AVATAR RE/ASSEMBLING AS ART-MAKING, KNOWLEDGE-MAKING, AND SELF-MAKING

A Dissertation in
Art Education

by
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ABSTRACT

An avatar is a representation of an identity in an online virtual world. Most virtual environments provide options for avatar customization. This means that a person can either create an avatar from an existing selection of body parts and apparel or design an even more personalized image. Second Life, the investigative site for this study, is a popular online virtual world that provides almost endless possibilities for avatar assembling to anyone with the vision, skills, and patience to realize them. The process of creating an avatar usually involves negotiating with identity and body image, as it is necessary to select the avatar’s gender, race, body type, features, and clothing style. These elements are all identity markers in the physical world. Even when a person creates a non-human avatar, the avatar is still likely to reflect something about that person’s identity choices. As people are increasingly spending significant amounts of time in online environments, avatars are becoming an important medium for communicating and understanding identity. Though learning about identity is generally considered a critical component of contemporary art education, studies that address the virtual body from the perspective of art-making, self-making, and knowledge-making are scant.

In this study, I argue that the processes of creating and communicating through avatars constitute a means of learning about identity through art-making. I argue that avatars are a medium and that avatar-making is art-making defined on the basis of three theoretical frameworks: Allan Kaprow’s Happenings, Joseph Beuys’s idea of social sculpture, and Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics. Moreover, avatars are a medium for creating art within the broader practice of Net art. In using the term “avatar
re/assembling,” I refer to creating avatars through an art-making process that relates directly to the genre of assemblage. In connecting avatar creation to art-making, I not only emphasize the purposefulness, complexity, and creativity inhering in presenting an avatar, but also postulate avatar re/assembling from a critical position.

Further, I frame the knowledge-making and self-making experience of avatar re/assembling through Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (2005) discussions of the anomalous place of learning and the learning self in the making. Using this framework of learning to understand avatar creation, I perceive avatar re/assembling as an experience of knowledge in the making and envision the self as emerging from the experience of avatar re/assembling. Moreover, I contend that we do not create avatars in order to grasp an “already-made” knowledge of identity and socio-cultural ideas of the body, although doing so might teach us these. Rather, we assemble avatars to create experience and gain knowledge of the learning self in the making—a self that is constantly learning, transforming, and becoming.

I ask: How do different kinds of avatar-making experiences tell stories about self-making? How does avatar creation constitute art-making? How are these experiences pedagogical? Using the avatar as a methodological device (specifically, I observe avatar culture and reflect on my own avatar creation experience), I draw on two qualitative research methodologies: participant observation and autoethnography. I have investigated the experiences of people new to avatar creation, of those who continually change their avatars’ appearance and post photographs of the outcomes online, and of those whose avatars do not represent an idealized human form. Through fictional dialogues, I create
performative texts that present my interpretations of the findings. I consider the fictional
dialogues as offering knowledge (Denzin, 2005; Neilsen, 2002) and insights through
which others can learn about avatar re/assembling and make connections to their own
experiences.

I found that most participants in my study saw themselves as engaging in a
creative process whereby they were able to give aspects of themselves fuller expression
than in the physical world. Even those new to avatar creation whose avatars tended to
reveal the limits of their incipient technological knowledge focused on creating avatars
that reflected their physical appearance in some way, whether literally or in an idealized
version. In addition, from my interviews and observations, I found that the experienced
participants considered avatar creation crucial to their ongoing negotiation of identity and
body image, their avatar-assembling experiences constituting a mixed-reality existence in
which their virtual and physical bodies work together to create a learning self. And, based
on the participants’ experiences in this regard, I was able to identify the knowledge-
making and pedagogical moments inhering in avatar embodiment.

To translate these research findings, I suggest avatar pedagogy as an element of
art education. In theoretical terms, such an incorporation would involve using avatar
creation to provoke critical discussions about body image, identity, and technology. In
practical terms, drawing from participants’ experiences, I recommend processes that can
be exercised and transformed in teaching in service of a meaningful and effective avatar
pedagogy.
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“Thank you” was all I knew how to say when my committee members congratulated me after the defense. Caught in the relief of finishing and in the tangle of wanting to express heartfelt sentiments in the truest English idiom, there was so much more that I wanted to say but it remained trapped in my thoughts at that moment. But finally, it is time to express my appreciation formally. I want to use this space to dedicate my sincere thanks to all who deserve more than just that thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Avatar: The Intersection of the Body, Identity, and Technology

We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine.

—Sherry Turkle (1995, p. 9)

It is not a question of leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis.

—N. Katherine Hayles (1999, p. 291)

I ask, “Is there a body here?”
He replies, “Of course, I see them now.”
I inquire, “But are they only representations?”
He answers, “True, but they are bodies ... connected through keys.”

—T. L. Taylor (1999, p. 436)

Discourses about identity and the body have been important in both the social sciences and the humanities in the past few decades. In fact, it has been argued that the body has become a medium for the construction of society¹ (Shilling, 2005). Digital technologies have advanced significantly and in doing so have enhanced or even replaced the functions of the material body. Thus, they have challenged traditional notions about what constitutes an authentic physical body. Discussions about cyborgs (Haraway, 1991),

¹ From a sociological perspective, Shilling (2005) argues that the body is “a multi-dimensional medium for the constitution of society” (p. 1). Drawing on the work of classical sociologists such as Durkheim, Simmel, and Marx, she concludes that the body is “a source of, a location for and a means by which individuals are emotionally and physically positioned within and oriented toward society” (p. 11). (Original italics)
posthumans (Hayles, 1999), techno-bodies (Balsamo, 1996), and virtual selves (Agger, 2004; Jordan, 1999), have all contributed to a new understanding of the body and embodiment and opened up new perspectives for understanding the impact of technology on identity and gender (e.g., Flanagan & Booth, 2002; Green & Adam, 2001; O'Farrell & Vallone, 1999).

These discourses on the body have entered the field of art education: a small number of studies have been published on the body in curriculum (e.g., Duncum & Springgay, 2007; Springgay, 2008; Springgay & Freedman, 2007), and on technology and the body (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2001; Gaudelius & Garoian, 2007; Keifer-Boyd, 2007, 2009, 2010) that shed light on the importance of the body in art education. Specifically, discussions about the body and technology provide insights that are critical in situating art education in highly digitalized contemporary society. For example, Garoian and Gaudelius have proposed cyborg pedagogy (2001) and performing embodiment (2007) as ways to respond to the impact of digital technologies on daily life. Keifer-Boyd (2007) argued that technology–body interfaces constitute a “mutual articulation of knowledge” (p. 51). However, the experience of creating a virtual body as art-making, knowledge-making, and self-making has not been explored in terms of its implications for art education curricula or pedagogy. Self-making is performative formation of subjectivity2; it is identity construction with self agency. As art educator

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2 Much of the literature did not make a distinction between identity and subjectivity (Woodward, 2002). According to Ann Phoenix (quoted in Lee, 2004), identity is rooted in modernist discourse whereas subjectivity is founded on a postmodern and post-structuralist discourse. Subjectivity places more emphasis on the “making of identity” (Lee, 2004, para. 4) through self-agency. Thus, I use subjectivity to indicate that self-making is a process of identity construction that involves performative self-agency. And, I use identity as a general term because it has been used widely in studies of digital and online environments.
jagodzinski (2010) has pointed out, questioning “what a body can do” from a Deleuzian perspective about the body, that is considering “the body’s ability to act and be acted upon” (p. 101) and exploring the bodily affect (i.e., the impact bodies have on each other that drives us to change) is important for reconfiguring visual culture art education, which, according to jagodzinski, has several drawbacks. Therefore, this study focuses on filling that void in order to understand the virtual body’s ability and affect and based on that understanding to begin addressing some of the drawbacks of visual culture art education.

**Body as Identity**

The body is an important aspect of every person’s self identity. In contemporary society, people tend to connect their identities to what their bodies look like. This is inevitable because identities are constituted within representation (Hall, 1996). The body is a signifier of identity. According to Fraser and Greco (2005), the idea of “one body, one self,” is a “historical event that dates from the Renaissance, and was consolidated with the Enlightenment” (p. 12). Each individual has been understood as bounded with his/her body, which according to the standard Western worldview is enclosed by the skin; hence, from this ideological viewpoint individuals can be identified and separated from

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3 jagodzinski (2010) delineated three drawbacks of Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE). First, “identity politics has not worked, primarily because visual cultural studies, as practiced in art education circles, remains caught by representation that is defined though *difference and sameness*” (p. 94). Second, “many approaches fall into antagonistic power dynamics of critical theory without any thought to the transference process of fantasy that takes place between spectator and the object of desire” (p. 100). Third, “popular visual cultural studies as it is now practiced often ends up fortifying what is already a cynical savvy viewer who is quite aware how the world is represented” (p. 104).
others based on the appearance of the body. The body is, thus, an object to be seen that provides information about the person. The skin is, thus, a surface to be written on, and it, therefore, presents numerous identity markers. Our visible bodies are in large part who we are and who we seem to be. How we know ourselves and others is influenced by the appearance of our bodies. As Walker (1993) put it, “privileging visibility has become a tactic of late twentieth-century identity politics” (p. 868). The body is identity. It is constructed through all the interactions we have with environments and others. It is the showcase for our formations and transformations.

A virtual body is one way to re/create one’s visible body; thus, it is a representation of identity. The word “virtual” involves the concept of immaterial. There is no tangible material that constitutes the virtual body. Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines the term virtual as used in computing as something that is “simulated on a computer or computer network” (“Virtual,” n.d.). Virtual bodies are simulated bodies, techno-bodies, that exist in computer-generated environments.

