

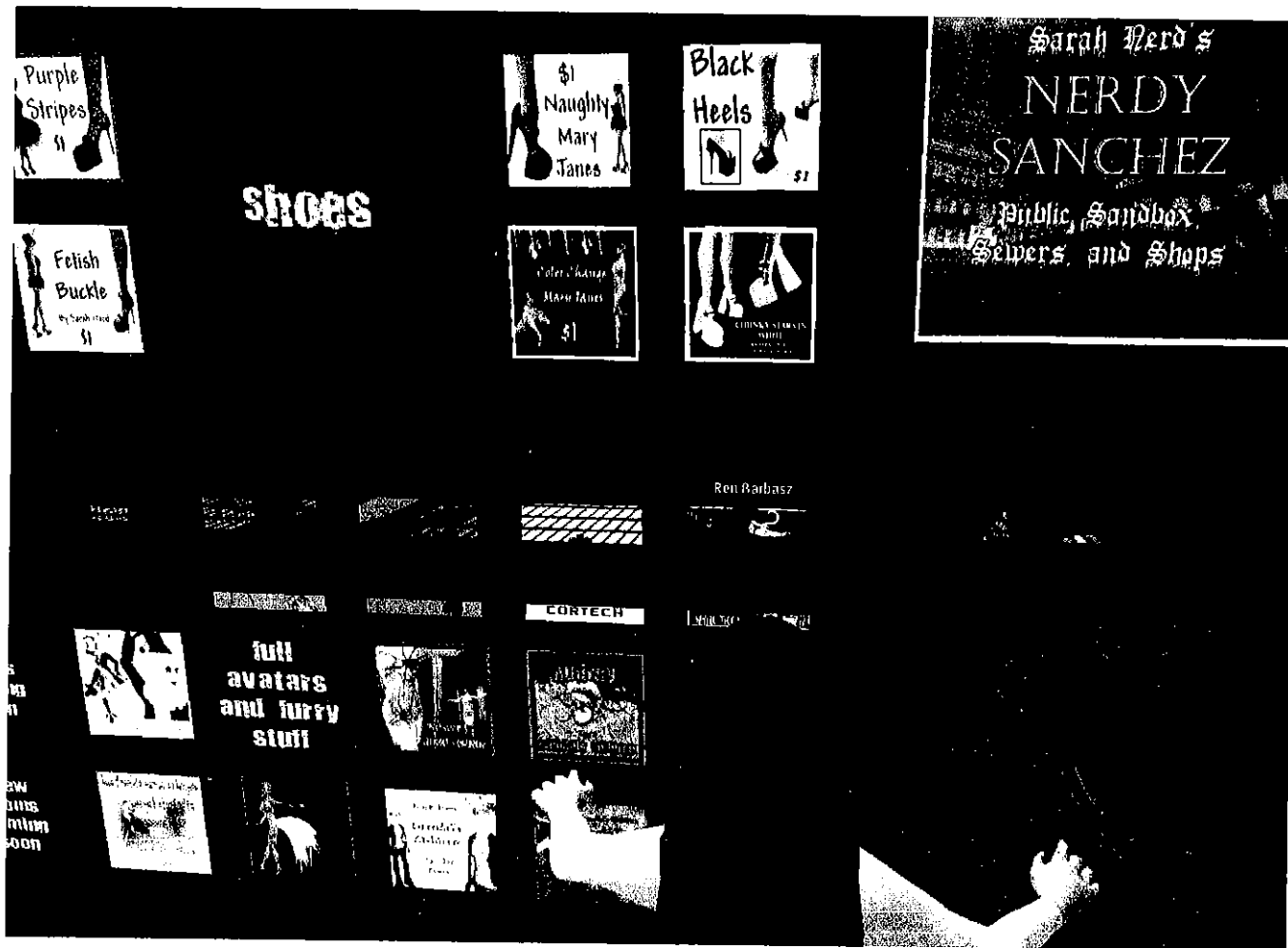
Swinging by Red Square (top); checking out one of SL's many strip clubs (bottom left); and chatting with a friendly, winged avatar.

