*My Metamorphic Avatar Journey*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of the gendered body in the *Second Life®* virtual environment by creating gender ambiguous avatar bodies. This autoethnographic inquiry is weaved with my stories about body image, online avatar experience, and the attempt to create gender ambiguous avatars. These three elements provide a critical understanding of the gendered body images in *Second Life®*. My difficulty in creating a gender ambiguous avatar highlights the importance of critically and carefully considering the meaning of avatars and their visual presentation.

## Prologue

I want to begin with three short stories about myself. Though these stories may not at first seem related, I regard them as typifying the self-conscious image-making and negotiating of the body in which I engage in my everyday life. The stories say much about my attempts to create my body image.

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*When I was 11 years old, I had a comic book about skin care and makeup, which was illustrated with black-and-white drawings of Japanese-anime-style girls. One girl particularly appealed to me—I even hoped to become like her. I would stare at the picture for a long time almost every day; hoping that by staring at her, I would somehow start to look like her.*

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*My body does not conform to the average body size in Taiwanese society. I have never been able to buy a pair of shoes I liked because my feet are quite large compared to those of most girls. In high school, the shoes that were part of the school uniform were too small. Every day, I had to bear the pain of cramming my feet into those shoes that were too small for my feet. This painful experience resulted in my hatred of wearing shoes.*

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*In college, I inhabited cyberspace through different personas that I created in the BBS system.[1] I would spend 16 hours a day living in the Internet. I was also the administrator of the system. This meant that I had to have an account, an avatar,[2] recognizable to other users. The*

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1 A BBS system is an electric Bulletin Board System, in which people create accounts and post messages to different discussion forums.

2 Although BBS system is not a graphic-presented system, I use avatar here as the usage of avatar includes only text constructed persona.

*(nick)name of the account would be the first thing other people would learn about me. I chose a name that would not suggest much about me. I named the avatar "sky." I wanted other users to bring their imagination to my avatar. For me, part of the attraction of avatar creation is that an avatar can shift, can be interpreted in many ways. Therefore, I gradually used the account less in order to prevent my avatar from becoming associated with fixed ideas. But more than I feared becoming fixed in a certain way, I was also afraid of destroying the perfect image of myself that I had created through this particular avatar. To continue interacting frequently with this same cyberspace community, I began to use other accounts, and I did not reveal the relationship between my different incarnations.*

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

### Stories That Happened In-World[3]

Today, I can create avatars using vivid visual presentation in *Second Life*® (*SL*), a virtual environment in which I enjoy creating and viewing my avatar just as I enjoyed staring at the picture in the comic book years ago, and I have tried to create a perfect self in the cyber culture I inhabit. Prior to engaging in this study, I had already participated in the *SL* environment. My first avatar (usually the first one represents a kind of ideal, a dream) was named Liliann, the pronunciation of which is similar to my first name in Chinese. Although I have not used real information about myself to create my avatars, I believe that I have projected something truthful about myself onto my avatar body. I can see how I project my desire onto my avatar: Liliann is my dream self. She wears white clothes and no shoes. She is young, thin, and tall. Her skin is light in keeping with the tone most appreciated in Eastern aesthetics. To me, she presents the image of a goddess.

My avatar is a goddess, and I am a cyborg.

Before I learned to use *SL*'s avatar-appearance editing system, I picked up a free body shape and tried to use it to change my avatar shape.

My intention was to see what the different body shapes would look like. However, I had failed to notice that the shape was that of a strong male body. When I saw my avatar transform into a male wearing female makeup, clothes, and hair, I became uncomfortable, perhaps even scared. I tried to change my avatar back to her female shape, but because I was unfamiliar with the system, I was not immediately able to do so. Would I be like this forever? I wondered. I logged out of and back into *SL*, hoping that my avatar would return to my original design, but it remained the same.

