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The World Made New

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The term "metaverse" in reference to multiplayer virtual worlds was first coined in Neal Stephenson's 1993 cyberpunk thriller *Snow Crash*. The book toys with the possibilities of a future in which many people live their lives partially online. What is striking about the Internet-dominated near-future world *Snow Crash* portrays is that it is only ambiguously dystopian: it is dark and violent, but in many ways very conducive to individual creativity, and in any case, even its most astute inhabitants don't long for a gentler or more meaningful life. In Stephenson's anarcho-capitalist vision, people alternate between time frivolously spent in reality and equally banal activities in the metaverse, which is so tightly woven into everyday life that public terminals are ubiquitously located to allow the poor to log in to it (although their avatars—their virtual bodies—are noticeably inferior). Before the book's save-the-world-from-great-evil plot is set in motion, the most urgent issue in most people's lives is having their pizza delivered in under thirty minutes.

Second Lives:
A Journey Through Virtual Worlds
By Tim Guest
Random House ~ 2008 ~ 288 pp.
$25 (cloth)

Coming of Age in Second Life:
An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human
By Tom Boellstorff
Princeton ~ 2008 ~ 328 pp.
$29.95 (cloth)

Fifteen years after the publication of *Snow Crash*, Stephenson's vision of a massive multiplayer world filled with user-generated content is thriving in virtual worlds like Second Life. Indeed, San Francisco-based Linden Lab, the company that owns and administers the Second Life platform, has consciously incorporated elements of Stephenson's metaverse into its programming. As of April 2008, Second Life had more than 13 million users, with roughly 50,000 logged on at once during peak hours, and it was facilitating the transfer of an average of $1.4 million in real-world money per day. Countless articles have recounted the improbable wealth, debauchery, crime, community-formation, and sheer weirdness to be found in Second Life, and two recent books—London journalist Tim Guest's *Second Lives* and UC-Irvine anthropologist Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life*—have taken on the task of

contemplating its social significance and implications.

Second Lives sets out to demonstrate how the real world batters and abuses the average person until he is driven to seek solace in the warm glow of his computer screen, where he can reinvent his identity and virtually conquer his real-life demons. Each chapter is awkwardly framed by Guest's mopey ruminations about his own real-life problems—debt, loneliness, the high price of London real estate—and goes on to describe some virtual-world solution—virtual employment (and criminality), virtual love affairs, virtual real estate. "Each individual I met found something new in virtual worlds, something they lacked in real life."

While virtual worlds are especially attractive to those who are socially isolated in real life—people with physical disabilities and autism spectrum disorders have an established presence in Second Life, for example—the majority of the game's users, according to Linden Lab's data, are educated, middle-class Westerners with successful day jobs. Nor are most Second Life "residents" (as its users are called) the socially inept losers of popular caricature; a 2006 study from the Dutch think tank EPN found that residents of Second Life who reported many friends and high levels of happiness online for the most part reported the same in the real world, though the correlation understandably diminished the more time respondents spent logged in. So even though Guest argues that users turn to Second Life because of real-world inadequacies, in truth, dissatisfaction with "first life" is not the primary incentive driving interest in virtual worlds, and popular and socially successful players of Second Life are generally also popular and socially successful in real life. Certainly when I signed up for Second Life last summer, it was not to escape real-life burdens or make profound spiritual connections that I lacked in actual life, but out of a curiosity born of a decade of gaming and socializing online. What did this newest toy have to offer?

Coming of Age in Second Life suggests that what it has to offer is a third way between the twin perils of modernity: the untrammeled capitalism that alienates man from his labor, and the collectivist solutions to this alienation that crush individual freedom. Drawing heavily on Henri Bergson's depiction of the *Homo faber* (man the maker), Boellstorff proclaims that virtual worlds like Second Life are inaugurating a new "Age of Techne" in which the capacity to fabricate will become the defining aspect of humanity. This new age will be rooted in what Boellstorff calls "creationist capitalism…in which labor is understood in terms of creativity, so that production is understood as creation." Production and consumption will no longer beget alienation, but rather, the creation of new worlds and better selves.

The exemplar of this new age is, not coincidentally, Neal Stephenson's "hacker"—the software developer and computer engineer whose individuality is realized through technology and who has an almost limitless faith in his capacity to improve himself through it. EPN's study found that IT and communications professionals make up more than 30 percent of Second Life's heaviest users (those who log in for more than 30 hours a week), and 30 percent of all of these users agree with the statement "Second Life offers me a better life than real life does." "At the core of creationist capitalism is the idea of the self as a creator," Boellstorff writes. "Creativity [is] linked to self-expression and thus to freedom."

Second Life puts a premium on creativity by compelling its residents to construct every aspect of their world. Not only is the social aspect of Second Life heavily oriented around virtual shopping and self-customization—residents are encouraged to build and script objects like avatar skins, gestures, clothes, furniture, and landscapes for personal use and for sale inside the world—but the world itself exists only through the conduit of human ingenuity and fabrication. In Second Life, there is no need to pick through the tangle of the natural and the man-made that philosophers have tried for centuries to distinguish in defining human nature. Nothing in virtual worlds is given and everything is customizable, including the self.