On any given weeknight, Sue Hoogestraat knows that her husband Ric will be glued to his computer from the time he gets home from work until around midnight. On the weekends, he's online up to 14 hours at a time. It's not that the 53-year-old is ignoring life, exactly. It's just that he has a second one to conduct as well. In the virtual community called Second Life, Ric Hoogestraat is a younger, tougher version of himself. His long black hair is silkier online than the graying strands Sue sees daily. And his Second Life includes a second wife, with whom he spends his weekend days on a virtual motorcycle, cruising along the pixellated topography. His online persona is about 50 pounds thinner and 20 years younger than the real Ric, not to mention more successful in business. In the August 10, 2007, *Wall Street Journal* article profiling Ric Hoogestraat and his online addiction, his real-life wife, Sue, laments: "This other life is so wonderful; it's better than real life. Nobody gets fat, nobody gets gray. The person that's left can't compete with that."

Second Life, created by Linden Labs in 2002, has about half a million users trolling its cities, shopping malls, clubs, and grounds. It's one of an ever-growing group of online environments known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMPORGs). Unlike its MMPORG predecessors, such as the hugely popular sword-and-sorcery-centered *World of Warcraft*, Second Life is modeled on the modern world. There are no monsters to kill or spells to break. Technically, it's not even a game. It has its own thriving in-world economy, based on the Linden currency—which can also be converted into real dollars, allowing many residents to make a living off their virtual business. Moreover, there's no end goal in sight, and you can't be killed or injured. It borrows heavily from Will Wright's *SimCity* games, where the object of the game is

to construct a bustling city scene, as well as from *SimCity's* more social offshoot, *The Sims*, a life-simulation computer game with customizable avatars.

On a recent episode of *The Office*, Dunder Mifflin's resident geek, Dwight, hunches over his computer screen, mesmerized by his Second Life avatar floating in the air. He enthuses to the camera: "In my Second Life, I was also a paper salesman, and I was also named Dwight. Absolutely everything was the same...except I could fly!" The possibility of "me, but better!" is one of the greatest draws of the 3D virtual universe. While, technically, you can fashion your SL avatar however you choose, it's striking how many members mold their virtual character into flawless versions of themselves. Brenda, an SL member I met in-world at a virtual strip mall, confessed her avatar is "just like me...well, a very, very idealized me!" A buxom brunet in a polka-dot bikini hanging out on a popular SL beach had this to say about her virtual persona: "Pie is me, but skinnier, younger, and with a much better ass." One blogger, in a post detailing how everyone he met in-world was playing a souped-up version of their real self, jokingly lamented: "Are we all such narcissists?!"



Checking out the wares in "Sarah Nerd's Freebie Paradise" (while flying).

Second Life and MMORPGs like it are so popular in part because they offer members clear advantages over the real world. You can be anyone you want online, and studies have found that people may even be at their best in these virtual worlds. Members tend to be more revealing, open, and social online than they are in real life. It's a phenomenon called the "hyperpersonal effect"—a term coined by Joe Walther of Cornell University, who has spent years studying the effects of online relationships. Communicating online gives people time to construct their responses, and the anonymity of the Internet also frees them from social anxieties, making it easier to open up to others. It also makes it easy to fabricate an identity. The September 2007 issue of *Wired* magazine featured a story about Thomas Montgomery, on the surface a fairly standard middle-aged guy. A former marine who punched in at a factory every morning and had two daughters with his wife of 16 years, Thomas was also Tommy, an 18-year-old marine who spent much of his time on the social-networking site Pogo (and while there, wasn't shy about talking up his 9-inch penis). He soon made the online acquaintance of

Jessica, a 17-year-old cheerleader, and their relationship quickly grew intense; the two exchanged pictures, talked for hours online, even promised to get married. That is, until Thomas's real-life coworker ratted out his true identity to Jessica and started hitting on her himself. As it turned out, Jessica also wasn't who she seemed. The middle-aged mother using her daughter's photos broke up with Tommy after discovering he was, in fact, Thomas, and soon afterward Thomas shot his coworker in the factory parking lot. It was a fantasy romance that was both entirely fictitious and undeniably real.

This is why speculative-fiction enthusiasts, techies, and even journalists are already hypothesizing that Second Life is going to change real life as we know it. Some say it heralds the beginning of an all-encompassing "metaverse" like that imagined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 cyber-fantasy novel *Snow Crash*: a futuristic virtual space where humans carry out all their social and economic interactions, in essence making the virtual more real than reality. Of course, Second Life hype is often quashed by simply pointing out that it's still just virtual. But while that

distinction may hold weight for some, the line between the real and the virtual is growing blurry for others, especially when members form real emotional attachments, and sometimes addictions, to their online lives.