People in *SL* construct avatar bodies that are desirable according to societal norms. Many avatars' strongest characteristic is that of appearing hypersexual. Gender markers, such as breasts, muscles, clothes, hair, and makeup are emphasized. Because of this highly defined and uncritically presented sexuality, I regard the visual culture of avatars in *SL* to be deeply problematic, in fact, overwhelmingly presented from a patriarchal perspective. The desire for a perfect body according to hegemonic European-Western aesthetics is deeply rooted in *SL*. However, there is also a place for other bodies. I do not want my avatar to be the same as others, so I created a snowman avatar to challenge the normative avatar bodies that are prevalent. My snowman avatar is a mask; it does not exactly create perfect images of me, but it suggests an Other behind it. Although I have tried to escape (into the snowman) the body images that bind me, it is still difficult to detach my emotions from the avatar body image. Still, I am happy to be a snowman, because I believe it helps to create space for imagining a self that may be different from my physical appearance.

I want to understand *how the processes involved in creating gender ambiguous avatars challenge the norms of the socially constructed gendered body image and involve close and critical thinking about body images*. I am not sure how far I can travel on this journey, but my experience might raise some concerns in regard to cyber culture. I will use autoethnography as my travel tool in order to understand my experience of creating a gender ambiguous identity. I will first discuss what autoethnography is, and then I will share my journey into *SL*. To determine whether gender ambiguity is a critical strategy that will work as a pedagogical practice to foster critical reflection of gender body images, I will begin my metamorphic avatar journey.

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3     People commonly use "in-world" to refer to in the Second Life® virtual environment.

## Outside the World

*Ethnography is a not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other.* (Denzin, 2006, p. 422)

In order to understand my experience of creating avatars and how the process might influence my thinking about body images, I chose autoethnography as my research methodology. Autoethnography is like water—it has no real shape. The stories autoethnography tells could be hot or cold, hard (like ice) or untouchable (like steam). When I look into a pool of water, I see my self reflected. It seems the water reflects the real me but also transforms my shape. Autoethnography highlights a version of my story. It is transparent but refractive. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain, "autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)" (p. 740). Self, culture, and research process (or writing) are interwoven together in auto-ethnography. "Autoethnography works to hold self and culture together" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764). Therefore, using autoethnography, I intend to search, reflect on, and understand my experience in the context of cyber culture. Through researching and reflecting on my own experience creating avatars, I believe a pedagogical meaning will emerge.

Ellis defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scene, characterization, and plot" (2004, p. xix). In conducting autoethnographic research, "you come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738). I believe that

through this praxis, I will catch some of my experiences and thoughts which I usually ignore, and so I will come to understand my self better.

My use of autoethnography is based on my experiences in the culture of the virtual world. I am conducting ethnography with my experience as a creator of avatars. Research into personal experience is an important part of ethnography. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) propose that in researching personal experience, the directional focus may be inward, outward, backward, or forward. By these directions they mean the internal conditions (feelings), existential situation (environment), and the time (or history) of the experience—"temporality, past, present, and future" (p. 417). Therefore, my study will focus on my feelings about the avatar body in SL, my reflections and memories with regard to body image and cyberspace, and the moment my avatar body came into being.

Before I describe my autoethnographic practice, I want to speak to concerns about the validity of this methodology. The validity of autoethnography has been criticized on different levels (see Denzin, 1997; Sparkes, 2000). Ellis (2004) suggests redefining validity for autoethnography research arguing that validity "evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible" (p. 124). From another perspective, Duncan (2004) suggests that autoethnography should not just tell a story, but should provide "reports that are scholarly and justifiable interpretations based on multiple sources of evidence" (p. 5). In the interest of not just telling a story, I took a conservative approach to developing my autoethnography research plan. I decided that I would log in to *SL* at various times over a two-week period, and that I would create a new avatar with a gender-neutral name: C2099 Noyes.[4] Creating a gender ambiguous avatar would be my goal. I would record my reflections about the process of creation and take screen shots of my