Techno-Bodies

The creation of techno-bodies was made possible by two interrelated phenomena: cyberspace and the infusion of the machine with the body (Shilling, 2005). An image and term that is commonly used to illustrate this kind of body is “cyborg,” which refers to a body that is “a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). The vision of such a body largely came from what Ihde (2002) termed technofantasies. Ever since

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4 See Appendix A for a glossary of terms as defined in this study.
William Gibson’s introduction of the term *cyberspace*, popularized in his cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), cyberspace has been associated with disembodiment and techno-bodies. Some theorists see cyberspace as providing people with opportunities to pursue dreams and develop identities without the constraints of their physical bodies (see Shilling, 2005). Others, such as Hans Moravec (as cited by Figueroa-Sarriera, 1995; Hayles, 1999), whose dualistic ideas are based in Cartesian superiority of mind over body, imagine that in the future, humans will be able to download their minds into computers and leave their bodies behind. Hence, technologies are seen as capable of transforming our fleshy bodies into virtual ones. In other words, through technologies that allow us to restore, perfect, escape from, and generally rework our bodies, we can re-embody ourselves (Cruikshank, 2001). The *virtual body* was born according to these discourses. As Haraway (1991) has stated, the cyborg myth shows that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (p. 149). This is not to say that the worlds and beings imagined by science fiction writers have been realized; instead, our relationships with technology and our dependence on virtual bodies are in some measure bringing these worlds and beings into reality. We all have virtual bodies during our daily use of technologies; for example, an online profile can be seen as a virtual representation of an actual body.

**Avatar Embodiment**

Avatars—virtual bodies—constitute people’s identities in virtual environments. The word *avatar* originated in Sanskrit. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition, an
avatar is “the descent of a deity to the earth in an incarnate form” (“Avatar,” 1989). In Hinduism, avatars are most often associated with the Hindu god Vishnu, who appears in human or animal forms. In the context of computing, the use of the term *avatar* to refer to online virtual bodies was popularized by Neal Stephenson’s (1992) science fiction novel *Snow Crash.* An avatar becomes the identity, thus, the virtual body, of a person who enters a virtual environment, such as through an online gaming environment or another kind of virtual world. In most of these computing environments, a person must either choose (or be assigned) a pre-created avatar or create an avatar if he/she is to log into the system and interact with the computer program and/or other people. Therefore, the person uses a virtual techno-body as his/her interface for technology-mediated communication. Although the term as it is used in computing does not correspond with the original meaning, this contemporary use does borrow from the original inasmuch as both rely on ideas of transformation, identity, and representation. Today, the term avatar is widely used to refer to a representation of a person in a computer environment, whether it is textual, two-dimensional (2D), or three-dimensional (3D) graphical forms.

My first experience of a graphical avatar (image not text) that could be changed according to a person’s will was watching my brother play the video game *Phantasy Star Online* on the video game console *Dreamcast* in 2000. I was impressed by how, unlike traditional video games, which assign fixed characters to each player, the player could change, even though it was only to a limited extent, his/her avatar’s appearance. Until this point, I was unaware of how creating text-based avatars—which I had been doing for

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5 Philip Rosedale, the founder of Second Life, the popular online virtual environment, mentioned in an interview that his vision of Second Life was inspired by the novel *Snow Crash* (Maney, 2007).
quite some time—on an online BBS (Bulletin Board System)—might relate to questions of identity and representation. BBS is a computer system that allows people to log in to perform functions such as exchange messages, chat, read and post news, and play online games. The system is largely text-based, although limited graphic presentations can be created using ASCII code. For most of the world, BBS was entirely replaced by the World Wide Web; however, it has continued to evolve and remains a popular means of online communication among Taiwanese youth today. Having been an administrator of the official BBS system in the National Hsinchu Teachers College in Taiwan in the 1990s, I became intrigued by the ability of computer technology to afford people opportunities to create online identities. My observation of how graphic avatars can be redesigned in video games and of text-based avatars in programs such as BBS planted the seeds for my inquiry into avatar creation as art-making, knowledge-making, and self-making.

Fast forward to 2007 when I first logged into Second Life (SL), where in creating my first SL avatar, I drew significantly and unconsciously on my own body image. I did not intend to socialize with other people in SL, but I was captivated by the idea of creating a virtual body. According to a 2008 survey conducted for the U.S. Congressional Internet Caucus Advisory Committee, most people prefer to use an avatar that looks somewhat similar to them, and only 15% of people make their avatar’s appearance

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6 The World Wide Web links hypertext documents (web pages), which can contain texts, images, videos, and interactive multi-media. A web browser is used to view web pages. On the other hand, a terminal program is used to log in to a BBS system, which typically only contains text. The BBS system has evolved into a World Wide Web format (Web BBS), but Web BBS remains limited and using a terminal program is still the main way to participate in activities in a BBS system in Taiwan.

7 National Hsinchu Teachers College officially changed its name to National Hsinchu University of Education in 2005.
dramatically different from that of their physical body (Reuters, 2008). Another research study by Nowak and Rauh (2005) also suggested that the majority of their participants prefer to have avatars that look like them. In addition, Messinger et al. (2008) found that most people create avatars that are both similar to their real selves and somewhat more attractive. In creating my avatar, I started by giving her a name that sounded similar to my own given name in Chinese, and I followed up by giving her long black hair and a long white dress. Similar to the findings of studies on avatar creation, I made my dream self, what I imagined to be an idealized, more attractive version of me.

My avatar inherited my identity markers. But I did not become fully aware of my avatar as part of my body until an incident that changed her body in a quite fundamental way. I accidently gave her a male shape, and as I was not fully conversant with the editing interface in SL, I was unable to change her back. I felt as though my physical body was hurt. I was, in fact, very upset at being associated with this shape that did not resemble me. My virtual body affected my actual body. My avatar embodied my identity and my emotions. I saw that the virtual world is not a disembodied environment (Ajana, 2005). Indeed, from the perspective of neurology and psychology, scientists have demonstrated that a person’s brain can easily adapt to and recognize an external object or another (virtual) body as a part of the physical body (S. Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2007; Blascovich & Bailenson, 2011; Carey, 2008; Petkova & Ehrsson, 2008). For example, Petkova and Ehrsson (2008) conducted an experiment based on using mannequins to represent bodies. They controlled the participants’ viewpoints with “synchronized visual and tactile stimulation” (para. 5), so that the participants saw the mannequins from

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8 My Chinese given name is Ling-Yin (翎吟).
the first-person perspective. The results showed that participants perceived the
mannequins as constituting their own bodies. Perceiving my avatar body as an integral
part of my own body is not an illusion but a reality of my cognition.

As one of the first important publications pertaining to the Internet and identity,
Sherry Turkle’s (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* offers the
starting point for my own inquiry into the relationship between avatars and identity.
Turkle (1995) argued that computer technology’s creation of virtual worlds (cyberspace),
has given rise to a culture of simulation—a culture that has itself changed the ways that
people think about their relationships with technology, thereby transforming our
understanding of identity and self (Turkle, 1995, 2005). The computer and the Internet
have changed the boundary between machine and human, real and virtual: “images of
machines have come ever closer to images of people, as images of people have come ever
closer to images of machines” (Turkle, 1995, p. 177). This is the theoretical framework
for understanding human relationships with avatars within which the present study is
situated. Avatars are not merely the graphic images (or texts) that we create. They are,
instead, part of the body’s experiences of embodiment.

Based on this shift in the relationship between machines and humans, Turkle asks
how the culture of simulation has changed our views of self and identity. Drawing on
debates in psychoanalytic theory and poststructuralist theory, she argued that the self is
decentered and that identity is multiple, fluid, and fragmented. What leads her to this
conclusion is her research on the text-based online virtual environments of Multi-User
Dungeon (or Domain) (MUD) communities. Turkle (1995) recognized the Internet as “a
significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (p. 180). She found slippages between the personas that the participants created and their selves, and encountered “places where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self” (pp. 185–186). This provides a second aspect to the framework for discussions about avatar and identity, as an avatar and the self are not two distinct things; instead, the boundaries are blurred, if they exist at all.

Although Turkle argues that this culture of simulation provides a transitional state that might open up multiple viewpoints on and opportunities for personal transformation, she is cautious. She warns that our experiences in cyberspace are serious play, and “without a deep understanding of the many selves that we express in the virtual we cannot use our experiences there to enrich the real” (p. 269). Turkle’s work has had a significant influence on scholarship referencing online identities (Kennedy, 2006; Nakamura, 2008). However, the Internet environment and online communities have changed considerably since her book was first published in 1995. In particular, images and graphics are becoming more and more important in online virtual environments. The virtual bodies (i.e., avatars), which have become more and more realistic with the advance of 3D graphic technology, have come to dominate every aspect of the online experience. Yet, there has not been enough research on graphical bodies on the Internet and people’ “depictions of racialized and gendered bodies” (Nakamura, 2008, p. 13). In recommending new directions for online identity research, Kennedy (2006) suggested

9 The word persona is used here to indicate the online identity that a person creates, as opposed to the identities in real life that are commonly seen as natural (Turkle, 1995). Turkle claims that the conventional distinction between the two does not hold.
that the new media affords opportunities to create new digital identities. She further claimed that insufficient research has been conducted on online identity. Overall, she suggested that a different discussion of online identity is needed—one that engages with contemporary theories that challenge the concept of identity itself. Residing in this culture of simulation, avatars are becoming increasingly important for inquiries into how bodies, identities, and technology are interconnected.