In Second Life, you can meet a friend in Paris for a day of shopping on the virtual Champs-Élysées in a matter of minutes. Hell, if you happened to have the urge, you could soar over the Elven Forest while performing Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker." It's a world of possibility that for many users renders the constraints of reality, well, kind of silly. But if the virtual playscape is just an exercise in utopian experimentation, why do people drag so many real-world physical and cultural conceptions in with them?

It's not hard to see why inventing oneself online is a tempting prospect. Peruse the headlines of any lifestyle magazine or watch five minutes of commercials selling antiwrinkle creams, weight-loss plans, and lash-enhancing mascara, and it's pretty obvious that the never-ending quest for perfection is a pervasive part of our culture, and the backbone of our economy. Online forums like the wildly popular social-networking sites MySpace and Facebook already allow one to carefully construct the perfect persona to represent oneself to other virtual users. Flawlessness is difficult and expensive to obtain in the real world, but physical perfection comes frighteningly easy in an online world where you can change your hair, skin, and girth with the click of a mouse.

In October the bottled-water manufacturer Evian announced plans to install virtual vending machines in Second Life that would instantaneously give residents' avatars clearer skin texture in exchange for reading a short advertisement. Just as in reality, advertisers on Second Life offer vague promises of a happier life through beauty—though in Second Life those promises are fulfilled in an instant.

Nearly all the avatar bodies in Second Life, both male and female, have perfectly svelte proportions, a contrast to reality, at least in the United States, where current reports state that 62 percent of adults are overweight. Sabrina Doolittle, a blogger for the unofficial Second Life shopping and fashion blog, Linden Lifestyles, recalls initially shaping her avatar self close to her real-life body, and then quickly becoming shamed by it as she took in her surroundings. "When I first logged into Orientation Island, I slid the sliders around to make something that looked more or less proportional to my real-life body. I am by no means a tiny woman, but I certainly don't walk through my real life feeling elephantine. [But] with my avatar scaled to my RL [in-world lingo for "real life"] body

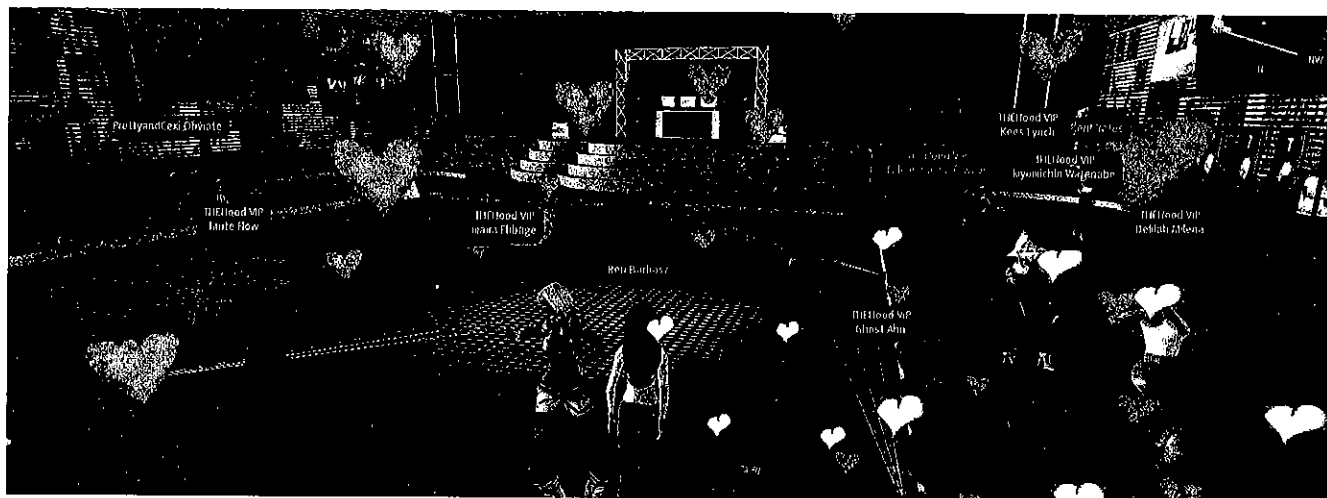
proportions, I felt absolutely enormous compared to other women in SL. The moment I lurched off Orientation and hit the mainland, it took me approximately 180 seconds to cave in, find a dark corner, and ramp down my bulk."