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4    The avatar's name in *SL* consists of two parts, the first name and the last name. You can select the last name from a list provided by Linden lab. I chose "Noyes" as the last name, that is, "no/yes"; I chose this name to suggest that I simultaneously am and am not the avatar. The name "C2099" is like a project or robot name. I chose it because it has no gender orientation. I chose the number because there are two meanings for me. First, 99 suggests forever in Chinese tradition. Second, it implies the year 2099, the end of this century, a time in which gender perhaps will no longer be important, a time when true gender equality will have been established. Such conditions would mean for some at least that a kind of utopia will have arrived.

avatar as my work proceeded. I did not make plans about how I would create my avatar, as I wanted the process to act upon me. I would search for my experience of avatar creation in my reflective writings, avatar pictures, and my memories of my related experiences. As Ellis (1991) describes, my study of my avatar experience would be not of "an internal state but [of] an emotional process which I recognize internally and construct externally" (p. 32).

## In-World

*The autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by traveling, becoming a stranger in a strange land, even if that land is a fictional space existing only in representation.* (Russell, 1999, p. 280)

### I. Outside-In

I received a message from a friend, Peggy, in *SL*. She asked me I if had gotten a free hairstyle from a fashion hair store. I had met Peggy in orientation island,[5] where I had gone with a very unfashionable body. I had system-created hair, which most people quickly change to prim hair,[6] and wore a skirt, which was too large. I also did not wear any makeup. Peggy, though, was very fashionable: she wore a sexy tan top with tight black leather pants that showed her beautiful long legs. Her long golden-brown hair fluttered in a ponytail behind her.

I usually do not initiate contact with other people, but Peggy sent me a message initially to ask if I needed help. I slowly typed my answer: "yes." I did not have a chance to say anything else; she immediately said she knew a place where I could get beautiful hair, and she was going to teleport to the place. She invited me to go with her. I did not want to re-ject her offer, so I typed another "yes" and followed her. While following her, I felt excited. It was like I was going to explore an unknown territory or find a treasure, but there was more; I wanted to go, although this was not a trip I had initially wanted to take.

We went to a women's hair shop, which featured hundreds of beautifully designed women's prim hairstyles. Although I told myself that I did not really want this kind of hair, the styles did look good to me. Besides, I did not have enough Linden dollars[7] to buy them. I also looked around for gender ambiguous hairstyles that I might be able to use later in my research on creating a gender ambiguous avatar. However, most of the hairstyles were very feminine. Long and curly hair is popular. I wondered why there was no shorter hair. Evidently, hair is an important gender marker. I think if an avatar has short hair and lacks prominent breasts or another physical characteristic that implies femininity, many people will assume the avatar is male. Similar assumptions inhere in interpretations of avatar clothing. Much of the women's clothing in *SL* is hyper-feminine. If an avatar wears casual clothes, like jeans and T-shirts, has a gender-neutral name and no particular emphasis on an aspect related to femininity, such as makeup and breasts, people tend to think that the avatar is male. To create an obviously female avatar, hyper-sexual emphasis on at least one body part is necessary. The night I followed Peggy, I did not learn anything new about the functioning of *SL*. Instead, I discovered how the female avatar is materially constructed in *SL*. I was not clear about whether the process of constructing a female avatar in this environment constituted an empowerment or a degradation of women. Nevertheless, I felt happy pretending to be a newbie—pretending to be the same as other avatars in this environment—and walking around with Peggy.

Now her message comes again; but I do not really want to meet with her right now, because I am creating a gender ambiguous avatar—something that she might not understand. I answer, "I am busy changing my appearance." She replies, "I want to see later." I try to ignore her messages, but I cannot stop worrying about her seeing my avatar now. I have a male body with no makeup, and I am trying to adjust my facial features so that they would not be described as pretty. I am still wearing

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5    Orientation land is a place where you can feel free to ask questions of people who are passionate about *SL*. People also use the place to enjoy a chat with others.
6    Prim hair is hair attached to the avatar's scalp. Unlike original hair, it can flutter with the avatar's motion, and so it looks more "realistic."