**Avatar–Self Relationships**

I have [a] bad history: I am a person who fell in love with her own prostheses.  
—Sandy Stone (1995, p. 394)

As an embodiment of a person’s online identity, an avatar is a prosthesis, an art medium, a doll, a simulation, a projection of a desire, a fantasy, a reflection of a social stereotype, an assemblage, a way of becoming, an immersive experience, a performance of identity, a masquerade, a site of visual culture, and all of the above. Avatars mean different things to different people. As some researchers have pointed out (e.g., Ballengee-Morris, 2009; Schultze & Leahy, 2009), there is no fixed relationship between an avatar and the self; rather, the relationship is multi-dimensional and subject to change (Schultze & Leahy, 2009). People conceptualize their avatars differently; for example, some refer to their avatars in the third person, “s/he,” whereas others prefer the first person, “I.” This lack of fixity suggests that the (virtual) body and the self can be productively conceived as processes rather than as stable sites.
Schultze and Leahy (2009) identified different avatar–self relationships and categorize these relationships according to two dimensions: telepresence and social presence. Telepresence refers to a person’s “sense of being there, that is, being present and engaged in the virtual world” (p. 8). Social presence signifies one’s “(re)presentation of self to others as well as to him/herself” (p. 11). Schultze and Leahy placed these two focuses of presence in a scale for two kinds of perceptions of avatar–self relationships—seeing the avatar and the self as one and seeing them as separate (see Figure 1-1). In the dimension of telepresence, the avatar–self relationship includes the invisible avatar, the avatar as a 3D cursor, as an object of reflection, as an object of affection, as an object of play, as a tool, as capital, and as an autonomous agent. And in the dimension of social presence, the relationship casts the avatar as a virtual “me,” a possible self, a character, and a scripted character. However, as well as these relationships, the researchers also cited “a reflexive relationship between the communicator and the avatar as a social being. In other words, as the communicator watches her avatar in interactions with others, she makes herself present to herself” (p. 13). Accordingly, they argue that the participants in their study, at least, “learned something from their avatars” (p. 13).
No matter how a person conceptualizes his/her avatar, establishing an avatar–self relationship starts with a creative process. For example, a person might construct an avatar in order to make friends online. Avatars created for this purpose are likely to be eye-catching so that people will be attracted to them. Some use such avatars as tools to chat with others, whereas others live through the avatar in more complex ways. These distinctions are merely dependent on the individual’s perception; they are not necessarily different from an outsider’s point of view. Although some people might not change their avatars once they have achieved a satisfactory look; avatar creation, for many others, does not end at a specific point (unless the person stops participating in the virtual world permanently). These people change their avatars, re-creating their virtual bodies, periodically or even frequently. For people who do not change their avatars often or who
do not do so once they have created a look they like, their avatar creation process could be seen as reaching for a symbolic persona fitted for their interactions in the virtual world. However, for those who do change the avatar’s clothes, hair, etc., even exchanging one avatar for another, the process is more complex: they negotiate identity representation continuously. Nevertheless, there are more intricate reasons, such as those connected with role-playing and business, for the practices associated with the creation and redesign of avatars.

What Can an Avatar Do?

To ask what an avatar can do is not to ask only about its technical functions. It is not what an avatar can do for people, but what an avatar can do to people. Borrowing a Spinozist question, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) ask, what can a body do? They state that we know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (p. 257)

Given that avatars are virtual bodies, to ask what an avatar can do is to ask how avatar creation can change the body. Asking this question acknowledges that an avatar has its own affects. According to Seigworth and Gregg (2010), affect is a force “that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (p. 1), and it is
usually found in-between bodies. Therefore, in asking this question, I am assuming that avatar creation can influence the body’s knowledge of self in the world.

Research about the “functions” of avatars suggests that it is a site where changes can occur. Gromala (1997) concluded her research on avatars and self as follows:

an avatar functions as the site through which human agency is projected and reflected back to the user, influencing that user’s sense of self. Through avatars, users experience both the reification and disruption of boundaries between the “real” and “virtual” worlds, between the mind and body and between the biological and symbolic. (p. 228)

Other studies have explored some of the things that avatars can do to people. Observing members of The Palace, an online 2D graphical environment, Suler (2007) noted that an avatar’s appearance can have a great effect on the user’s behavior and the reactions it elicits from others. Yet other researchers have indicated that “people infer their expected behaviors and attitudes from observing their avatar’s appearance” (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009, p. 285). For example in an experiment designed to determine how people use avatars for the purpose of negotiation, researcher Nick Yee had participants wear head-mounted displays and allowed them to see their mirror images, their avatars in this context, but although their avatars resembled their physical bodies, they had been modified such that some of them stood taller than the participants actually stood and others stood comparatively shorter. He found that the people with taller avatars “out-negotiated those with shorter avatars. Regardless of their actual physical height, people with virtually shorter avatars were three times as likely (compared to people with normal-
sized or taller avatars) to accept an unfair settlement” (Blascovich & Bailenson, 2011, p. 106). Further, Yee found that this effect continued into the physical world in face-to-face negotiations. In his experiments, participants who had been assigned taller avatars had more successful negotiations later when facing other participants in the physical world even when the height differential was removed by the use of an adjustable chair. This change is referred to as the Proteus effect (see Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al., 2009).

Extending the research on the Proteus effect, Peña, Hancock, and Merola (2009) found that using avatars with negative associations (the appearance of the avatar presents it as a “bad guy”) can mean that it meets with only or at least predominantly negative responses. Messinger et al. (2008) reported in their findings that people who regarded their avatars as more attractive (prettier, thinner, taller, etc.) than their physical selves tend to be more extroverted online that they are in their physical lives. Researchers have also pointed out that avatars can change people’s behavior, because people are more likely to mirror an avatar that looks like themselves (Blackman, 2010; Fox, Bailenson, & Binney, 2009).

However, there is more to be explored. Most of the research focuses on avatar use and performance. Some researchers (e.g., Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Jin, 2009; Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2010; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010; Vasalou, Joinson, Bänziger, Goldie, & Pitt, 2008) have examined people’s avatar creation behaviors and the effects of avatar choices on sites or games such as World of Warcraft, Whyville, Wii, and Yahoo! Avatars. Others have explored avatar narrative play as identity construction (e.g., Crockett, 2007; Franz, 2005; Hsiao, 2007; Klevjer, 2006; Webb, 2001). In addition, some researchers have focused on the appearance of avatars and the connection between
avatars and personality, self-presentation, and expression (e.g., Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Sung, Moon, Kang, & Lin, 2011; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). In the field of art education, British art educators Bailey and Moar (2001a, 2001b) have explored children’s creation and use of avatars in the virtual world ActiveWorld, and found avatars to be powerful learning experiences as children tend to connect strongly to them. But, they also noted that even though they enjoyed using the avatars, they were not entirely happy with the choice available to them. The primary reason for this was that they did not resemble them, and ultimately, the children wanted their avatar to be like them. (Bailey & Moar, 2001b, p. 3)

These studies show the potentialities of an avatar’s effects on identity transformation; however, little attention has been paid to the process of creating or assembling an avatar as art-making, self-making, and knowledge-making. This might be due to the different processes of creating avatars in different technologies. More importantly, it should be noted that the performance as/in the avatar is inseparable from the avatar embodiment. That is, performing an avatar or using an avatar to do something is the main reason for having one. Still, the process of creating an avatar gives rise to important questions for understanding avatar creation as art-making, knowledge-making, and self-making.

My research starts with asking what the experiences of avatar re/assembling can do. From this encompassing question, I ask these research questions: How do different kinds of avatar-making experiences tell stories of self-making? In what ways is creating
an avatar, art-making? How do these experiences create knowledge and become pedagogical?

**What is Avatar Re/assembling?**

The process of creating an avatar is a process of assembling different body parts. A typical human body (the part that others see) consists of body shape, skin, hair, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, teeth, ears, nails, and, in most settings, clothing and accessories. These are now fully transferred into the formation of an avatar in virtual worlds, and each of these elements can be customized. In SL, there are numerous body parts and clothing options from which to choose. Creating an avatar involves choosing and/or customizing different body parts and clothing, much like assembling a doll. For most people, it is a process of choosing different items for their avatars. In addition, in SL, avatars can be anything, including animals, fantasy creatures, and inanimate objects. Each avatar, therefore, is an *assemblage* of different representations. Each part of the avatar body contains its own representations of identity.

Assemblage is a genre of art that uses found images, ideas, and objects to assemble an artwork. It is strongly connected to collage, an art form in which objects, such as newspaper clips, pieces of cloth, and/or many other cultural fragments are assembled and attached to a surface in order to create references to life through sensory and representative fragments. Collage as an art form emerges in the early twentieth century with the rise of modernism (Wolfram, 1975). Originating in Cubism and also associated with many other modern art movements, including Futurism and Russian
Avant-Garde, collage became an important means of expression through the work of Dada (Wolfram, 1975). It became “an art which alone was concerned with the way people lived their lives” (Wolfram, 1975, p. 77). Continued by surrealism, Neo-Dada and Pop Art, collage is regarded as a significant form in twentieth-century art (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Donald Barthelme, postmodernism fiction author, argued that “the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media” (quoted in Herzinger, 1997, p. 204; Schickel, 1970, p. 178). Collage’s use of juxtaposition has notably influenced many art forms, such as montages in film making, Happenings in performance, assemblages in sculpture, and so forth. In 1953, the term “assemblage” was first used to describe art: French artist Jean Dubuffet called his works assemblages d’empreintes in order to reserve the term collage for works by Picasso, Braque, and the Dadaists (Seitz, 1961). The term was adopted for the exhibition “The Art of Assemblage” in 1961 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York “as a generic concept that would include all forms of composite art and modes of juxtaposition” (Seitz, 1961, p. 150). Seitz (1961) stated that “the term ‘assemblage’ has been singled out, with this duality in mind, to denote not only a specific technical procedure and form used in the ... arts, but also a complex of attitudes and ideas” (p. 10); further, “assemblage is a method with disconcertingly centrifugal potentialities” (p. 84). Assemblage’s force is its ability to touch different affects through its unexpected materials and objects to which each viewer can make different connections.

In using the term “avatar re/assembling,” therefore, I refer to creating avatars through an art-making process that relates directly to the genre of assemblage. In
connecting avatar creation to art-making, I not only emphasize the purposefulness, complexity, and creativity inhering in presenting an avatar, but also postulate avatar re/assembling from a critical position. This position is based on Garoian and Gaudelius’s (2008) idea about “the critical pedagogy of collage, montage, assemblage, installation, and performance art” (p. 1). That is, these art genres create disjunctive narratives and in-between spaces that explore potentialities of multiplicity critical for challenging the spectacle of visual culture. They provide examples of artworks of these genres and explore the in-between spaces and other characteristics of collage. And, in doing so, they argue that these characteristics provide a “collage pedagogy” that can help art teachers and students rethink and challenge visual culture in the flood of spectacle and commodity fetishism. If we think of avatar creation as assemblage, then, avatar re/assembling is always in-between, because there is no determinate and fixed identity in avatar re/assembling. To explain the concept, Garoian and Gaudelius referenced Nam June Paik’s assemblage *TV Buddha,* an installation consisting of a Buddha statue facing a TV screen and a closed-circuit video camera projecting the statue of the Buddha onto the TV screen: “Paik challenged the concept of the body as the ‘screen’ on which the prevailing codes of culture are continually projected and through which identity is determined” (p. 97). We can see the process of avatar re/assembling as similar to this artwork, given that in both constructions we sit in front of a screen that ostensibly projects our self-images. However, the difference between avatar creation and the *TV Buddha* is that the self-image inhering in the former is not an exact projection, but an indefinite body image that is

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10 *TV Buddha* and information about it can be found at http://www.paikstudios.com/gallery/1.html
always in the making. The process of avatar re/assembling is already an assemblage that includes the virtual body, the physical body, the screen, and everything in-between.