In real life, of course, much of what we consider our fundamental self is quite beyond our conscious control. Ancestry, family, circumstances of birth, inherited talents, and genetic predispositions—all of these are given to us long before we can refuse them. But in Second Life, Boellstorff emphasizes, every aspect of self is chosen. Here, the elementary school maxim "you can be anything you want to be" is quite true, down to the literal ability to be a thing rather than a person. Second Life abounds with robots, vampires, and in particular, "furries"—a subculture whose members personally (and often sexually) identify with animals. Identity-shifting is common in Second Life; many residents regularly switch genders (and species). Boellstorff echoes the beliefs of many residents I chatted with when he suggests that shape-shifting is valuable for its ability to "produce…a kind of empathy" with people unlike oneself, as one of his interviewees claims: "In SL, you can get some marginal experience of what it's like to be fat or black or female. It can lead to better understanding of other people." In the spirit of this advice, I adopted as many perspectives unavailable to me in real life as I could and became a gay black man.

The experience was less enlightening than I had hoped. Tweaking my appearance was easy enough, but the difficulty came not in looking like a gay black man but in actually being one. As it turns out, it's

hard to authentically experience a life without some history of that life in an environment where identity is relatively stable. Even actors have scripts that contextualize the characters they play. In Second Life, the whole charade of identity follows a sort of pretzel logic. On what should I base the behavior of my avatar? Without a life story, all I could draw from (and reinforce) were popular stereotypes. Or I could just base my avatar on my own personality, which would be to deny the likely possibility that gay black men really do have different perspectives than me.

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that, in Second Life, the reaction of my audience to the new "me" was as unreliable as my own claim to truthful representation. If a white avatar makes a racist remark towards my avatar, does that mean that I experienced racism? What if the white avatar was actually a black person acting out stereotypes of white people? If a white female avatar makes a pass at me, is it a latter-day manifestation of Ralph Ellison's Sybil? Does it matter if the avatar was owned by an old guy from Norway? My avatar was sitting in the hot tub of a gay bathhouse one day chatting with several other (possible) men, when one of them expressed his frustration with the reluctance of most residents to post photos of their real-life selves in their profiles. "Isn't that one of the attractions of SL?" I asked. He agreed, but said he wanted to be sure about the people with whom he was having virtual sex. Sensing that this might be a hint that I was not playing my part convincingly enough, I hastily teleported away.

Without question, the most popular pastime in Second Life is virtual sex. On its face, the popularity of Second Life sex is baffling. Avatars are basically cartoons that lack genitalia, which must be purchased or built separately and attached to an avatar; sexual intercourse consists of a scripted animation activated by clicking on a conveniently-placed globe. While it's possible to acquire some fairly graphic sex organs and get absorbed in the chat component, the whole process is about as stimulating as a corporate PowerPoint presentation.

Nonetheless, one of the most common sights in Second Life is the virtual strip club, and one of the most common in-world careers is escort service. Tim Guest devotes a chapter of *Second Lives* to his adventures with virtual prostitutes, and attests to the small fortunes to be made in escorting: he paid the equivalent of three dollars an hour for his experiences. However, it is easy enough to find free sex in Second Life, including all imaginable and outlandish fetishes.

Boellstorff and Guest both suggest that Second Life offers people a way to rehearse social behavior—like conversing with strangers or practicing foreign languages—in an unpressured, low-stakes environment. To

some extent, the same goes for virtual sex. "People were attracted to sex in virtual worlds because of the lack of real-world consequences," Guest writes. In some cases, the vicarious sex also serves not as a substitute for real-life experiences, but rather a means of augmenting them. One of the virtual escorts Guest speaks with, for example, confides that prostitution in Second Life has helped her become more "sexually adventurous" in real life. "It's connected me with a new sense of self.... I've crossed paths I once was too fearful to cross even in my own imagination."

And so, like pornography, Second Life promotes the idea of sex as a complex techne, a skill (and a highly commodifiable one at that) that requires above all creativity and practice rather than love or commitment. For Boellstorff, this conception of love fits perfectly into creationist capitalism: "Those who cannot understand how persons can fall in love without 'knowing' their partner in the actual world confuse episteme with techne. What operationalizes love in virtual worlds is not knowing who someone is, but crafting a relationship within the virtual world." Creativity and performance are imperative in Second Life, and they can have a distorting influence on real-life relationships if residents fail to see that the *Homo faber* is not the only, and not even the primary, mode of being human. There has been widespread press coverage of scandalous Second Life romances that have broken up real-life marriages in the past couple of years, including a BBC documentary about virtual adultery, but at least those residents who want to meet their virtual partners in person realize that a relationship is fundamentally unlike a popsicle-stick sculpture—that it is, in fact, rooted in *knowing* rather than *crafting*.