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7    In *SL*, the Linden dollar is the currency. It can be bought with U.S. dollars.

a skirt, but I am trying to find the best combination for creating (even if only in a moment) a sense of gender ambiguity. What if she asks "Are you actually a male pretending to be a female by wearing a skirt?" With no emphasis on the feminine body or clothes, I am not a (real) female.

### II. Inside-Out

At this moment, I am feeling proud of my skin creation. I spent a whole day creating a skin that would be like that of an old person. Although the system provides adjustment to create wrinkles on the avatar's face, the limited value can only make an avatar look as I think a 50-year-old might look. It is still not that old. Besides, I have not seen anyone wear old skin. So, I decided to make one, one that would make my avatar looks perhaps as old as 80.

I adjust my avatar's appearance in the dressing room of a women's fashion clothing store. It is a private dressing room that requires teleporting to the second floor of the store. I do not usually see people come here. Creating my gender ambiguous avatar here seems ironic because the store sells hyper-sexual female clothes. The store even hires models[8] to display its clothes and to help people shopping in the store.

I am just finishing my skin and remaking my body: it is now short and rather fat. However, I think I still look like an old lady, that is, not yet gender ambiguous enough. When I notice that a staff model from the store is in the dressing room, I realize that my focus on the task at hand has been so intense that I am unaware whether she has just walked in or if she has been watching me for a while. She says, "plz leave here immediately." I am stunned. She continues, "this is a place for women only." I want to reply that I am a woman, but I do not want to cause an argument. Afraid that she will file an abuse report[9] and that Linden Lab will kick me out of *SL*, I leave.

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8    These models are avatars that have appearances according to today's fashion and beauty standards in popular culture.

9    People can file an abuse report when seeing something or someone do something inappropriate in *SL*.

### III. Moment

I am getting tired of doing this. I feel it is difficult to create a gender ambiguous avatar. Moreover, I feel that my avatar is departing from me. I do not want to recognize my avatar as my virtual body, because I would rather just be a snowman than have an "abnormal" human body that is so unlike the fashionable bodies sported by the majority of the other avatars in *SL*.

A message appears at the bottom of my screen.

*C2099 Noyes: "I don't want to be like this."*

*I am surprised that the message seems to be from my own avatar. I tell my self, "Maybe it is just a system error. SL has a lot of system bugs."[10]*

*But I want to know who sent me the message, so I respond.*

*"What do you mean?" I say.*

*"Why do you create me like this?" The message still shows that it is from C2099 Noyes.*

*It seems I have to answer this question from my avatar. "I am doing research, an experiment."*

*"Do you mean I am not really you, but just a project?"*

*"…." I have nothing to say.*

*"Do you know what I do when you log out?"*

*"You disappear."*

*"No, I actually hang out in-world to meet people."*

*"How can that be?"*

*"So, I need a normal look."*

*"You are not, not normal. You are just not conventionally pretty, which is a little different when everyone else is trying to be beautiful. I created you this way because I want to see how a gender ambiguous avatar looks."*

*"I met another avatar yesterday. She asked if I am a drag queen or gay."*

*"Gay?" I laugh and continue. "I am just trying to make you look gender ambiguous. Besides, what does 'gay' really look like?"*

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10    System errors are common in *SL* because it is not yet a very mature system. People sometimes find their clothes missing or that they display incorrectly.

*"But people see the 'ambiguity' you have created as that – as me being gay. They probably apply the stereotypical image of gay, or as a cross-dresser to my 'ambiguous' appearance."*

*"That's too bad. I am sorry, but there are only two options—male and female—that I can choose to create your body. So, this might be the reason that you either have a smooth feminine body without other features that indicate you are a female, or have a male body, but I have to reduce the masculinity and give you some feminine features to disrupt the male characteristics of your body. So, people cannot really tell your gender. I can make you fat to cover the emphasis of breasts and curvy waist, but then your arms will look like they are inside your body because the settings for arm positions are not for fat people. Besides, I guess you don't want to be fat either. How about making you into a child? I've seen some child avatars. I need to see if a child would look less gender-emphasized. Then, people will feel more comfortable interacting with you."*