This in-between is also the abstract line that Deleuze (2006) described in explaining his concept of assemblage.¹¹ That is, an assemblage is constituted by many different lines, and

an abstract line is a line with no outlines, a line that passes between things, a line in mutation. ... It is very much alive, living and creative. ... An assemblage is carried along by its abstract lines, when it is able to have or trace abstract lines.

(p. 178)

In other words, the abstract line or the in-between is where creative new possibilities can be fulfilled, and the assemblage is the process through which they are produced.

The concept of assemblage proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is one that addresses “the play of contingency and structure, organization and change” (Wise, 2005, p. 77). As with artwork, assemblages combine components in multiple ways. Thus, they inhere in multiplicity. They have no shape, and “their ‘law’ is rather the imperative of endless experimentation, metamorphosis, or transmutation, alignment and realignment” (Grosz, 1994, p. 167).

Some feminist scholars have applied the concept of assemblage to the body and see the body itself as an assemblage (Coleman, 2009; Grosz, 1994). In this way, they envision the body as a multiplicity that breaks the strata created by identity. According to Malins (2004), “the body conceived of as a machinic assemblage becomes a body that is

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari do not use the term assemblage to refer to the art genre, but there are similarities between these two uses. The word assemblage refers to the idea of putting together pieces of heterogeneous things.
multiple. Its function or meaning no longer depends on an interior truth or identity, but on the particular assemblages it forms with other bodies” (p. 84). The body is no longer a fixed totality when we think of it as an assemblage, but instead, it contiguously relates with other bodies.

In order to consider the processual quality of avatar re/assembling, I extend the Deleuzian concept of assemblage to the process of avatar creation in order to think of the process of avatar/reassembling as assemblage. Thus, we can understand how this process functions to create change, agency, and transformation. That is, avatar creation has its own affect/function, such that it cannot be reduced to a technique or skill that serves the construction of identities. And, the avatar cannot be seen as an object of desire or as a subject with a fixed identity; rather, it is a becoming.

The concept of becoming is Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) challenge to the notion of a stable identity (Braidotti, 2002). Through their theory of becoming, they address questions about being. And, in doing so, they propose a series of becomings, the first of which is that of “becoming-woman.” And, this first becoming “involves a series of processes and movements beyond the fixity of subjectivity and the structure of stable unities” (Grosz, 1994, p. 177). The concept offers a way to disrupt the dualistic account of subject and object. Seeing an avatar as becoming acknowledges the multiplicity of being, because “becoming and multiplicity are the same thing” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 249).

Therefore, avatar re/assembling is a process that has pedagogical implications and evokes change and becoming. To understand how avatar re/assembling functions to do
this, I ask what kind of knowledge and experience are produced in the process of avatar re/assembling.

**Avatar Creation as Art-Making**

In the previous section, I compared avatar re/assembling with creating assemblage art. Here, I further theorize avatars as an art medium and the potential of avatar creation as art-making.

How does avatar construction constitute a medium for art-making? The virtual world Second Life is a significant example and stage for using avatars as an art medium. Though SL has a short history (it began in 2003), artists have used this environment as an experimental ground for art-making. The cover of the February 2008 issue of *Art News*\(^\text{12}\) shows an image of an avatar portrait from one of the artworks by artists Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org) and proclaims Second Life as the newest of the new media. The 3D virtual world offers a creative medium through which people can fabricate an imaginative environment impossible to achieve in the physical world. Theorist, artist, and curator Patrick Lichty (2008) claimed that “virtual world art is part of a historical arc of work that engages social relations” (para. 2), and he proposes three theoretical frameworks to theorize *virtual world art*, i.e., art created in and through online virtual environments, such as Second Life. These three frameworks include Allan Kaprow’s Happenings, Joseph Beuys’s idea of social sculpture, and Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics. I borrow his frameworks to explain the notion of avatar as medium.

\(^{12}\) See the cover of the magazine here: [http://artnews.com/issues/issue.asp?id=10437](http://artnews.com/issues/issue.asp?id=10437)
Happenings are performance art, acts, or events with roots in the 1950s and 1960s. It usually involves the participation of audiences and emphasizes their connections with the spaces designated for performance. A leading figure of Happenings, artist Allan Kaprow stated that the guidelines for Happenings as follows:

(A) The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible. ... (B) The source of themes, materials, actions, and the relationships between them are to be derived from any place or period except from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu. (Kaprow, 1995, p. 197).13

This philosophy provides a foundation for perceiving virtual worlds as media because virtual worlds are part of many people’s daily-life experiences. And, as Lichty (2008) pointed out, virtual worlds operate according to many of the principles of Happenings, such as “variability of time, indistinctness of audience, and uniqueness of moment” (para. 4). Avatars reside in and form a constituent part of virtual worlds. Thus, they are a medium and interface for social interactivity and the site of Happenings in cyberspace. This is best illustrated by the Matteses’ Synthetic Performances project in SL. They use their avatars to reenact performances by artists like Marina Abramovic, Joseph Beuys, Guilbert and George, Valie Export and Peter Weibel, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden. The Mattes’ performances through their avatars touch the potentially potent virtual body’s affect. In other words, their avatars create conceptual and emotional connections with audiences. For example, in one performance,14 featured in PERFORMA07 in New York in November 2007, the Mattes used their avatars to

13 Allan Kaprow created seven rules for Happenings. Here I only quote the first two, because these two are what Lichty (2008) used to explain virtual world art. See Kaprow (1995) for other rules.
14 Eva and Franco Mattes, Synthetic Performances can be seen here: http://youtu.be/C8aTHkjaOF8
reenact Abramovic’s 1977 performance *Imponderabilia*. In the original performance, artists Abramovic and Ulay stood naked at the entrance to an exhibition. In order to enter the exhibition, a person was obliged to make a choice between facing a naked male body or a naked female body. The reactions of the audiences to these performances vary. Each audience responded differently: there was laughter, hesitation, uncertainty, and some members passed between the artists’ nude avatars several times. In such a way, the avatar performance reveals the effect of the avatar as a body capable of evoking conceptual and emotional responses on the part of others. The artists’ virtual bodies created an in-between space and medium through which the audiences interacted with their work. Their performance was a virtual Happening consisting of their avatars and their interactions in the virtual world. Although their virtual Happenings were drawn from the work of performance artists, I do not consider their work as contradicting Kaprow’s guidelines. Because their performances were among the first of their kind in the virtual environment, the milieu is different from that of other Happenings. Their borrowing of the performances offered by other artists creates a reference to art and so becomes an effective statement about the ways in which avatars and the virtual world can be used as art media.

Artist Joseph Beuys’s idea of social sculpture sees society as a whole as art and “everyone … [as] an artist.” He states that “a total work of art is only possible in the context of the whole of society. Everyone will be a necessary co-creator of a social architecture” (in Harrison & Wood, 2003, p. 905). One of the representative works of social sculpture is his *7000 Oaks*, which was first shown at *Documenta 7* in Kassel,
Germany in 1982. Seven thousand trees were planted for the project, each of which was
accompanied by a columnar basalt stone. Beuys explained that “7000 Oaks is a sculpture
referring to peoples’ live, to their everyday work. That is my concept of art which I call
the extended concept or art of the social sculpture” (quoted in Cooke, n.d.). Lichty (2008)
argued that Beuys’s social sculpture “is a site of social exchange” (para. 5). Virtual
worlds provide affective sites for social sculpture as well. The Matteses’ reenactment of
7000 Oaks in Second Life in 2007 provides a demonstration that the virtual environment
as an art site can generate similar awareness as with Beuys’s original work (Lichty,
2008). According to this view, each avatar is an artist that can contribute to the social
organism of the virtual world. Avatars, as created by people, then, become media that
shape the virtual social sculpture. For example, the Matteses took pictures of avatars in
SL and displayed them in real-life and virtual-world galleries in order to create a work
called portraits of avatars. They stated that their work “questions both the traditional role
of portraiture and the nature of the morphing relationship between identity and public
presentation in virtual worlds” (2007, para. 1). These avatars are their media, and their
project was a virtual social sculpture that reflected issues of identity in the virtual world.

Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002) relational aesthetics creates another foundation for
understanding avatars as a medium. Relational aesthetics, according to Bourriaud is
“aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations
which they represent, produce or prompt” (p. 112). The role of artworks, accordingly “is
no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and
models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist” (p. 13).
Avatars can be media for creating relational art because virtual bodies are not just images, but have affect that can form interactions and relationships with other bodies. For example, Chinese artist Cao Fei in her project for the 52nd Venice Biennale used her avatar, China Tracy, to perform the machinima\textsuperscript{15} documentary \textit{i.Mirror},\textsuperscript{16} in which the artist detailed her experiences within and feelings about Second Life and how she started to confuse her two lives (Culp, 2008). Her avatar body forms a relationship with others who participate in her Second Life, as well as those audiences who view her work in the machinima form, and further, with her physical body. Her avatar is her medium for creating understanding between herself and others.

These examples illustrate the potentialities of art-making through creating avatars and seeing them as art media. (I provide further art examples in Chapter 2 where I also explain in more detail how using avatars as a medium addresses the identity issues discussed in the present chapter.) Avatars as a means of art-making has important implications for art education. As Sullivan (2005) has argued, “the capacity to create understanding and thereby critique knowledge is central to the visual arts” (p. 73), and the artists who use avatars as a medium are set to gain insights and knowledge of this medium and technology. If art-making is a way to understand information and create knowledge (Sullivan, 2005), then, avatar re/assembling is consistent with that process. In the next section, I will conceptualize the art of avatar re/assembling as embodied pedagogy.

