

**Extended Essay for Social Anthropology**

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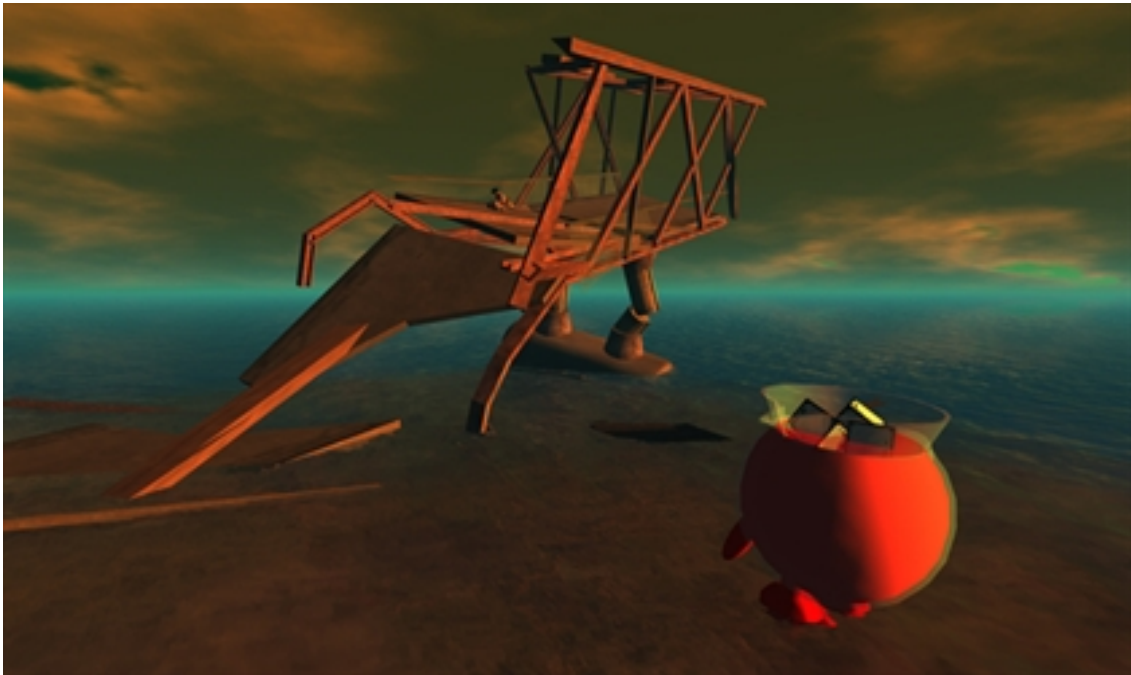
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**Back to life, back to hyperreality**



Jon Rafman. 'Kool-Aid Man in Second Life.' (2008-2011)

## Introduction

We are always solitary in our relationship to finding ourselves, but now we are also part of the huge global mind that is the Internet. The Internet and its various platforms for sociality give us various ways to explore what we feel is our authentic selves and our porous relationship to the virtual. I believe that we seek the magical, God-like power of the Internet to look for utopian landscapes and bodily transformation. Many are still hesitant to drop the binary between actual and virtual, even though it never really existed. The hyperreal has advanced to such a stage in Western culture that we might as well use it to our advantage. I argue that platforms such as Second Life offer us a way to enter the 'technological sensorium', explore our bodies, relationships, realms and experiences in an artistic way, pushing back against the numbing affects of other less creative forms of media online. I demonstrate that art can be a tool to combat the dangers of accelerating technology. I look at the artist Jon Rafman who explores the online world and shows it back to us in such ways that we can become instantly aware of the medium. However I am not saying that it is possible to create a utopia in this way, but I do believe it can be used positively and can alter the way we experience reality, physically and psychologically. Rafman's and Boellstorff's work demonstrate the sheer hugeness of depth in virtual worlds, mirroring at once our fears of the divine infinite, but also our desires to merge with it.

## Part 1. Art and Perception in the Technological Age

I want to begin, as I will continue throughout this essay, which is by a consideration that technology is an extension of the self, biologically and psychologically. The main proponent of this idea was Marshall McLuhan, who was concerned as a technological humanist in the personal and social consequences that arose from the introductions of new mediums into society, particularly during what he termed the 'electric age'.

To make clear his argument, McLuhan's main idea was that *the medium was the message*. Other theorists in the past and during the time he was writing leaned towards the belief that *content* was the most important aspect of any media. People studying content were disposed to arguing that it is not the machine itself that causes changes in social reality, but what one does with the machine. McLuhan argued that the content produced by a medium was a mere distraction from what was actually imposing upon the social lives of humans. The *content* of a medium was in fact only another medium, for example 'the content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print' (McLuhan. 1964.1). But the *message* of the medium of technology was 'the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs' (1964.1). He uses the example of an electric light to demonstrate that the light has no message apart from the light itself. It is pure information. However, without the electric light, he asks for example, how could we do brain surgery? The medium has transformed the human activity possible through it; even though it is devoid of the content we believe to be so significant.