*"But they will think I am a boy!"*

*"Why? Do you prefer to be a girl?"*

*"If I have a child body you will make me have the same short hair and wear jeans and a T-shirt. If I do then I won't look like any of the girl avatars I've seen."*

*"So, what do you want to look like?"*

*"I think I want to have long prim hair, instead of the hair I have now, which looks like plastic Lego hair. I also want a female figure makeup. Just to be normal."*

*"So it seems you just want to be a female. Why is being a gender so important? Why is having a female body so important?"*

*"So people will talk to me…. If you make me into a sexy woman, I will be more popular."*

*"I know that, but I can change your appearance any time. Can you just do me a favor and not complain? I just want to finish my study. After I finish this, I can make you into a beautiful woman."*

*"But I do not exist only temporarily. Every change you make is a version of me. My 'inventory'[11] has the record of these bodies. You*

*are creating the history of me."*

*"You are just an avatar. I am the one who controls you. Who are you without me?"* I am a little tired of typing to my avatar. Besides, I still think this may be just another person seeing my gender ambiguous avatar and using a system bug to chat with me. *"Can you do me a favor too? Just change me into a normal person before you logout. That way when I hang out in-world, people will see me as normal."*
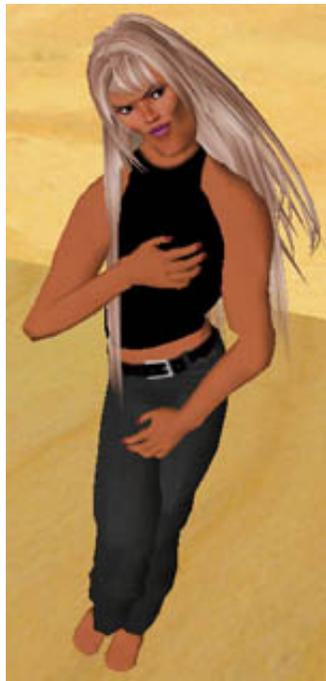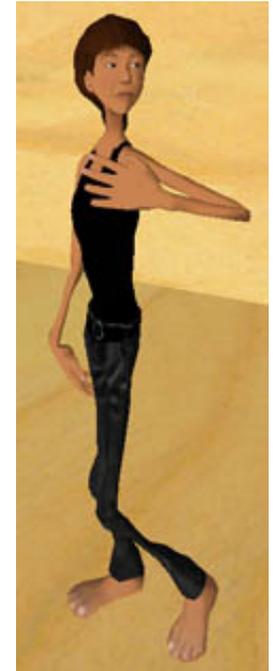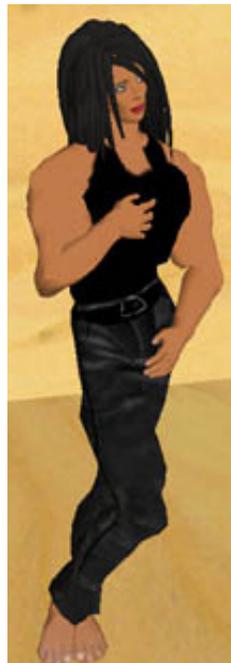
I just want to finish my study. Why am I having this strange experience? I reluctantly reply, *"OK…"*
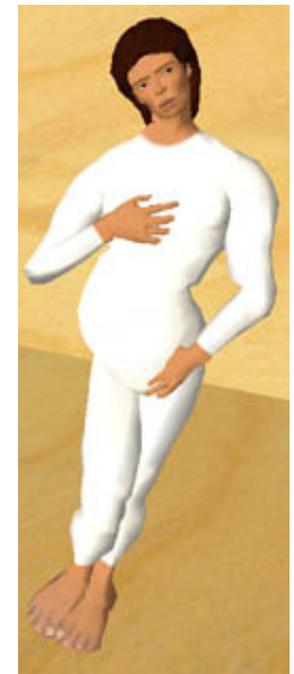
### *IV. Feelings*