\textsuperscript{15} Machinima are movies made in 3D virtual environments.
\textsuperscript{16} The three-part machinima video \textit{i.Mirror} can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/user/ChinaTracy
Avatars, Knowledge, and Pedagogy

[W]e may walk into the room and “feel the atmosphere,” but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point. The pedagogic encounter is full of angles.

—Sara Ahmed (2010, p. 37)

As discussed in previous sections, there are many ways to perceive avatars. An avatar is full of angles like an assemblage, as in Deleuze’s (2006) description, which is itself full of lines. I could never present every angle from which to perceive avatars. But I perceive avatar re/assembling as enabling the creation of multiple ways of understanding one’s identity. Avatar re/assembling can be a means of reflexivity. Do I know myself better since creating my avatar? I am not sure. But, I do remember my struggle to find an identity that would represent me in my avatar re/assembling experience. I never succeeded. I started to think that no one representation could adequately capture me.

Similar to the test developed by the psychologist Karen Machover (1949) wherein patients are asked to draw human figures, research has shown that an avatar’s appearance offers information about its creator’s personality (Bélisle & Bodur, 2010). Turkle (2011) used the Rorschach test as an analogy for avatars. She stated that “we have an opportunity to see what we wish for and what we might be missing. But more than this, we may work through blocks and address insecurities” (p. 212). Therefore, from a psychological perspective, the creation of an avatar produces knowledge about oneself.

17 The Rorschach test is a psychological test that is often used to understand a person’s personality and emotions.
However, there is more. The knowledge created through avatar re/assembling, is also knowledge in the making.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) in her book *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy* argued that:

Knowledge, once it is defined, taught and used as a “thing made,” is dead. It has been forced to give up that which “really exists”: its nature when it is a thing in the making, continuously evolving through our understanding of the world and our own bodies’ experience of and participation in that world. (p. 1)

She proposed that anomalous places of learning (those found outside the traditional school curriculum), in her words, “peculiar, irregular, abnormal, or difficult to classify pedagogical phenomena” (p. 5), produce knowledge in the making and constitute a pedagogical force. As places of learning outside the classroom and institutional boundaries, virtual worlds “encompass a peculiar knowledge and skill” (p. 151). Knowledge created and shared in the virtual environment can only be created in that environment. For example, we can only have experience of virtual world art\(^\text{18}\) through interacting with it in the environments that constitute and host the art, such as Second Life. Ellsworth further argued that “the pedagogical component of the places of learning … can only be found in the response of one’s learning self to a place’s assemblage of texts, images, media, documents, objects, address, space, and time” (p. 151). Virtual worlds and avatars are places of anomalous learning. An avatar’s pedagogical power can

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\(^{18}\) Virtual-world art here refers to art created using virtual-reality and other digital technologies that construct virtual environments. It is important to note that virtual (world) art can have double meanings. In one meaning, virtual-world art is art created using digital technologies, and in the other meaning it is art characterized by its own virtuality. Brain Massumi (2002) reminds us that the virtuality of art should not be confused with digital technology. The virtuality of art creates potential.
only be experienced through one’s avatar assemblage—that is, one’s physical body, embodied experience, and avatar presentation (see the previous section’s discussion of *TV Buddha*). Ellsworth stated that “if the experience of knowledge in the making is also the experience of our selves in the making, then there is no self who preexists a learning experience. Rather, the ‘self’ is what emerges from that learning experience” (p. 2). Using this framework of learning to understand avatar creation, we can perceive avatar re/assembling as an experience of knowledge in the making and see self as emerging from the experience of avatar re/assembling.

Ellsworth (2005) invited her readers “to think experimentally about possible and impossible pedagogies” (p. 9). She explained that pedagogy from an anomalous place of learning would not be possible if pedagogy is only thought of as being at the “’center’ of dominant educational discourses and practices—a position that takes knowledge to be a thing already made and learning to be an experience already known” (p. 5). Instead, “when viewing them in relation to the multiple and potentially eccentric connotations of the phrase ‘the experience of a learning self in the making,’ their force as pedagogy becomes more apparent” (p. 5). In accord with this view, I endeavor to understand the pedagogy of avatar re/assemblage in a different way. We do not create avatars in order to grasp an “already-made” knowledge of identity and socio-cultural ideas of the body, although doing so might teach us these. Rather, we assemble avatars to create experience and gain knowledge of the learning self in the making.
My Avatar as My Methodological Device

Because this experience arises out of an assemblage of mind/brain/body with the time and space of pedagogy, we must approach an investigation into the experience of the learning self through that assemblage.

—Elisabeth Ellsworth (2005, pp. 4–5)

My research journey into avatar creation began when I tried to create a gender-ambiguous avatar in Second Life (Liao, 2008a). This experience gave me a perspective on the limitations of technology and how stereotypical images of identity are reproduced in the virtual environment.

In the present study, I focus on the experiences of assembling and creating avatars and how identity is projected and/or transformed through avatar construction to provide suggestions for art education and education in general for the use of avatars and virtual worlds. Second Life is the primary research site, because at the time of the study (2008–2011) it was the most popular virtual environment and offered the most freedom for creating 3D avatars.

This study is based on qualitative research methodology that concentrates on narrative inquiry rather than on statistical probabilities, an approach that is in accord with Eisner (1988), who also aligned the educational study of experience with qualitative methodology. To study the experience is to study the narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The experience is created within the cultural context. Understanding the virtual culture, therefore, is necessary to interpret the avatar experience. Thus, I experience the virtual culture of SL myself, and not only myself, but with/through my avatar. My experience, thus, becomes explicitly part of the research that shapes my interpretation as
performed stories, like a play or a conversation. From my own exploration of virtual
culture in SL, I found three general avatar constructions that map this inquiry—those of
newbies, fashion bloggers, and fantasy players. These differing forms of avatar
embodiment are created and shaped with/in the context of the culture of simulation.

Newbies predictably are people who are new to avatar creation in SL. It is a term
that is widely used in SL to differentiate avatars. Although the term could be understood
as derogatory, I use the term to represent the culture of SL. Newbies’ reflections on
avatar creation—before they become technically proficient and involved in more
sophisticated ways of performing avatar identity construction—can be valuable.
However, this is not to say that there is no intended performance in this participation. In
other words, they might perform according to their perceptions of and ideas about avatar
embodiment. Their reflections on their experiences are important. These performances,
constrained by a lack of technical skill, are created at the interface of technology, the
place where the boundaries of technology and desire confront one another. Knowledge
about identity and body image is reflected back through negotiations between technology,
desire, and self. Another experience that seems relevant to understanding the experience
of avatar creation involves people who blog about fashion and post their avatar pictures
online. The way bloggers play\textsuperscript{19} avatar assemblage provides perspectives on how people
express identity and use avatars as a means to work through identity inquiry. The third

\textsuperscript{19} I use the term \textit{play} here to reflect the point that some SL bloggers see SL as a game so that their avatar
re/assembling is part of their game play. In addition, the term \textit{play} also indicates how this activity (avatar
creation) creates assemblage. Hans (1981) drew on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of desire as
productive to argue that desire is the motivation for play, that production is the result of play, and that play
produces continuous change in our world, because when we play we exist in a mode that is “continually
forming new connections and flows” (p. 54). Hence, we are continually forming new assemblages when we
play.
experience is that of fantasy players—here the conscious work is that of constructing avatars that are different from the human, ideally beautiful, and generally attractive avatars most commonly met with in SL. Fantasy players often have non-human avatars. Their avatars generally do not represent a human form; instead, they often prefer animals and fantasy creatures, and/or they may even have more than one avatar. They are not necessary role-players, but they construct their avatars through narratives of their imagination.

My avatar becomes an important research device because it allows me to participate in the virtual culture, and by way of re/constructing my avatar, I am in the becoming. I reflect on my SL experience and understand and examine the experiences of others. In other words, my avatar is also the lens through which I conduct this study. I tell stories through and based on it.

In using my avatar as a central methodological device, I draw on two qualitative research methodologies: participant observation and autoethnography. An important way to understand a culture is to take a role within it. Kendall (1999) and Boellstorff (2008) both stated that participant observation is an important approach to conducting online research, as it “allows researchers to build trust and to learn to interpret participants’ identity performance in the same way that participants themselves do” (Kendall, 1999, p. 70). In other words, as a participant in the culture, a researcher has an insider status that can yield insights into any given cultural experience. It is on this basis that I participate in and observe the virtual world using my avatar. Autoethnography comprises: “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, scenes, characterization, and plot” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Writing about my avatar is my way of connecting the personal to culture and society. By means of fictional dialogues, I turn my personal experience inside out. These two methodologies set the foundation for the use of my avatar in this study.

My fictional conversation through my avatar and fictional characters intertwines facts from my observations of the participants, my reflections on experiences with others as they occurred through my avatar, and my own “critical reflexive inquiry” (Arrows, 2008, p. 54). Fictional writing has been used as a form of academic and dissertation writing by a number of scholars (e.g., Arrows, 2008; Dunlop, 1999; Sameshima, 2007). Eisner (1997) pointed out that the question of “how we perform the magical feat of transforming the contents of our consciousness into a public form that others can understand” (p. 4) has become an important one in academe. I see fictional dialogue as a way not only to present and translate research into a work that can be understood by a broader audience, but also as a way of explicitly acknowledging the personal aspect of the research process and the conclusions reached through it. As Sameshima said (in Arrows, 2008), “using fiction in an autobiographical format ... offers powerful opportunities for dialogue” (p. 52). Ballengee-Morris (2009) stated that “transformation and dialogues that occur between self and self, and self and others, demand a dialogic presentation that arts-based methodology provides” (p. 22). She connected her narrative conversational presentation of research to two qualitative research methodologies:
narrative inquiry and arts-based research. She explained that “narrative inquiries require one to explore and relate personal practices and reflections to social theory and systems” (p. 21) and “Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) has the potential in its poetic, narrative, and/or visual presentation of research to engage its audience to revisit their positions and assumptions” (p. 21). My rationale for using fictional dialogue in this study is based on the same viewpoint.