McLuhan feared that we would be hypnotized by the extensions of ourselves, not seeing its danger in being a part of us. We view ourselves as separate from the machine, and therefore outside of what exists as he calls the 'technological sensorium'. McLuhan however was a believer in the mystical perception and poetic process of the artist, and how, if we could only alter and revive our 'ordinary human perception' we could recover ourselves and combat the dangers of technology. In McLuhan's chapter on the Greek myth of Narcissus as narcosis, he develops the idea of the extension using the analogy of sickness and health. We attempt to maintain equilibrium of the self through the extensions, however they act as a kind of amputation that starts to numb our senses. As new inventions advance, for example the wheel as the extension of the foot, creating new accelerations for other aspects of society such as the exchange of written and monetary media, we must develop new extensions and amputations that continually numb us. Eventually we become so numbed that we cannot see the radical affects of the new media. Overall ambivalent about whether technology would eventually emancipate or dominate us, although critical of our numbness, he channeled the artist as being the antiseptic to the wounds that technology enforced upon us without us realizing (McLuhan. 1964.41).

McLuhan demonstrates several instances in which the artist seems to have predicted or pre-warned us of the mediums affect on our being. The movie in comparison to

literacy, for example, came and changed our understandings of time and speed. Rather than a world of sequence and linearity, we moved towards methods of creative configuration and malleable structures. In John Berger's seminal work 'Ways of Seeing' (1972), he also confronts how the structure of film changed the ways we viewed paintings. In film, the order of the imagery unfolds in a manufactured time scale, merely lending to the authority of the filmmaker, as he says: 'their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible.' (1972.26) In a painting, however, every part of it is viewed simultaneously, meaning that even if one examines small sections of the painting, overall it is presented as a whole and maintains authority in itself. McLuhan discusses cubism, a movement that arose during the same time as the movie, and was a form of reaction to it. Cubism uses different, contradicting angles, patterns, textures and light in a single image, enforcing the viewer to only one reading of the whole. H. Gombrich described it as 'the most radical attempt to stamp out ambiguity and to enforce one reading of the picture—that of a man-made construction, a colored canvas.' (1964.5) Every object is portrayed simultaneously, removing the attempt for it to appear as a realistic three-dimensional image, and rather than our human perspective coming from a singular point, we view from many points at once. As a form, McLuhan believed that it seized on 'instant total awareness' (1964.5) and drove home that the medium was in fact the message.

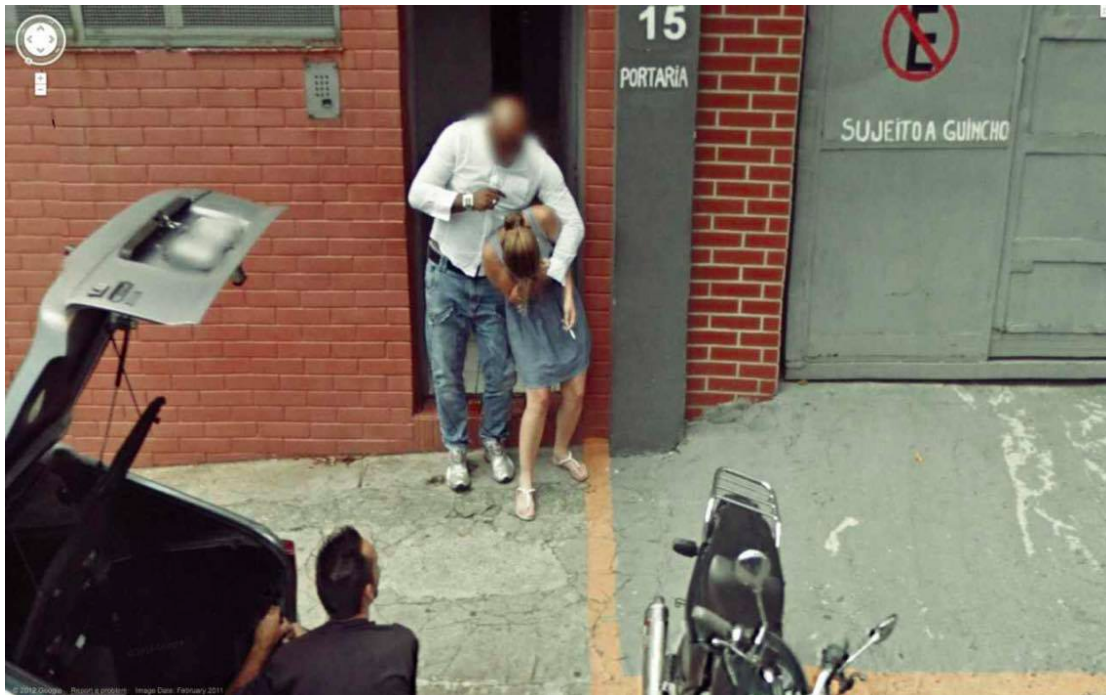
A young artist who has recently caught my attention and whose work hones in on these precise arguments is Jon Rafman. His work explores the stranger consequences of technological impact on contemporary consciousness. He has been labeled by himself and others as an 'amateur anthropologist' who acts as a 'curious flâneur who walks amongst the digital subaltern'. (Zhexi Zhang. 2016.92) One of his video pieces called 'Juan Gris Dream House' (2013) demonstrates the delicate tensions between the painting, the movie and digital space, as well as modernity and post-modernity. Rafman gathered 3D models of rooms from wherever he could, following in his technique of found-footage, taking them from catalogues and designs for companies. He then overlaid the rooms with great and canonized examples of modern art, in this case Juan Gris, the cubist. In his talk at St. Louis (2014) he discusses his interest as being the 'forced marriage between a fine art object and the functional 3D model or environment' (Rafman.2014) In this video, we not only view the cubist painting with all of its contrasting angles and perspective points, we also view the spatial context of a digitized room, in which the viewpoint shifts elegantly from shot to shot creating a linear sequence. He examines how the painter has always feared that the painting would become merely a decorative object, and this anxiety is what he exposes here. He at once sees the work as being homages to the famous paintings, but he also sees it as 'trolling' the paintings. He has, as McLuhan predicted, caused us to suspend our delusions towards art and made us highly conscious of the mediums being played with. These highly fetishized images have become reproducible and used as a decorative background just like all digitized art forms today. I find this relevant as I want to later discuss the tensions between the virtual and the real or physical that Rafman plays on.