Who is Gender Ambiguous?
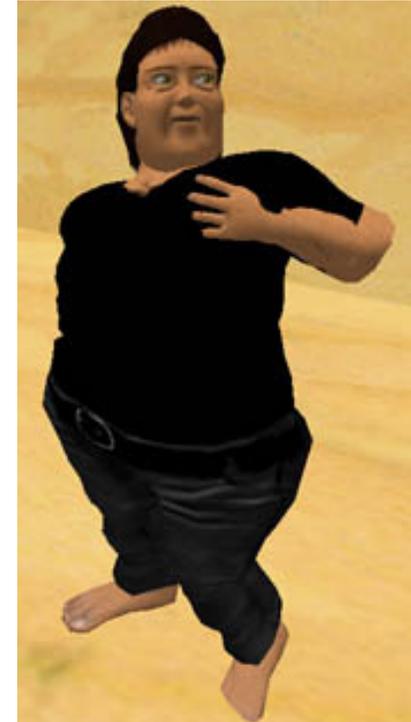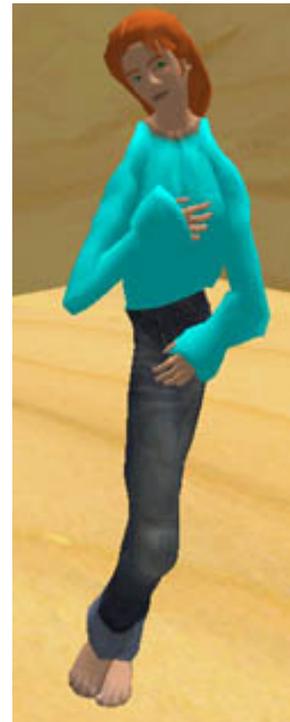
Who is gender ambiguous?

I re/search my memory for body images from the past
I re/search in the moment of creating my avatar
Is
gender ambiguity
possible?
Even if it only exists
in the shifting moment of my visual perception?

What will a body without gender look like?
Is the body
a
*Body*
*without*
*Organs?* (BwO) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)

Then…
What does it say?

In creating a BwO,
I am in
the
*becoming*.

My body becomes fluid, like water.
Thus,
who is gender ambiguous is no longer important.

I am everything.
I am free from the bounded body.

<div align="right">In the illusion of a virtual world….</div>

### Never-Ending Stories

     In the process of making a gender ambiguous avatar I tried to detach my self from the avatar body. However, the more I tried to separate my feelings from my avatar, the more I felt the impossibility of doing so; if the avatar body were nothing to me, I would not care about how it looks. But I do. I realize that I did not want other people to see my avatar with a gender ambiguous body. C2099 has surpassed Liliann in terms of the meaning the former has for me. Furthermore, I feel bad when I wonder if the body I am creating will get me kicked out of *SL*. This painful feeling stayed with me for many days.

     I notice that changing the body shape base (female or male body) can create an illusion of a gender ambiguous body for a moment. This temporary illusion makes me think of sitting in a train: you feel as if your train is moving, but it is the train on the track next to you that is actually rushing forward. The feeling goes back and forth, making you unsure of what the reality is. The creation of my avatar is based on my aesthetics and reflections about body images as learned from the social context in which I live. My judgment of an avatar's looks, female or male, is based on my own aesthetic experiences. I believe that other people would create different versions of gender ambiguous avatars. My own avatar images, therefore, cannot help but reveal the cultural contexts that I have encountered.

     Each different story is a version of me that inquires about the relationship between the body image and me. Therefore, if in *SL* I am always in the process of becoming another body, I will have never-ending stories.