Boellstorff argues in *Coming of Age in Second Life* that *Homo faber* is the essence of man, that "the story of Prometheus describes the mythic moment when humans, receiving the gift of techne, became fully human for the first time." But in Hesiod's telling, the story of Prometheus ends not with the gift of fire, but with Zeus' revenge for it: the introduction of woman to connive against man, and with her, the sum of human suffering. Only once Pandora's jar is open and its demons have escaped can it be said that the race of men is fully human.

Unlike Boellstorff's book, Guest's *Second Lives* is written with the understanding that, for all its wonders, human ingenuity can never quite transcend human suffering. While he is sympathetic to the residents of virtual worlds and their largely innocuous motives for participation, Guest remains wary of the utopianism of many of their boosters. His previous book, *My Life in Orange*, is a memoir of his childhood in a cult that his mother joined in search of freedom and transcendence, but which collapsed after poisoning several hundred people in

a nearby town. Guest fears that the impulse to leave reality behind and migrate to virtual worlds is ultimately rooted in that same Pyrrhic desire to "create heaven," the flip side of which is always some new hell.

He is particularly suspicious of the post-humanist aspirations that the platform seems implicitly to encourage, and which are explicitly promoted by Philip Rosedale, the founder and chairman of Linden Lab. Rosedale believes virtual worlds will make reality obsolete; he looks forward to a post-human future in which "the computational density of Second Life is enough to support thinking" and we "upload [our] entire minds into a global, networked machine."

Much of what Rosedale tells Guest is meaningless extropian dream-talk unlikely to resonate with most of the residents of his virtual world, who are there to play dress-up and engage in a little evening banter on weekday nights, not to become cyborgs. But his talk of escaping the constraints of our given humanity might mean something profoundly different to those with serious limitations in the real world. Second Life could give them a chance to be like everybody else—as in the case of Wilde Cunningham, an avatar controlled by a group of severely disabled adults in a Boston day-care center. According to Guest, Second Life broadened their horizons immensely. "As Wilde, they were liberated from their daily plight. As Wilde, they could walk. As Wilde, they could dress themselves. As Wilde, they were eloquent, funny, and mobile." In such cases, where physical appearance may make others wary of socializing with someone, virtual representations may indeed provide an effective way to bypass the stigma against disability.

But the goal of a compassionate society should be to accept disability as a fact of life, not to whitewash its public appearance simply because it makes the rest of us uncomfortable. In asking the disabled to pretend to be able-bodied online to make themselves palatable to our sensibilities, we run the risk of confusing the real benefit of virtual worlds—that they invite otherwise isolated people into the social life of a community—with their illusory frills—that they allow people to "become beautiful" or "fly," as though encouraging virtual perfection is somehow a replacement for our real-world obligation to treat the disabled with dignity.

And what of those who turn to Second Life to escape not from obvious disabilities but from other aspects of their given selves? According to Boellstorff, the malleability of identity in Second Life has led residents to insist "that they had built friendships in Second Life that were as real as their friendships in the actual world—even more real, since one did not prejudge persons based on factors like gender, race, and age." But are these factors less real or essential aspects of a person than the appearance he chooses for

himself in Second Life? Second Life is useful not where avatar is confused with self, where the platform is used to create ideal and entirely intentional identities, but rather, where it helps us face precisely those given aspects of selfhood—"factors like gender, race, and age" without which we would not be human—and come to terms with human imperfection and obligation.

For many residents of Second Life, the connection between responsibility and the stability of one's identity is already implicit. Although it is common for users to shift identities and to open several accounts at once (referred to as "alts"), Boellstorff points out that once residents form a circle of friends, they often find that keeping up with the social lives of several avatars is too demanding and eliminate their alts in order to invest more time in developing their primary avatar, who very often reflects their real-life identity most accurately. One of Boellstorff's interviewees reports that, "When I first started I alternated between two main avatars, and was planning on making more, but since I started actually meeting and hanging out with the same people I haven't really changed my basic look. . . . I started having static relationships and wanted to remain a single entity." What this resident understands is that friendship—even online friendship—depends on mutual obligation. One must be capable of being held responsible for himself and his friends, and that can only happen when there is a unitary, identifiable person to hold responsible.

The use of avatars as what Boellstorff calls "sites of self-making in their own right" encourages precisely the opposite understanding of self. Rather than asking us to take responsibility for the self we are given—the burdensome aspects along with the liberating—it promotes the idea that an increasingly more "authentic" or "essential" self will surface as we peel off the burdens of circumstance to reveal a pure, freely willed core. This is the mindset of children, who, squirming under the yoke of rules and authorities, imagine themselves to be secret superheroes and magicians whose full power is yet to be manifested—but when it is, you can be sure that they'll never have to wash the dishes again. The first steps to adulthood consist in taking responsibility for one's given self—for example: the shy person who builds a small, tight circle of friends and finds solitary pursuits to enjoy. Far too many residents of Second Life, as is clear from the work of both Boellstorff and Guest, are stuck dreaming of unlocking the gregarious socialite trapped within, creating a growing gap between their capacities and aspirations, and making themselves increasingly miserable in the process. For those users, accepting and improving their given selves might best begin by logging off.

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