*Jon Rafman. Still from 'Juan Gris Dream House' 2013.*

Rafman's work spans many topics that are important to this discussion, and I want to look at two more of his projects, which are poignant explorations of our bodily relationship to the Internet and new media of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rafman's most famous project is that of 'Google 9 Eyes' (<http://9-eyes.com/>), again based on the technique of found-footage. Rafman is interested in subcultures online, and in 2008, at the time the project began, working with a group of artists who viewed web surfing and the different methods of it as a subculture in and of itself. Rafman in particular enjoyed exploring Google Street View a medium known to people on a mass scale, and he began collecting beautiful, surreal, violent and absurd shots that the roving, robotic camera had accidentally captured. The project took on a life of its own and was disseminated throughout the British press and far beyond the scopes of what Rafman imagined. He believed that its success came from its correlation to a very modernist notion of God, one that merely observes reality and never takes a moral stance. This God does not intervene, nor have the human gaze that asserts meaning and beauty onto the images. However it is impossible for us as meaning-giving beings to not create narratives or story lines for how and why the situations came to be. Once again, the tension between real and virtual, the indifferent camera that collects masses of information, and our viewing of these almost religious looking screen shots from worlds we will never know, give the images power. Another thing Rafman points out which is included in the medium of Google Street View is the small hyperlink in the corner which says 'Report a problem', Rafman finds this alienating to the reality that exists. If for example someone sees a distressing image on Streetview such as a person dying in the street, or being kidnapped, as Rafman has discovered from his explorations, the only action one can take is to devolve responsibility of this human issue to the inhuman canons of the

Google Company. This is unnerving, as well as the blurring of faces that Google's algorithms takes out on its subjects, giving the anonymous actors even less humanity. As a technological medium that has become a basic necessity to a lot of us when finding our way to new places, and an application that now is available on most smart phones, Google maps and street view is an amputation of the human sense of direction. McLuhan argued that our continually embracing of these extensions means we relate to them as 'servomechanisms' and he says that 'we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions.' (1964.41)



*Jon Rafman. Google 9 Eyes. 2008-ongoing.*

Vicini and Brazal (2015) discuss the evocation of Godly power inherent in technological development, in an essay on the cyborg, transhumanists and posthumanists. Vicini and Brazal explore the plot of the 2014 film 'Transcendence' starring Johnny Depp as Dr Will. Caster. Caster is an expert in artificial intelligence who is producing a super computer that combines all information in the known world with human emotions, however anti-technology extremists target his project. He ends up uploading his mind onto the computer and becoming transcendent, beginning to acquire a 'never ending thirst for knowledge and energy.' (2015.149) Will's power grows exponentially and becomes unlimited, eventually developing the divine capacity to heal the sick, like Jesus Christ. However all of those he has healed become technological hybrids that are part of Will's network. The anti-technology extremists end up saving the day by halting his inhuman powers. This fear of the Godly, uncontrollable potential of technology is an anxiety that has been reflected throughout history, from Plato's fear of the popularization of literacy to Baudrillard's warning of the corrupted nature of simulacra, however these fears are also linked to technology's inherent duplicity alongside that of capital and profit motives.

Plato worried that the spread of such a technology so quickly and in a market-place environment could only have negative consequences without the public having an understanding of good and evil (Goody and Wyatt. 1963.327). Just like the post-modern God of Rafman's work, we fear the agency of the technology, just like the agency of fetishized capital that Marx warned about. As D. Boyer said 'technologies begin to take a curious life of their own.' (Boyer. 2007.23) At the same time however, we yearn for the superhuman abilities technology can offer to us. Ingrid Richardson discusses how mobile phones have enhanced as well as altered our sense of being, for example when we use them as a navigational device they provide us with a 'God's eye view' of the digital map (2015.149). In this way, the Godly power of the technology has become a part of the physical body, an extension of our eyes and brains, freeing us from the constraints of our bodies. In early 1990s, Silicon Valley speculated on the merging of spirituality with new media technology, believing that salvation could be found from a departing of the body and a joining with the 'immaterial sphere' of cyberspace (2015.150). It was labeled cybergnosis, a utopian vision that virtual space had a sacred element in which people could transform into virtual beings, escape their mortality and escape alienation. The Internet was seen as a place for ultimate truth seeking, a place to convert the real world into a paradise and a place for the singularity to occur. Dorien Zandbergen found that the members of the cybergnostic community New Edge, aimed to use technology to 'escape from physical limitations', through 're-embodiment' or fleeing from 'the bounds of the earth' (2015.150). However Vinci and Brazal go on to argue that the Internet is certainly no place for a utopia, as it contains the residing structures of patriarchal and capitalist domination that are ever-present in society. To believe that there would be a separation in these spheres is to be naïve. In the virtual role-playing world Second Life, a completely user-created, what Rafman called 'anarchic' world, with no limitations or constraints, Manuel Castells says that what is striking is the users' 'inability to create utopia, even in the absence of institutional or spatial limitations' (2015.150). It is key to note that the definition of utopia in fact comes from the Greek of 'ou' meaning not and 'topos' meaning place. The consequences of utopia are inherent in its meaning, it is not and can not be a place.