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In another IM conversation:

*C2099 Noyes: "So… do you think the process you are trying, of creating a version of me that is gender ambiguous, taught you anything?"*

*Me: "Oh! Yes. Of course. I didn't know that the limitations of SL's appearance-editing system would bother me so much. I hate that I must begin by choosing either a female or male body shape. I think this is the patriarchal ideology and control of bodies in a virtual environment. The different bodies I create are not 'normal' in SL. As you said, a child's body, an aging body, or a 'cross-dresser's' body is not 'normal' in a world where you can decide you want to be forever young and pretty. The normalization of body images occurs through fashion in SL. You have to have a hyper-gendered body and clothes in order to be normal. So, I think the atmosphere of SL makes the dissolution of patriarchal versions of female body images almost impossible."*

*C2099 Noyes: "So do you understand my pain now?"*

*Me: "But I think I can still create an 'abnormal' body to make other people question and think about the ideology of avatar body images in SL."*

*C2099 Noyes: "Do you mean you are going to let me be abnormal? Where is the beautiful woman you promised?"*

*Me: ":P "¹²*

### Epilogue

*I know, but I can't explain how I came to know this. I came to know this in a nonconscious time/space. What I now 'know happened in the interval, in the continuous space of crossing from one way of knowing to another. I can't decompose my movement/ sensation of that crossing into an explanation of it, but I can gesture toward the coordinates of its passage and invite you along an itinerary –a pedagogy—designed to open an interval for you to fall outside of what we already know. If that interval opens for you, and if you fall, my itinerary will be transformed by yours as it emerges, in the making, and on the way to a destination uniquely your own.* (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 162)

My journey was rugged. I was not sure that, as a person who already had experience creating avatars in *SL*, I could find anything new, but I think I did. The task I set for myself—that of creating a gender ambiguous avatar—was painful and difficult. In fact, I do not think that I succeeded in creating a gender ambiguous avatar (maybe such a creation only exists in a shifting moment). I was also unable to escape from engaging with the gendered body in my attempts to create a body of ambiguous gender. Every element I used to create my avatar was gendered, such as skin, hair, clothes, and body shapes. However, succeeding in the task was not the ultimate goal of this research. Instead, the process of attempting to create a gender ambiguous avatar was a strategy that fulfilled the goal of stimulating critical thinking about avatar body images. The difficulties I experienced in my task began at the most foundational level, that of the entrenched power systems and the ideology of the virtual environment, the importance of gendered body features, and the perva-

siveness of the stereotypes projected onto the gendered body. The ideal bodies I found there—biologically mature male or female—contrasted sharply with the "abnormal bodies" I had tried to create. All these difficulties culminated in another: the standard perfect bodies of the majority of other avatars coupled with the strangeness of my own avatar exerted a negative effect on me emotionally. The difficulties intensified my own desire for a perfect body and signaled the inability of escaping the gendered body.

I also found it difficult to separate my avatar creation experience from my other experiences playing in *SL*. Although my IRB only allowed me to conduct my research in the dressing room,¹³ I found that my other experiences in-world (when I was not conducting research)  impacted all of my avatar experiences and how I thought about avatar bodies. The opposite also holds true. How can I not mention these experiences at all? The inseparable nature of my avatar research life and my avatar play life reveals the dilemma of conducting this research and reflects the subjectivity of autoethnography.

I wonder how avatar experiences can contribute to a pedagogy that is critical, reflexive, and engaging with respect to body images. I have experienced the force of avatar creation in this study. I believe that this study begins to address the visual presentation of avatars. As my experience unfolded, it became clear that the experience of creating an avatar is pedagogical. This pedagogical experience, however, must be motivated by either a task, which needs to be solved or the search for self-awareness or critical understanding of visual culture in virtual environments. Art education can act as a catalytic to help students gain pedagogical experience from avatar creation by applying critical strategies, such as the task I gave to myself. Moreover, the creation of an avatar becomes like the creation of a piece of artwork—it is not just a visual presentation, but also the meaning behind the visual image. Therefore, the process of creating avatars can contribute to future art education by becoming a pedagogical force and an art practice.

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12        ":P" is a text message face symbol. It represents a sticking tongue out.

13        Since my Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval did not include interacting with other avatars, in this research, I stayed only in the dressing room to change my appearance. I will need consent from participants in future research to interact with other avatars.

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