Will Wright, the mind behind the *Sims* series, once called his creation a "virtual dollhouse." It's an apt description for Second Life, too, where not only are SL players constructing cities and societies, they're also embodying fully dimensional Lara Croft-esque avatars: in essence, the Barbie dolls of the computer world. It takes only minutes of being in-world to notice that Second Life is a thin and able-bodied place. It is also, glaringly, a white place. Though no formal survey has been conducted on race demographics in Second Life, one SL blogger pointed out that she rarely saw black avatars, and when she herself darkened her skin color as an experiment she found that while her existing SL friends didn't comment, "strangers kept their distance." In another skin-darkening experiment, one woman—whose avatar normally rocks a beachy, California-girl look—modeled a new shade of black skin her friend was selling and promptly had an ugly encounter.

"I teleported into a region where a couple people [were] standing around. One said, 'Look at the n***** b*****.' Another said, 'Great, they're gonna invade SL now.'"

If Second Life can be said to be a projection of a fantasy—the perfect world that members join and are fully responsible for creating—does the glaring lack of diversity and the explicit racism thrown at even a virtual representation of blackness reveal that the larger utopian vision behind online escapism is a homogeneous society of fit, pretty, and thin white members? As part of an assignment for a college course, a black female student experimented with her gender and race in Second Life and documented it on her professor's blog, *Diary of an Anxious Black Woman* (www.diaryofanxiousblackwoman.blogspot.com). Within her first 10 minutes with a black female avatar, she was chased down by cars, their passengers yelling racial slurs. Later the same day, she changed her body to that of a white male and was promptly invited by a friendly SL member to attend a business meeting on how to acquire property in Second Life.

Much of the press surrounding Second Life has touted it as a sort of cyber-utopia. (There's even a website dedicated to the concept: secondlifeutopia.com.) The hype feels similar to the kind of praise the Internet reaped in its infancy—some claimed the web would be the great equalizer, a world wherein race and gender would become insignificant. But the web is far from a postrace, postgender utopia, and conceptions of



Surrounded by "dance love" (emanating from that weird bear creature on the corner of the dance floor) at "The Hood."

After a very sexual exchange with a male avatar, I started to undress. We were both dismayed to discover I had neither nipples nor an actual vagina. "Buy a skin!" he typed, then flew away.

both are so culturally embedded they speedily filter into a liminal space like Second Life, where the virtual society is being deliberately and carefully replicated by the members who belong to it. It says something as well that many black players have complained that Second Life's basic avatar options don't offer nearly enough different tones and gradations for black skin, nor do they offer any type of hair other than glossy, smooth, Pantene-commercial hair, or any lip-color options. Even if you do choose an unrealistic-looking dark skin for your avatar, you're still stuck with conventionally "white" features.

The lack of diverse features speaks to a very specific standard of beauty that is perpetuated in-world, one that also sets the tone for what often seems to be the most popular pastime in Second Life: online sex. One *Wired* columnist reported that 30 percent of Second Life's economy is sex-related (some SL bloggers say more, some less). When you consider that more than \$1 million worth of Lindens change hands daily in-world, that's not chicken feed.

In my own search for an authentic SL experience, I decided that I would have to join the thousands of users whose time in-world is occupied with getting busy. The first thing that became apparent was that sexual organs

themselves are the subjects of a brisk SL economy. On my first day in-world, I flew to one of Second Life's most popular sites, a nude beach, and clumsily started walking around, bumping into avatars in various states of undress. After receiving a few well-meaning heckles ("You can take off your top, sweetie!") I finally struck up a conversation with a good-looking male avatar willing to show me the ropes. After a very sexual exchange, I started to undress. We were both dismayed to discover I had neither nipples nor an actual vagina. "Buy a skin!" he typed, then flew away.

A "skin," I was told by a more helpful avatar, is the term for the digitized breasts and vagina in which one outfits a lady avatar. (Transgender users of SL report that it's fairly simple to outfit a female avatar with a penis, but more difficult to hook up a male avatar with female parts. In any case, neither seems to be done very often; much of the pull of Second Life, according to the trans users I spoke with, is the ease of representing oneself as a different sex.)

Apparently, most newbies go straight to fitting themselves with the appropriate sexy parts, something I would have learned if I had gone to Orientation Island instead

of straight to the nude beach. Deep Focus, an online marketing firm, found that genitalia are among the most frequently purchased items in Second Life. (Not surprisingly, the other top-selling products in-world are jewelry and clothing.)