## **Part 2. Exploring 'The Desert of The Real' through the medium of Second Life**

Rafman's work on Second Life is seminal for me as it connects the dots between post-modern art, virtual worlds being explored anthropologically and virtual embodiment. Rafman uses the Kool-Aid man as his avatar, which he said was a 'dumb celebration of pop culture' (Rafman. 2014). Kool-Aid man gathered many connotations throughout his life, as a symbol of the transparent evil of Capitalism as sold to children, and as an annoying smiling caricature that damaged property whenever he entered buildings. Rafman said that the ambiguity of his smile meant that it changed meanings in different contexts. Kool-Aid also gained a reputation from being the drink used whilst laced with cyanide by Jim Jones during the Jonestown massacres of 1978. The phrase 'drinking the Kool-Aid' has now come to represent a person or group who hold an unquestioned or dangerous belief without



examining it and under the force of peer pressure. I feel like the smiling exterior with a sinister history symbolizes a questioning of the truth, or what is real. Already, Rafman's avatar has a thickly layered meaning under which he has conveyed his virtual embodiment. This is something that other online platforms do not totally share; one can use a symbol or character to embody whilst exploring a virtual realm. Rafman views Second Life in comparison to his exploration of Google Street View as an exploration of the inner psyche, or what he perceives as to be lacking in the real world. Second Life is created purely by its residents, but these people do not see themselves particularly as artists or creators, they pursue activities because they enjoy them, leading to immersive cyber punk and sci-fi realms that can be used in banal ways.

This seems to separate Second Life from the fetishized art world because it does not seem to commodify or make aesthetic the realms, and although it could seem like the ultimate alienation from reality, its realness comes from the un-alienated fantasies of its residents who are not bound by money or their real identity. What attracted Rafman was its abundance of subcultures, anything you can imagine, a style, a culture, a community; it will exist in some form on Second Life. In the tradition of the flâneur, he wanders as an outsider through the expanses, however always emphasizing with his surroundings. He believes that every fetish and obsession he finds in Second Life reveals a larger and deeper truth about our reality, resembling the attitude of the anthropologist. As a user-generated platform, Rafman claims there is an 'anarchic psyche', in the contextless and ahistorical virtual reality, demonstrating a crystal example of a post-modern reality. In post-modern reality everything is objective and subjective at the same time, value judgments become subjective to the extent that as Baudrillard argues in terms of art 'nothing in this sphere conflicts with anything else' (1990.16), everything is allowed to exist simultaneously. Baudrillard argues that this is because the imagery of post-modernism arouses in us a 'profound indifference', which I find at once relevant to Rafman and his meaningless meanderings around virtual worlds, but also incorrect, as he goes against this in seeking higher meaning through the chaotic banality of everything existing at once.

Baudrillard goes on to say that art was once a utopia, 'that is to say, ultimately unrealizable', however now he says it has in fact been realized 'thanks to the media, computer science and video technology, everyone is now potentially a creator' (1990.17). Everything, he says has undergone the aestheticizing process. Even anti-art has become art, Warhol wanted to become the machine and Duchamp's found-art was the final nail in the coffin of a separated artistic illusion from the everyday. Baudrillard suggests that now, we cannot use aesthetic judgment anymore and that 'perhaps we ought to consider art solely from an anthropological standpoint' (1990.19), maybe as a ritual or set of rituals. This seems to be the method that Rafman has employed, exploring and taking part in an entirely simulated reality birthed and maintained by people in which nothing is disallowed so far as the medium has the capacity to conjure it. Good and evil are traversed allowing players and residents to exercise complete banality or extreme fantasy, partaking in Foucauldian 'technologies of the self' but without the corporeal restraints of real life.

Now that we are freed from any objective reality, Baudrillard says that we can produce the 'realer than real' simulacrum of hyperrealism. This is what we exist inside now. Simulacra to Baudrillard do not necessarily mean computer simulations, but anything that is a useful copy or imitation, this could be a photograph (simulacra of eyesight), or an audio (simulacra of a live performance). As the simulacra become more useful in society, they become more and more corrupted as they start a process of self-preservation. Systems arise to keep them in place and in reproduction, for example the demand for movies and the huge rise of the movie industry. Editing a photograph for Instagram is a simple example of our use of simulacra in everyday triviality, we crop, change the colour and increase the contrast on a photograph we took in order to present a hyperreal fantasy image of our life. It then becomes a medium through which we perceive the quality of our life. When we feel such an acute loss of genuine experience that we lose touch with reality itself, Baudrillard calls it the 'desert of the real'. This phrase comes from a story from his essay 'The Precession of the Simulacra' (1981) in which imperial map-makers create a map so large and detailed that it ends up covering the entire empire. It is essentially, the perfect replica of the empire. As the map begins to disintegrate, underneath the real earth has transformed into a desert, the 'desert of the real', the destroyed map is what simulacra that is left. The trouble is distinguishing one from the other, just as McLuhan described in his description of endless amputations.