The methods I used to collect data for my study include semi-structured interviews and field notes of my participant observations and reflective writing on my experience. In addition, I have collected both text and image data from the participants’ personal blogs and websites as available in order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ motivations and self-presentations. Interviews provide a way of getting at the back-story of the avatars, and they may also provide alternative explanations for what I observe (Glesne, 2006). Through my observations of the participants and as a participant, I collected narratives of avatar creation experiences, because, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explained, “narratives and stories can be collected ‘naturally’; for example, by recording stories as they occur during participant observation in a research setting” (p. 56). These different methods can provide a way of triangulating the research and, thus they support the validity of the study’s results (Maxwell, 2005).

I recruited the participants for the newbie group in a generally random way. In order to recruit newbies and meet with each of them in person, I posted recruitment announcements (see Appendix B) on public bulletin boards and in newsletters, and I
made announcements about the study in classes at Penn State’s University Park campus. As newbies they were unfamiliar with SL, and I accepted the first five people who agreed to participate in the study. Participants each received a $10 gift card as compensation. I observed their initial avatar creation processes and interviewed them in person.

For the fashion bloggers, I observed Second Life fashion feeds, mainly iHeartSL, Shopaholic Feed, and Fashion Feed of SL. I subsequently invited active bloggers to participate in this study according to two criteria: (1) they had to have been blogging for a minimum period of six months with an emphasis on a personal journal approach rather than merely providing information about where to buy items, and (2) their fashion practice had to center on mixing and matching different clothes from a variety of designers.

I met some of the fantasy players, through random encounters in the virtual world and found others through their personal sites. I invited them to participate in the study based on their non-human avatar forms.

In total, I interviewed five newbies, five fashion bloggers, and five fantasy players between October 2009 and May 2010. Though I interviewed the newbies in person, I interviewed the fashion bloggers and fantasy players online either in Second Life through

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20 See Appendix C for the informed consent form.
21 See Appendix E for interview protocols and questions.
22 iHeartSL (http://iheartsl.com/), Shopaholic Feed (http://shopaholicfeed.com/), and Fashion Feed of SL (http://fashionfeedofsl.com/) are blog websites that syndicate hundreds of SL fashion blogs. iHeartSL is the biggest SL fashion feed, syndicating more than 800 blogs.
23 See Appendix B for the recruitment script, Appendix D for the implied informed consent form and Appendix E for interview protocols and questions.
24 More details about SL fashion bloggers and SL fashion-blogging practices are provided in Chapter 4.
25 See Appendix D for the implied informed consent form.
text chats or voice chats, and in one case we conversed through Skype. Both bloggers and fantasy players received 2,000 Linden Dollars as compensation. I describe these participants in the following chapters.

I treat each of these participants as a case study, because they are by no means representative of all the users in the virtual world. Therefore, their experiences may not be generalizable; however, they do provide important angles and perspectives from which to understand the experiences of avatar creation.

I positioned myself in the role of a cultural participant in the research. As previously stated, by assuming this role, I was able to understand the cultural context from the inside. However, Maxwell (2005) reminds us that when the researcher who is conducting interviews is part of the world of study, reactivity (or reflexivity) is an inescapable influence. He suggested that the researcher needs to understand how she/he influences which information is presented and which suppressed, and how this affects the validity of the interview. In addition to possible researcher bias, it is necessary to understand that “qualitative research is not primarily concerned with eliminating variance between researchers in the values and expectations they bring to the study, but with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108).

My research journey draws on numerous subjective angles. I cannot be objective when discussing my experience creating my avatars, because I do not see my avatar as an

26 Skype (http://www.skype.com) is a program that allows users to make voice calls and send instant messages over the Internet.
27 Linden Dollars are the currency used in Second Life. It can be exchanged for U.S Dollars. The exchange rate varies every day. The average exchange rate is about 260 Linden Dollars to 1 U.S Dollar.
28 I use pseudonyms to refer to all the participants in this study.
object outside of my bodily experience. My avatar is a virtual part of me. The subjectivity of the researcher in qualitative research has long been a subject of discussion. Peshkin (1988) argued that a researcher’s awareness of his/her subjectivity is a positive thing, as it contributes to producing research in which the researcher has questioned his/her own biases, preferences, and assumptions.

Through this research, I aim to present the complex connections among avatar, body, identity, technology, art, knowledge, and pedagogy. My narrative inquiry begins with my avatar and with a fictional conversation with Alice, an avatar I met in SL. I introduce my avatar and Alice in the following section.

**Introduction to the Dialogue: Who?**

“[W]hat is the use of a book ... without pictures or conversations?”

—Lewis Carroll (1865/1897, pp. 1-2)
This is my avatar, Liliann. Most of the time, she looks like a professional woman, though sometimes, she tries to become a rabbit or a jellyfish. With her help, I participate in the virtual world of Second Life. Her contribution to this study is enormous; for example, she interviewed 10 of the 15 participants. It is through her that I can interact with others and understand my embodiment in the virtual world.
This is Alice. She lives in the wonderland of Second Life, and she is my best friend in-world. Alice has a fashion blog that shows off her “collections” of virtual clothes and body parts. I do not know her real-life identity, but I enjoy chatting with her. She was a source of considerable inspiration for my study. Therefore, I decided to include
some of our conversations in my dissertation. In reference to the picture of her shown here, Alice observed, “I dressed as the Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, so that you can convince your readers that Second Life is really a wonderland.”

**Wonderland Geography: Overview of Chapters**

Of course the first thing to do was to make a grand survey of the country she was going to travel through. “It’s something very like learning geography.”

—Lewis Carroll (1871/1917, p. 43)

This chapter provided the context of this study. I located my study of avatar re/assembling in the intersection of the discourse of body, identity, and technology. I provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks that describe avatar creation as self-making, art-making, and knowledge-making. Further, I discussed my research methodology and explain my use of my avatar and narrative conversation as a methodological device for this study. In Chapter 2, I explore examples of avatars used as a medium for creating art that reflects body, identity and self-making, as well as examples of educational use of avatars for knowledge-making. Presented through my dialogues with Alice, this chapter is organized according to the two main topics of the dialogues—art and education. I present the narrative of my research findings and my interpretation of the findings in regard to the newbies, bloggers, and fantasy players in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. The narrative conversations I have with Alice in these chapters serve as my data interpretation intertwining with my own experiences and observations. Seeing avatars as mixed-reality selves, I conclude the study in Chapter 6 by summarizing
the findings to answer my research questions. In addition, drawing from the research findings, I propose processes that concern ongoing becomings and transformations for an avatar pedagogy for art education that connects to body, identity, and technology.
CHAPTER TWO

AVATARS AS A MEDIUM IN ART AND EDUCATION

The goal of this chapter is to illustrate how avatars can function as a medium for art-making, self-making, and knowledge-making. In order to achieve this purpose, I provide examples of artworks that involve using avatars as a medium and engage conversations on embodiment and identity, as well as examples of educational use of avatars in order to prompt learning about the body, identity, and stereotypes. Throughout my research and writing process, I chatted with Alice, my friend in SL, about avatar creation, art, and education. I saved our dialogues (chat log), as our conversations provided me with a number of ideas relevant to my dissertation. These conversations can be thought of as performative texts (Denzin, 2003) that do things (see Austin, 1962).¹ I selected some of our chat logs and organized them into two categories—art-making and knowledge-making for the purpose of showing how avatars can function within the related contexts of art and education.

In the previous chapter, I discuss three conceptual frameworks proposed by Lichty (2008) for understanding virtual world art and avatars as an art medium. These include Happenings as defined by Allan Kaprow, the notion of social sculpture as defined by Joseph Beuys, and relational aesthetics as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud. Here, I further situate avatars as a medium for creating art within the broader practice of

¹ In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin (1962) discusses his speech-act theory, which explains the performative action in speech. In performative utterance, saying is doing.
contemporary Net art\(^2\) (or Internet art) to address avatars as an art medium for self-making. Avatars in virtual worlds constitute part of the cyberspace experience. Therefore, using avatars in art is art-making on the Internet—and sometimes even beyond the Internet extending into the physical world. Internet art is connected to historical art movements and contexts, such as Dada, Happenings, conceptual art, mail art, video and television art (R. Greene, 2004; Neumark, 2005). These movements transformed traditional art practices and brought new understandings and definitions of art. The concept and technique of appropriation found in Dada, collage and assemblage art, and others, such as Fluxus,\(^3\) is often used by Net artists (R. Greene, 2004). Appropriation is an important concept in understanding the use of avatars in art-making. The use of avatars as a medium can be seen as a way of appropriating cyber visual culture. Avatar creation becomes art when artists have clear intentions about exploring ideas (often ideas related to identity and the body) and use an avatar to represent their ideas. In this way, the medium becomes the message (McLuhan, 1964), which perpetuates and echoes issues about virtual body. A few examples of artworks that use avatars as a medium are Kristine Schomaker’s performance *The Gracie Kendal Project* (2010); Micha Cárdenas’s mixed-reality performance *Becoming Dragon* (2008); Victoria Vesna’s Net art piece *Bodies INCorporated* (1996); Evelin Stermitz, Jure Kodzoman, Ljiljana Perkovic, and Loritz

\(^2\) The term Net art was first used by Slovenian artist Vuk Ćosić in 1995 when he opened an email only to find that the email had been compromised during transmission such that the only words he could recognize were “net.art” (R. Greene, 2000). Net artists use the Internet as a medium for creating artwork that can only be experienced via the Internet itself. Rachel Greene’s (2004) book *Internet Art* is a good introductory text.

\(^3\) Fluxus is an art network that began in the early 1960s. It combines many different disciplines, such as music, literature, and architecture. The term Fluxus comes from the Latin word meaning “to flow.” Some of the most well-known artists in the Fluxus group include John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik (video and television art), and Ray Johnson (mail art). Happening artists, such as Allan Kaprow, have also had an important influence on Fluxus.
Zbigniew’s Net art piece *World of Female Avatars* (2004); Gregory Little’s Net art piece *A Manifesto for Avatars* (1999); and Gazira Babeli’s *Ultimate Submission* (2007). Discussions of these works are included in the chat logs presented below.