As is the case with most vaginas found on the Internet, the cooters for sale on Second Life meticulously conform to pornographic standards. SL sex shops feature rows and rows of skins, adorned with meticulously coiffed "landing strips," or no pubic hair at all. One gargantuan-breasted woman whose acquaintance I made at the nude beach pointed me toward the shop where she bought her skin, saying they had "the tightest ones" there, implying a promise of actual sensation.

And then there are the virtual penises: Who would buy five inches when you can go for 10? Or an ejaculating model? Or, for that matter, a solid gold schlong that never goes limp, with decorative flames dancing along the head? Penis envy can be purchased for anywhere from a few hundred Lindens to thousands. Genitals are the prized pigs of Second Life; almost every style up for purchase conforms to an absurd, anime-esque hypersexuality. Though it's often praised for allowing people to carry out their deepest fantasies in a freeing environment, cybersex in Second Life only cradles sexual fantasies that fall within a very specific hegemonic porn standard—one that has already permeated real life.

Nearly half of SL's most popular destinations are tagged "mature," though Wagner James Au, Second Life blogger and author of the forthcoming book *The Making of Second Life: Notes from The New World*, cautions that statistics like these can be misleading. "A lot of the people at these mature sites are being paid by the landowners [the residents who own and profit from the location] to be there," Au explains. "It's something new residents will do to make easy Linden dollars." Au thinks that all the sex hype about Second Life is overemphasized, and he may be right: Statistically speaking, about 40 percent of SL residents actually engage in cybersex frequently or occasionally. And while that's a significant percentage, it seems much of the SL atmosphere is less about doing the virtual nasty than about enjoying a deeply sexualized culture.

What makes Second Life's sexualized culture different from the real world's? It's hard to say. The range of in-world sexual experiences—having a dirty conversation with another member, hanging out in a strip club, dressing your avatar up in garters and thigh-high stockings—are, like many in the real world, about the fantasy of being a perfectly sexy person; yet the aesthetic trappings of that sexuality—again, as in the real world—hew tightly to

heterosexual-male standards. And, it would seem, the 43 percent of SL residents who happen to be female succeed in this world by conforming wholeheartedly to those standards. It's not surprising to learn that Second Life prostitution is a rapidly growing source of real-world income for users; an in-world female escort charging 1,000 Lindens an hour can bring in \$500 to \$1,000 dollars a month working online. But it is disheartening given the context: Even with a population almost evenly split between male and female users, woman avatars, escorts or not, are making their bids for sexual fulfillment in an online Wild West where the atmosphere is male-dominated and the anonymity of the Internet renders harassment fairly commonplace.

Joseph LaBarbera, a clinical psychologist at Vanderbilt University, is one of the many folks who have stated the obvious by positing that people behave differently when anonymous and that, consequently, the Internet is "tolerant of all sorts of rude behavior." In addition, the journal *Gender & Society* published a report in 2000, well before the advent of SL, detailing how male online personas in social forums acted in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, objectifying female members and using tech knowledge to one-up each other.

Linden Labs, for its part, is still learning how to deal with the various problems posed by its lawless utopia. During a recent chat-show event hosted in-world by the technology news site CNET, the show's female guest, the first self-proclaimed Second Life millionaire, was attacked by hundreds of flying pink phalluses sent by an SL troublemaker, called a "griever" in SL-speak. Last March, Belgian newspapers reported that real-life police were patrolling Second Life after a Belgian woman, a previous rape victim in her real life, suffered trauma when her avatar was raped in Second Life. And episodes of both *CSI: New York* and *Law and Order: SVU* have offered up detectives pursuing stalking and sex crimes in Second Life-esque online worlds.