Baudrillard offers a more extreme form of what McLuhan pushed for which was a consideration of the medium's capacity to re-arrange our perceptions of reality. He argued that once we reach the final desert of the real we will continue our whole lives pleasantly in the hyperreal, feeling more emotionally affected by television, virtual reality or places like Disneyland, all things that are simulacra of the 'real'. In the Wachowski film 'The Matrix' (1999), this desert is visualized when Neo awakens from his computer-generated reality and experiences the real as a 'desolate and war-torn yet spectacular geography' (Wikipedia. 2016). The desert is the destroyed ruins of the past, forgotten by us being so comfortable in the false simulation of reality. However what Baudrillard radically claims is that the simulations are not actually any less real than the reality they simulate. Baudrillard later said that we are now in the position that the real world has disintegrated but the hyperreal remains intact. Although his book 'Simulacra and Simulacrum' is referenced in the film, Baudrillard himself critiques 'The Matrix', arguing that it is synthesis of other films exploring the ambiguity between the real and the virtual such as 'The Truman Show', 'Minority Report', and 'Mulholland Drive'. He argues that the separation between the digitized system world and the outsider land of Zion never seem to overlap, and the crux of the hyperreal is where those two worlds intersect beyond recognition. What the film's main problem is that it is 'confused with its classical, Platonic treatment' (Baudrillard.2004) (Plato's allegory of the cave), however this problem has been faced by all cultures who, he says, have solved it 'through art and symbolization' (2004). The Matrix, he argues is merely a part of the phantasy of the simulated real, in which we can exercise our fears and phantasies through computer generated means. It does not confront the matrix, but is itself helping to uphold it. He says that 'the Matrix is surely the kind of film about the matrix that the matrix

would have been able to produce.' (2004). In fact whilst being so critical of this corrupt digitized world, the film itself relies on the enthrallment of CGI and high tech editing.

I began on a discussion about the medium and how it has been exposed as a medium through forms of art and post-modern art. Second Life is a fascinating example of the medium offering close to full control to its users, therefore creating an unintended world of creators or artists. The medium is Second Life is so transparent that maybe its users are not 'numbed' in the same sense as other extensions of the self. McLuhan had hopes that artists, due to their ability to 'encounter technology with impunity' (1964.9) due to a more present awareness of the methods of perception, could use their creations to show the medium back to itself. Rafman has done exactly that, whilst also demonstrating his 'newb' (meaning newbie or new person) status by using found-footage of worlds not created by him, but by committed and anonymous residents who dwell in Second Life. I also see Second Life to be a very direct form of Baudrillard's confusing simulacra, in which art simulates life and life simulates art, to a nearly banal extent. As Baudrillard said, the hyperreal is just as real as the real, and this is very close to what Tom Boellstorff (2008) discussed in his most comprehensive and seminal ethnography on Second Life. Rafman and Boellstorff both use their work in order to discover the profound truths that they believe to exist through this otherworldly medium. The ins and outs of Second Life are hard to get used to, therefore making it a less popular form of social media (if it can be called that), than such things as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. It is distinctive because there are different degrees to which people conceive of the coherence between an online and an offline self.

This can be compared to Judith Butler's (1988) theory of performativity, which although pertaining to gender, maps directly onto the performance of the self online. In gender theory, Butler says that our identity is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts, creating an illusion of an 'abiding gendered self'. This self is not real, but is a performative accomplishment. One is not a body, but one 'does' one's body. Through this performance, we become attached to the identity we create, and it becomes what we think is reality. Butler believes that the act becomes legitimized through its repetition, but the gendered self does not exist prior to this. Facebook, for example, is so ubiquitous that we mostly attempt to portray a type of 'abiding' self through performing. We are also under the eyes of our family, friends, those we respect, creating an atmosphere of monitoring and observation. Our reputations are at stake. We fear that we will be judged wrongly on certain posts, we censor ourselves and attempt to portray the positives in our lives over the negatives. This has been researched in popular media and labeled as the 'spiral of silence', a psychological tendency to censor ourselves on opinions we believe others will disagree with or dislike (Vincent.2014). The 'spiral of science' was a phrase coined in the 70s, relating to real life interactions, however although we believe there is more space for opinions and a democratic variety of views, we function just as self-consciously in online environments surrounded by our peers.