The examples of educational use of avatars for knowledge-making provide insights into the potentialities of teaching and learning about body image, self, identity, gender, race, and stereotypes through avatar construction in art education. These insights center on such matters as difficult-to-break stereotypical representations, the force of embodied learning, and self-knowledge generated through avatar embodiment. The educators discussed in this chapter use avatar-making to create pedagogical sites where students can learn about the self in the making (Ellsworth, 2005). They demonstrate that avatar creation constitutes, in Ellsworth’s (2005) words, *an anomalous place of learning*. Moreover, the pedagogical force of avatar-making is created by a combination of potentialities associated with embodied learning and art-making, as it is through avatar art-making that a person can transform dialogues about identity and the body by connecting such dialogues with his/her own body. Through the making of such connections, individuals gain the opportunity to create their own cultural narratives.4

**Avatars as Art Media of the Self**

**From Self-Portrait to Self-Making**

Log date: January 30, 2011, 9:23 PM

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4 Examples can be found in Kristine Schomaker’s and Micha Cárdenas’ work as discussed in this chapter.
Alice: Did you see my newest skin? I finally found one that is closer to my real skin. You know, I am Asian, but there are not many realistic Asian skins in SL. Some Asian skins created by Japanese designers are too dolly-looking, others are too stereotypically Asian with tip eyes, thin eyebrows ... etc. They don’t really represent what I look like.5

Alice can’t wait to show me her new skin purchase. I can see her excitement, but I don’t know what she looks like in real life, so I cannot comment on how good a match the skin is to her own. So instead of praising her new skin, I decided to ask her a question.

Liliann: Why is looking as close as possible to your real-life body important to you? Are you trying to create a self-portrait?

Alice: Self-portrait? Interesting. I just want to see how close I can get to my own body in SL. I don’t know much about self-portraits. I am not an artist.

Liliann: Everyone has done this in their elementary-art classes, I suppose, at least, in my generation in Taiwan. That is, draw a self-portrait (or a number of them using a variety of different media). I do not remember when I created my first self-portrait. But I remember when I was asked, again, to draw a self-portrait in my college drawing class, I sketched my portrait with a somewhat square face wearing glasses and a pony tail. I did not even look in a mirror. That was what I thought I looked like with some of my signature features. I do not like creating

5 The dialogues have been edited for spelling, and APA style for the citations has also been imposed.
self-portraits, because I feel a sense of pain every time I think about my square-shaped face, which is considered unfeminine, even ugly, in Eastern aesthetics. I felt similar pain when I created my first avatar in SL. I thought about making a square-shaped face. However, I encountered limitations when I tried to do so. I could not make a face shape similar to my own physical one. Well, that means the system does not accept what I look like.

Alice: Maybe this is your chance to jump out of that image of your face and have a face you like.

Liliann: These experiences have led me to think of my avatar as a self-portrait. Many people, including myself, try to create an avatar that looks somewhat like their physical selves. From this perspective, creating an avatar is like using a 3D computer medium to create a self-portrait. A self-portrait says much about the artist. It is a reflection of the artist’s identity at a particular moment. Meadows (2008) says that

Avatars are, ultimately, interactive self-portraits that we use to represent ourselves. ... Every time someone makes an avatar they create a portrait, though it may have little to do with who one is in the real world. But this is nothing new for portraits—portraits have always been combinations of realism and the techniques artists use to communicate the subject’s personality. (p. 106)
So creating an avatar involves using a 3D technique to “sculpt” a portrait, and what many people do, including you, is to take a photograph of the sculpture to create an image of it.

Alice: I didn’t think in that way, but I agree with you. I want an Asian skin that looks like my real skin because that is the way I want to be presented. I create my avatar just like a self-portrait. I created a photo-realistic avatar as a portrait.

Liliann: Yes, that’s it.

Alice: But self-portrait or not, why does it matter? I know many people see this as art-making. Some of my friends PhotoShop their avatars’ pictures to create artistic effects. If you go to an SL-related Flickr group page, you will see these images. They are like sub-culture pop art. I remember when I was in high school, many of my friends drew beautiful anime-like portraits. The avatar portraits on Flickr make me think of this sub-culture art that is popular among youth. Interestingly, many people I know who do this think of it as artistic expression, and it is the only art form that interests them.

Liliann: So what do you think of your portrait-making?

Alice: I didn’t really think of it as portrait-making at first. I thought of it as creating a collection of ideas about body-making. I enjoy my collection. I consider it a souvenir of experiences in SL.

Liliann: Your project sounds like art-making to me.

Alice: Really? Is an avatar portrait art?

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6 See http://www.flickr.com/search/groups/?q=second+life for groups related to SL in Flickr.
Liliann: It could be. When I think of avatar portraits, I think of contemporary artist Cindy Sherman’s work. Sherman creates her art by taking pictures of herself. However, these pictures are not really self-portraits, at least, they aren’t intended to illustrate how her physical body looks. She dresses up in ways that represent many different roles. It is like she created many avatars. I remember seeing her survey exhibition in London in 2003. Her large 5-foot-long self-photo-portraits featuring her through clown images were displayed near the entrance of the gallery. Clearly, she is not a clown, but in dressing up in this way, she represented stereotypical images and exposed the complex identities and affects of clowns. Also highlighted in the exhibition was her early work *Film Stills* from the 1970s. In these photographs she dressed as different female movie characters, though these film characters are imaginary. These photo-portraits reveal the stereotypical images of females in movies. Although I had seen many of her photographs in art books, magazines, and websites before I went to the exhibition, the large scale of her work held my attention. I felt immersed in the photos as if I were becoming her characters. In a way, her body is her medium and her portraits are political. The virtual body can also be used to do things that are similar to what Cindy Sherman does.

Alice: Do you mean she uses her body as a medium to create conversations about different issues?

Liliann: Yes. And, I see that you are doing something similar, except you are more about body image and identity. Other people are more about fantasy.

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7 See http://www.cindysherman.com/for more information about Cindy Sherman.
Alice: Now I am thinking about doing something similar to Cindy Sherman in using my avatar body to create different characters. But I wonder if the act of me creating avatar portraits is art-making?

Liliann: It would be interesting to see how you use your avatar body as an art medium. I think avatar portrait images can be intentional beyond being pretty and fantasy. So in answering your question about whether avatar portraits are art, I think, yes, they can be. Cindy Sherman’s portraits make viewers think about gender stereotypes or identity. And, I think avatar portraits can, too. At least, I know avatar portraits can change your physical body.

Alice: How? I wish my physical body had some of my avatar’s features. But it is much easier for me to change my avatar than the other way around.

Liliann: Have you heard of Gracie Kendal? She is real-world artist Kristine Schomaker’s avatar in SL.

Alice: I don’t think I know about her.

Liliann: She is a new media and performance artist based in Los Angeles who explores online identity in virtual worlds and social-networking technologies. In *The Gracie Kendal Project,* she talks with her avatar, whom she calls “my self-portrait, my alter ego, my inner conscience.” And, she says, “She is a character in my life story that revolves around the loss of identity, self-awareness and self acceptance” (Schomaker, 2010, para. 2). Part of her project is the opposite of

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8 See http://www.kristineschomaker.net for more information about Kristine Schomaker.

9 See http://graciekendal.wordpress.com for more information about *The Gracie Kendal Project.*
what many people, including you, try to do. She tried to change her real-life body
to look like her avatar.

Alice: I don’t know if that’s possible or not. Did she have plastic surgery?

Liliann: No, not really. She used make-up, dyed her hair, and added a piercing, etc. Her

project started as a conversation with her avatar. I will paste an excerpt of her

thesis about the art project in the notecard.

The Gracie Kendal Project began on November 1st, 2009, when I started working with Gracie on
a journey of self-exploration. Every day I would take pictures of both myself and Gracie and
place them next to each other comparing the real with the virtual. After observing how we were
interacting with each other through photos, I realized there was a dialogue forming. The natural
extension in this story was for this dialogue to be realized through actual conversations between
me and Gracie.

Through written chat and eventually comic-like banter, we expressed our inner dialogue in a
public way. We have developed a co-dependent relationship in which each of us wishes she were
the other. I yearn to have the life she does, the beauty, the success, and independence. She yearns
to be free from the constraints of pixels.

This conversation, as well as the performance pieces, has helped break down the barriers
between me and my avatar....

Through my blog, www.graciekendal.wordpress.com, I documented these photos, conversations
and comics almost every day. As the days and weeks went on, I started to think of Gracie as a
character in a story, my life story. She started to take on a more distinct persona from me, maybe
a repressed part of my personality. She started talking back. She is much more sassy, open,
confident and brave. She teases me, gets mad when I look down on myself, cheers me up and
gets excited when good things happen for me....

Through my blog, installation, text, photography, mixed media, video and performance I started
to construct a narrative of self that represents me and is me, one that helps to deconstruct ideas of
normalcy and authenticity. Through this storytelling I started to explore the extremes and
dualities of reality vs. fantasy, mind vs. body, art vs. life, private vs. public, virtual vs. tangible,
important vs. insignificant, revealing vs. concealing, internal vs. external, permanent vs.
ephemeral, imperfection vs. perfection and fact vs. fiction. What is real? (Schomaker, 2010, para.
11–14)
Alice: She is so brave. I would not want to show my real-life pictures to the public.

LOL.\(^{10}\) Besides that, I think her project is very meaningful. Her work materializes her inner self. I see this questioning and drive to become her avatar as a metaphor for transforming real life, making real life better. I’d like to become my avatar and have a better body shape and tons of clothes (of course this is important). But I also don’t want to become my avatar, because I cannot think of anything important she has besides an attractive appearance. Did you notice that I say “she?” I normally think of my avatar as myself, but in order to become her, I need to separate me from her. This is ironic. I make a self in the virtual world, and my double is not actually me. And, it comes back to reshape me.

Liliann: I think your relationship with your avatar is like an autopoietic relationship. I just learned the word “autopoiesis” recently. It means self-creation. Poiesis is Greek for creation or production. It originated in biological science to describe living systems (Mariotti, 1999), but it makes sense to use it here to describe relationships between people and their avatars. Do you agree? Or do you have other ideas to describe this relationship?

Alice: Interesting word. It makes me think of this phrase: “your self-portrait paints you.” Oh, artist M. C. Escher’s *Drawing Hands\(^{11}\)* might be a good example to illustrate this idea (Garcia, 1991).

\(^{10}\) See Appendix A for a list of Internet acronym.