For now, Second Life's punishment system is vigilante-enforced. Linden Labs has a behavior code that prohibits verbal and physical harassment, either racially or sexually charged, but even though every conversation and action in which one's character is involved is meticulously recorded, in order to punish offenders they must be reported by another member. Repeat grievers can be sent to an in-world prison—a cornfield that plays a '40s movie on a loop. Getting kicked out of the world entirely is extremely rare, but it happens—one "ageplayer," the SL term for those who fool around with minors, was banned from Second Life last year for simulating sex between a grown

male and a young boy. It's worth noting that heterosexual tween sex happens all the time in-world, and there are dozens of stores that openly sell tween skins for females. As far as it's been reported, no one has yet been forced to leave Second Life for having heterosexual underage sex. Then again, that kind of ageplay is basically a normalized kink in the dominant pornographic standard. While casually perusing the topography of Second Life, one may not spot a plethora of hypersexualized child avatars. But in an April 2006 report on CNET, an avatar named Usagi Mushasi, who spent time pretending to work in an SL sex club, relays that dolled-up, sexualized girls are not an uncommon sight in the adult-themed areas of Second Life: "One day in the welcome area [of a virtual strip club] I saw one child avatar. This one was just posing like she wanted some action. They stand around and look for action like escorts...then they ageplay."

Perhaps because the bad press surrounding Second Life tends toward the luridly prurient, Au, for one, wants to stress that there are meaningful relationships to be found in-world, too. One of the wealthiest Second Life residents, alongside Kevin Alderman (creator of an infamous Second Life sex bed that allows avatars to do it in gravity-defying positions), is Nanci Schenkein, an event planner from New Jersey who, with her avatar Baccara Rhodes, has made a killing planning virtual weddings on Second Life. Enough people have fallen for each other for Schenkein to have orchestrated more than 100 weddings, at a charge of about 90,000 Lindens (nearly \$300) a pop.

Which brings us back to the Hoogestraats, Thomas Montgomery, and the parameters of cybermarriages and affairs. It's a murky situation: Legally speaking, cyber-affairs don't count as infidelity during real-life divorce proceedings unless they spill into reality. Seventy percent of SL residents are married or cohabitating in their real lives. And no one has yet done comprehensive research on how online fantasy fulfillment can affect real-life relationships, real-world marriage counselors cited in the *WSJ* profile of Ric Hoogestraat say they are seeing "a growing number of marriages dissolve over virtual infidelity."

An April 2007 MSNBC article profiled two cases of relationships breaking down over Second Life affairs. Sam, a married man having an avatar affair with Kat, also married in real life, found himself unable to tear himself away from the computer during a family vacation. Kat's real-life spouse began getting jealous as well, which resulted in fights between Sam and Kat, who eventually terminated their online love affair. Then there was Max, a newlywed whose wife spent up to eight hours a day on Second Life. One day Max came home to find her web-chatting with an SL boyfriend. He angrily pulled the Internet connection

out of the wall; his wife threw a punch. Divorce proceedings are underway.

There's a tension between a real world governed by rules and an online one where the closest thing to a Dear Abby-style ethical compass is someone like Heartun Breaker, a popular SL advice columnist who answered the dilemma of a man happily in love with his SL wife but sexually tempted by his wife's new best friend with the advice, "Go ahead and do it! That forbidden fruit is too irresistible." Watching two pixilated characters copulate on screen is no different than watching pornography. But what if it's with an avatar you also talk to 20-plus hours a week? What if you're using one of the new sex toys designed to correspond to what your avatar is doing on screen so you're physically experiencing it?

Simply put, there's real emotion wrapped up in the virtual world. When Ric Hoogestraat needed real-life surgery, his Second Life wife bought him an island to cheer him up. Elsewhere, a story on Au's blog *New World Notes* details how Hamlet, Au's SL persona, happened upon a woman sitting on a dock, playing melancholy tunes on a record player perched next to her. The day before, her Second Life boyfriend broke up with her by not showing up to the housewarming party they had thrown to celebrate moving in together online.

One Gartner analyst predicts that 2 percent of U.S. citizens will get married in virtual worlds by 2015 to people they have never met, and may never meet even after they are married. Online virtual marriages may someday carry all the same legal implications of marriages that take place in the offline world. We're not there yet, but relationships forged online are certainly taking on a more important role and being seen with a new validity.

The problem is that the virtual worlds these relationships are forged within are actively set up as relatively consequence-free play worlds. It's easy to be Hollywood-thin, never put your foot in your mouth, and have porntastic sex in Second Life, which in turn makes it easier to abide by and not question those cultural standards in the first place. What's more, the bias that members can bring into the virtual arena as fairly anonymous citizens—like deep racism and misogyny—remain unchallenged because Second Life is still a lawless universe looked upon as a light pastime people should be allowed to enjoy in whatever way they want, rather than as an active, burgeoning society. We've yet to fully discover how meaningful relationships will fare in such a world, but if Second Life and other virtual universes become as prominent as their hype promises, we soon will.

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