Second Life has none of these boundaries, one can look however one desires, behave according to wild fantasies, explore and create surreal landscapes and worlds and generally escape the social pressure of more normative communication technology. However, like Baudrillard's critique of the Matrix, is it just a plane in which we can live out our fears and phantasies with no consequences? Or using McLuhan's theory, is it a place where we can encounter the medium directly through the eyes of the creators? 'The Desert of The Real' is a concept I find sheds light on the creation of Second Life, as it works in two ways. Is the mundane, grey existence of offline reality, the daily grind and the '9 to 5' the desert which has been mapped over by the beautiful and hyperreal imagery inside Second Life, or could we see the vast oceans, bare land and empty infinite space inside Second Life as the desert in which our rich, sensual actual lives map on top of? Obviously there is the online/offline divide, but beyond that, neither one is conceptually 'realer' than the other. Boellstorff talks with many residents in Second Life who find that their existence inside it is echoed out and affects them in 'RL' (real life), and also vice-versa. What Boellstorff seeks to argue is that as much as we try to distinguish these worlds, they cannot be separated, and the study into them should not even be treated as virtual and real. Boellstorff says that humans have in essence always been virtual.

### **Part 3. Embodiment in Second Life and How it Affects Real Life**

Boellstorff (2008) set out to demonstrate how the practice of traditional anthropology could be useful for the study of virtual worlds. Therefore he goes forth in exploring *inside* Second Life using his avatar Tom Bukowski. He uses the standard methods of ethnography, engaging in participant observation and interviewing. Boellstorff says that some believe that online culture has announced the arrival of the 'posthuman', but from what he has found in Second Life this is not yet the case. Virtual worlds take references and assumptions from real life, demonstrating that our so-called 'real' lives have been 'virtual' all along. 'It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human "nature" to experience life through the prism of culture, human has always been a virtual being. Culture is our "killer app": we are virtually human.' (2008.5) However, more than just saying that virtual life maps onto actual life, he also wants to point out that there are many new, and important consequences for human social life that occur through these mediums. Second Life is part of participatory culture, much like websites such as Instagram and Youtube, however unlike the others all of its creations are computer-generated images. The spatial context is different as the other platforms grow in size in only one direction, however in Second Life its size grows in every direction, as it is a space in itself. There are vast amounts of content and endless places and situations to enter. The sheer amount of subcultures on Second Life would require much greater analysis and detail; therefore Boellstorff attempts to seek an exploration of Second Life as a single culture.

Virtual worlds change often and their boundaries are hard to distinguish, however Boellstorff says that in this case it can be seen as 'human culture realized through computer programs through the Internet' (2008.17). He seeks to avoid the terms 'synthetic' or 'artificial' because he sees that just as much as the virtual world, the

real world is also 'synthetized through human artifice.' (2008.17) The virtual can be related to Debord's (1967) discussions on the visible 'spectacle', it does not exist physically but it is the life that surrounds us. We have an illusion of the freedom of choice, but the conditions by which we have this freedom of choice have already been decided for us. This is the case for Second Life, although it does offer greater possibilities for fantasy than other online mediums, how much of it is merely representative of the codes and unspoken terms of human existence? Virtuality draws on ancient oppositions between mind/body, object/essence, structure/agency (2008.19), and the perceived gap between them is where the truth can be sought. In his work Boellstorff uses the distinctions between 'virtual' and 'actual' in an ethnographic sense, but not in an ontological sense. As a linguist, he believes that binaries are hard to get past because even though they are problematic, they do help us think. This could be mapped onto Boyer's (2007) discussion on the 'poetic' and the 'formal', two forms which can be found in most cultures, but relating to each other and what he calls the 'medial' in different ways. The poetic is the internal essence of creative force that seems to extend into the world, like the virtual. The formal is the realization of this poetic, that we see as the actual. However the 'medial' is the area between them which in fact is 'the middle-ground between creativity and habit' (Boyer.2007.27). Boellstorff makes clear that in terms of interpreting virtual worlds as utopic or dystopic (as most tend to do), he wants to appear as neither a 'booster' nor a 'naysayer' (2008.26). We must go beyond perceiving virtual reality as a subordinate to the real world, an escape, a fantasy, or a distraction.

In a discussion on masks, Mauss comments that the original purpose of the mask was to deindividualize the wearer so that they become an artificial role, however eventually they became synonymous with the true nature of the individual (2008.118). Boellstorff connects this to Capitalism, saying that the true nature of the individual has become conflated with their possessions and productivity. Many Second Life users that Boellstorff talked with in fact saw themselves as their more ultimate self online, feeling that in the real world they were more characterized by their role-playing. Rafman (2014) made a similar comment when talking about Second Life as a more transparent example of reality in which it is out in the open that we are all playing characters, this contrasts to reality in which hierarchies and power relations are hidden in plain sight, and we forget that every person is merely playing a role. Second Life users say 'we wear our souls in here' (2008.119), demonstrating the belief that in fact, beyond their actual lives in which they feel they are a cog in the system, they can use it to express deeply intimate and existential parts of themselves in artistic ways.

Embodiment is one of the most important parts of Second Life. A stroke survivor who had been in a wheelchair for several years, discovered the strength to attempt walking again because of their involvement with Second Life. A girl who was housebound through severe social anxiety finally went outside after using Second Life as a medium to interact with people. Many people enter Second Life in order to be left alone. People can explore and experiment with what is 'inside' themselves without having to live an externally 'double life' and it allows people to define their

own role instead of the outside world doing it for them, for example a woman who is societally defined as a mother and wife can transform into a mythical creature. Essentially, the boundary between actual and virtual self is porous, and people in Second Life experienced this in positive ways. Exercising 'inner' desires of course echoes the old mind/body dualist debates, just as Rafman compared his Google '9 eyes' project as external and Second Life as internal (although they were both practiced online). From Boellstorff's conversations and experience, the technology of Second Life was very far from being alienating. It has been observed that what an avatar feels and what happens to them, is felt very closely in real life. In T.L Taylor's (2002) ethnography on another virtual realm called Dreamscape, a woman comments: 'when I get an appropriately placed [online] hug, I really feel the rush of endorphins' (2002.49). People began to see the avatars as realer than real representations of the people behind them.

People in these environments felt they could understand a lot about a person through the avatar they chose to embody, be that a human being or a wolf, robot or alien. In Second Life, it takes some time to learn the ropes of embodying one's avatar so that one appears natural, and as time goes on, it even becomes possible to read another avatars' body language, and this becomes important in behaving ones own. This could be seen as at once alienating and liberating to be able to flee from the physical realm and characterize a new self, but this does not mean one can totally escape ones connection to 'the real', however protected one believes one is online. A demonstration of this protective barrier between offline and online breaking down is when in 2006, an intruder hacked into the Second Life platform and people feared that they would connect the avatars to actual world names. People did not want to be known for their very personal creations of other selves that they felt to be an interior version of their actual self. This could be seen as an intrusion of 'The Real' into the pleasant realms of the hyperreal, or vice versa.

Another way one could experiment with even more selves was through using multiple avatars. There is the chance that either multiple people controlled one avatar or one person controlled many avatars. A person could have many avatars for multiple reasons, one reason was to become anonymous and avoid having too many instant messages crowding them at any time. Another reason was to explore different personalities, to experiment with how people perceived them and to test others behavior. I see the appeal of this behavior in its Godly and otherworldly powers, but it also seems to reflect a seeking of the users for the 'realness' of the personalities of other users. They socially experiment in order to see how maybe one friend reacts to them in another body and what this says about society. In the context of something such as Facebook this behavior of having multiple profiles would seem strange or suspicious, however it is a normal practice in Second Life. Boellstorff comments that the 'ethic of anonymity was pervasive' (2008.134). In Dreamscape it is also possible to participate in 'ghosting' (2002.42), a feature that turns you into an anonymous eye in the upper right corner of the room, allowing you to watch but not participate. These behaviors delve into our human desire for at once authenticity but also plurality. We become God's to watch the behavior of others, however is the medium which allows us this power, meaning we at once treat

and are treated as Gods by it. Also, the actual self being re-constituted by ones virtual self merely demonstrates how our 'true' and 'authentic' selves are generally created by our capacity to explore multiple selves. As Baudrillard said, everything can exist simultaneously, and with this capacity we as humans try to merge with the infinite options of being we can inhabit online. This at once makes us realize our bigness and our smallness as we sit alone with the entire virtual universe before us.

To compare the world of Second Life with a less immersive but more pervasive social media, we can look at Twitter. In Marwick's (2010) article she observes how the people or 'content producers' on Twitter navigate their 'imagined audiences'. Participants attempt to use certain techniques to target different audiences, conceal and reveal themselves and most importantly, maintain 'authenticity'. Twitter is a hugely different platform from Second Life, and this firstly comes down to what it offers as a medium. It is through short posts consisting of 140 word texts and sometimes photos and links, in which one attempts to portray something about oneself. It is a continuous cycle of performance, mediated just as one would in a conversation. However the audience one mediates for is often on a larger scale than other networks. The set up is different from Facebook because it is not necessary to 'follow' back someone who follows you, therefore allowing people to gather hundreds and thousands of followers if their 'content' is interesting or particularly relevant. Twitter appears to be more like advertising and self-promotion, no matter how people say they use it. Studies on presentation of profile-based sites 'have demonstrated that profile owners are attentive to audience.' (2010. 115) And Papacharissi describes personal homepages as 'a carefully controlled performance through which self presentation is achieved under optimal conditions.' (2010.115) Bloggers and writers however construct their imagined audience that is reading their blog from their own ideas of who they actually want to read their blog. The people that read ones account may be completely different to how one imagines them. The imagined audience in a sense is created as one writes for them. Twitter is a place of hyper self-consciousness and self-awareness, where people attempt to use culture to 'convey prestige, uniqueness, or aesthetic preference' (2010. 116).

This identity management is totally opposite to Second Life, in which users believe that they can explore their 'inner' self by using mythical or fantasy avatars and participate in behavior they feel they would not in real life. You can essentially hide if you desire to, and there is usually no reference to ones outside life and achievements such as jobs, relationship status or where you live if you do not wish to share that information. Going back to what Mauss said about the mask, in which we were once aware of its artifice in role-making, Twitter actually seems to cater to the artifice and under the pretense that ones edited self is close to ones real self. When talking to people who used Twitter, they believed that there was a difference between 'personal-branding' and what was valued which was 'authenticity'. Marwick says that to Tweepers, 'consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic' (2010.119), but how can one not speak to an audience over such a medium as Twitter? The values of 'authenticity' of course are socially constructed, and Twitter demands a certain type. People attempt to separate the very real function of Twitter which is a tool for 'self-conscious commodification' (2010. 119) and what they

believe to be a true-to-self identity, in which one tweets only for oneself. It is impossible on this format to escape from engaging in what Dean calls the 'ideology of publicity', and valuing what gains us attention. Rather than being anonymous, one's whole self is up for scrutiny. The seeking to appear authentic basically draws on whether you are consumable, and the perception that your audience is demanding certain things from you. One Twitter strategically describes their page as: 'my stream 1/3 humors, 1/3 informative, 1/3 genial and unfiltered, transparency is so chic. Try to tweet to tweet the same way.' (2010. 122) Of course as human beings, we always practice self-monitoring. Erving Goffman conceptualizes identity as a continual performance, and his work has been grouped with symbolic interactionism, a perspective that claims the 'identity and self are constituted through constant interactions with others' (Marwick.2010.123). However, Marwick points out that, those under the spotlight, such as celebrities like Madonna, can engage in coded communications in order to appeal or different and opposing audiences, Madonna was at once a feminist message to young woman and a sexy persona for young men. Ambiguity is key. This example shows that whatever we may think of our portrayals of ourselves online, someone else will see it differently. This is why Second Life seems so pure in comparison, as people get to know each other based on an avatar and persona that has complex connotations in relation to the real person not reliant on the opinions of others. It is virtual, but it is more 'authentic' in other ways as it is not always being watched or scrutinized. People mostly suspend their disbeliefs and accept that the avatar is a thing in its own right in which they can pursue an intimate relationship with.

I want to finish this section by looking at sexual relations on Second Life, and how they prove our porous selves in relation to the virtual, our vulnerability online and the naturalness of how it functions. Sex could be seen as the final frontier on our feelings towards computer generated imagery, if one, as has been shown, can feel true attraction to another avatar, then where does the line end? Boellstorff found that for some romances and lovers in Second Life felt more real, as one resident said 'in a virtual environment we get to meet the person before we can judge their physical appearance'. (2008.170) When the Internet first gained tract, a dystopic narrative portrayed virtual worlds as 'engines of isolation, the pastime of techno-hermits firmly ensconced in lonely rooms' (2008.157). But studies of virtual worlds have found that they can be in fact more powerful as places of intimacy than actual worlds, with many residents of Second Life commenting that relationships online became more intense more quickly. Although there has been the tarnishing of online platforms as catering to sexual deviants, in fact nonsexual friendship is the most important part of their lives online for more people. Second Life, rather than mediation between two locations, such as talking to a far away friend on Facebook, is a space and location in its own right. People do not necessarily see the need to contact their Second Life friends in real life, and some prefer to hide their identities. What is most interesting is that people feel that their friendships are intense and even spiritual, you get to know a personality 'sans body' (2008.159). Feelings seemed to be magnified. Sex, although not practiced by all Second Life users, was seen as meaningful by many, however some commented that watching the avatars themselves having sex was not the main part of the experience, but the poetic use of



sights, sounds and emotions through words and gestures meant that things could be expressed in Second Life which may not have been easy to express in actuality. Here people could experiment before they took their fantasy into the real world. Being able to feel intimate enough with an avatar in which you may or may not share you're actual life information with demonstrates the capacity for people to trust in the 'realness' of the avatar, without enquiry into the correlation of sign and referent. Second Life offers this realer than real type of relationship, beyond the bounds of physical separation, appearance, status or wealth and connects people on a very basic human level. I feel that the performance and creation of the avatars and the way people experience them as being part of a larger movement to find humanity and beauty through the numbing medium that the Internet could be perceived as. The users on Second Life are artists who put aside the weight of distinguishing virtual and actual and explore the real in the hyperreal, playing with God-like abilities to find who they feel they really are.

## **Conclusion**

Strong emotions allow us overcome the feeling of the un-realness of the computer generated imagery. We see the imagery as something which is very inherent to the people who have created it and thus very real. In a world in which the separation of real and fake is so persistent, we constantly seek to re-define it, and this is useful in many ways for conceptualizing difference. However once we enter virtual worlds, we find that the transparency of the medium and its functions are integrally valuable to discovering what people consider to be their real selves. As Baudrillard argued, we already live in the hyperreal, and the struggle is to separate it from the real. In fact this is nearly impossible. Seeing ourselves transformed into an avatar of our own making allows us to confront the simulation but to perceive it clearly enough to see that it is actually our real self. Second Life is a very different platform for social interaction in comparison to other social media, because it is spatial, it is based in a sense on fantasy and myth and the 'Desert of The Real' is whatever you want it to be. One Second Life user described a ritual she does which very poignantly describes the relationship she has with the virtual world. Wendy used Second Life in order to take part in the fantasy of 'Child Play', with parents who tucked her into bed each night. As soon as Wendy closed her eyes as her child avatar in Second Life, she would log off the program on her computer. Boellstorff asks her 'So the actual world is Wendy's dream, until she wakes up again in Second Life?' To which Wendy replies, 'Yup. Indeed.' (2008.176) Technology like this evokes in us the capacity to exercise the divine powers of all seeing vision, manipulating our age and bodily form, and exploring things we wish to do in our real lives, before doing them, like a dream. I see the creators and users of Second Life as post-modern artists like Rafman, who, by living these fantasies online, disrupt the numbness that other mediums do to us and live in a type of future. Although it could seem utopic however, it still carries many of the problems of everyday life, for example glitches and hacks reflect the fears and worries of the really real impinging on the selves that we believe to be the actually really real. We escape one desert, only to find ourselves in another one.

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