\(^{11}\) See http://www.mcescher.com/Gallery/back-bmp/LW355.jpg for an image of the artwork.
Liliann: By the way, recently, Kristine Schomaker/Gracie Kendal created another project, *1000+ Avatars* (Figure 2-1). You might want to visit her work and have your avatar photo taken for her project.

![Figure 2-1. Display of 1000+ Avatars project in Second Life.](image)

Alice: What is her new project about?

Liliann: She takes different avatars’ pictures, back and front. But she mostly only shows the back of avatars in the display area in her studio. Sometimes, she posts the fronts of avatars on her blog.\(^\text{12}\) She states that her project is “the idea of online anonymity”:

> I started out with one idea: to take portraits of avatars facing away from me. That was it, pure and simple. I had the idea that I wanted them to be

\(^\text{12}\) The *1000+ Avatar* project blog (http://1000avatars.wordpress.com/) presents partial images of avatars from the project and further information about the project.
unrecognizable, their faces hidden, just another level of anonymity in SL vs. RL. (Schomaker, 2011, para. 6–7)

Alice: I have to think of a representation of me to participate in that project.

Liliann: But looking at this large image collection of avatars, I feel a sense of spectacle.

Guy Debord says that “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (1967/2005, p. 7). Her project exposes the spectacle of identity representations. Identity is mediated by images. Indeed, others have similar thoughts about SL too. Derridada, a Second Life resident and real-life educator, says in a blog post that “SL is spectacle—no question—in some cases all spectacle and no substance—and because of this it is ripe for manipulation since it is fundamentally a liminal environment” (2011, para. 1). The virtual world is about spectacle re/production.

Alice: So, does this mean when I create my avatar portrait, I perpetuate the spectacle? I agree with Debord, but I see it differently. This spectacle says a lot about computer-mediated culture. If the spectacle cannot be stopped from reproducing itself, why don’t we think about how to turn the spectacle into a source of data for our collective consciousness of self?

Liliann: When you mentioned that you need to “think of a self representation” to participate in the project, an image of the virtual world as a machine or tool that produces representations of identities by slicing and still the identity came to my mind. I mean identity is not just an image, but the setting of the virtual world
forces you to chose an image as your identity (at least for a moment), which is like cutting out other parts of you.

Alice: It’s true. It’s hard to think of a representation of me. Although I know what my body looks like, I’m not sure if that body represents me. No, I don’t want to have a fixed image about me. Portraits are evil.

Liliann: LOL. Maybe that’s why you keep changing your avatar instead of stopping at a particular image representation. Actually, long before Schomaker’s 1000+ avatar project, between 2006 and 2007, Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org) did a project called Portraits of Avatars. They exhibited it in Second Life and real-life galleries in different countries. Their project explores the relationship between identity and virtual representation. Art critic Domenico Quaranta (2007) in writing about their project says:

what happens if we are given the option of customizing that avatar, and my mission becomes that of constructing a second life in the virtual space I have access to? What happens when the videogame becomes a public arena? What happens is that the avatar becomes something more than a puppet following my orders: it becomes the projection of my identity in a public space, the appearance that I wish to have when I emerge from my private space. It becomes the mask I have constructed to interface with the environment (be it real or virtual) that I inhabit. Since its outset, the aim of

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14 See http://www.postmastersart.com/archive/01org_07/01org_07_install.html where the “Most Beautiful Avatars,” series of the “Portraits of Avatars” exhibit in the Postmasters Gallery, New York, is posted.
the portrait genre has been to immortalize this mask, or in other words, to
construct avatars. (para. 8)

Alice: I’ve read about this in your articles (Liao, 2008a, 2010). You convinced me that an
avatar portrait says a lot about a person and raises questions about identity and
representation. Avatar portrait-making is like self-making.

Liliann: I like that analogy. It could be a section title for my dissertation. :-) 

Alice: Don’t forget to credit me. :P

Becoming and Embodying an Avatar

Log date: February 2, 2011, 10:32 AM

Alice: What do you think you could do if you were your avatar? I have been thinking
about this question since you told me about The Gracie Kendal Project.

Liliann: That’s an interesting question. I “am” my avatar. My avatar is part of me. If I
could become her, that would be to say there are some differences between my
avatar and me. But there was an art project called Becoming Dragon,15 which
explores the possibility of becoming an avatar, by performance and new media
artist Micha Cárdenas, whose work explores queer relationality, biopolitics, and
mixed-reality technologies.16 This mixed-reality durational performance takes as
its subject the idea of “becoming” as an embodied process. During the 365-hour

15 See http://secondloop.wordpress.com/ for more information about the project.
16 Micha Cárdenas is interim associate director of art and technology in the Culture, Art, Technology
program of Sixth College at University of California, San Diego (UCSD). More information about her can
be found on her personal site (http://transreal.org).
performance, the artist lives immersed in SL\textsuperscript{17} in the form of a dragon. The performance seeks to explore the shift from subjectivity to becoming, to examine the subject in transition, as opposed to a clearly defined identity…. [and] the possibility of using mixed-reality environments to construct new genders outside of the limitations of the male/female spectrum. (Cárdenas, 2008, para. 7)

The artist becomes immersed in the identity of the dragon, which, the artist states, is not limited to or by human gender categories. In “becoming” the dragon, the artist constructs a new subject position from which to question gender and the requirement of the \textit{Real Life Experience} before transgender surgery (the artist was in the process of gender transforming at the time) (Cárdenas, 2008).

Alice: It sounds like the artist stepped into the dragon’s skin and became the dragon. But in “reality” the artist is not the dragon.

Liliann: I think this is more of a gesture and political statement to question clear-cut identity (and gender and species). Becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, isn’t about imitation or evolution; it doesn’t happen in the imagination either. So it is not about the end point of becoming.

Alice: Whether or not she is a dragon at the end, does her project change anything?

Liliann: I think Cárdenas’s project raised questions about transformation. Embodiment in the dragon avatar contrasts with the embodiment of a gendered body. Cárdenas

\textsuperscript{17} During the performance, the artist wore a head mounted display with a stereoscopic display to create a 3D experience, and through a motion-capture system, the dragon avatar’s movements corresponded to the artist’s movements in the physical world (Cárdenas, 2008).
questions the usefulness of categorizing bodies according to gender. Is the experience of being a dragon the same as an experience in a gendered body? Her art-making creates knowledge in the making (Ellsworth, 2005) that challenges our perceptions of the gendered body.

Alice: But I can say that I am also embodied in my avatar body, which is not the same as my physical body. Why is Cárdenas’s dragon performance considered art? Why is mine not important at all? What do you mean by art?

Liliann: I wouldn’t say your embodiment is not important. But the artist addresses some questions that are important to herself and society, such as transgender, while your intentions are not fully formed. Your question about my definition of art is not easy to answer. I think art is shaped by the artist’s vision, so the definition of art changes over time. But the medium could also change how art is defined or understood. Photography is an example of that. So I see art as the artist’s intention expressed through an interaction with the medium.

Alice: I see. I have this medium in hand, but I need to think about why and how I can use it.

Assembling Bodies

Log date: February 5, 2011, 3:05 PM

Alice: Hey Liliann, did you know that a big hunt is on?
Liliann: No, I didn’t. But they take so much time that I don’t usually take part.\(^{18}\)

Alice: But this one is different, many big-name designers are participating, and they are giving out high-quality free prizes, skins, hair, shoes, clothing, jewelry, etc. If we do it together, it would be much faster to find all the free prizes.

Liliann: Why do you want to get all the prizes? I know you often don’t even open the box and never use the items.

Alice: Well, how do you know that? :P\(^{19}\) I just want to collect them. Maybe someday I will use them. You know, the more items I have the more different looks I can make for my avatar.

Liliann: Do you know the term *pack rat*?

Alice: Artists are sometimes called pack rats too. But many of them use junk they collected to create art.

Liliann: Assemblage art?

Alice: Yes, I think that’s the term.

Liliann: You know I do think that your avatar is like an assemblage artwork. You got your hair from one place and your skin from another.

Alice: Ha ha, so I am like an artist.

Liliann: Hmm ... Speaking of assembling bodies, have you heard of a Net art project called *Bodies INCorporated*\(^ {20}\) by Victoria Vesna?

Alice: No.

\(^{18}\) Hunts are opportunities for avatars to get free items from designers. There are often a number going on in SL at any given time.

\(^{19}\) See Appendix A for a list of Internet expression.

\(^{20}\) See http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu/ to view the Net art piece.
Liliann: This project, which was first exhibited in 1996, allows people to log on to the site and build 3D bodies from different components. The project mission states that “Bodies INCorporated is a project that actively incorporates the idea of avatars, with the intention of shifting the discourse of the body from the usual idea of flesh and identity” (Vesna, 1996, Mission Statement, para. 1). The avatar bodies can be assembled from different sounds and textures, for example, black rubber, blue plastic, and bronze. Each texture is described in terms of its characteristics, such as “hot and dry; it will sublimate at a relatively low temperature; fashion and style element” (Vesna, 1996, Textures, para. 1). These assembled avatar bodies function as “data containers on the network and allow users both to represent themselves as a container of various kinds of information and to search information contained in other bodies” (Paul, 2003, pp. 168–169). The purpose of avatar-body-making in this project is different from avatar creation in SL. These bodies are not used to perform any task, but to form a collection. This artwork is one of the first to discuss the issues of the body, technology, and identity through avatar-making in cyberspace.

Alice: So the avatar bodies constructed in that project have different textures and sounds, and each element carries different messages. I can connect immediately to those textures used in creating my avatar. If each texture has a meaning, re/assembling my avatar is about making and remaking meanings.

Liliann: I agree with that. Bodies INCorporated is a collaborative project in which a person’s avatar not only contains his/her own message, but also contributes to the
creation of a greater community body. This creates knowledge about the assembled bodies in cyberspace. Vesna (1997) says that she created this work because “there is a need for alternate worlds to be built with more complex renditions of identity and community building and not simply replicating the existing physical structures or hierarchies” (para. 12). In other words, she imagines a utopian world without societal constraints.

Alice: What you just said about collaborative and community bodies is interesting to me. I think websites like those SL fashion feeds are also communities with collaborative bodies. Fashion bloggers reassemble their avatars and contribute to the construction of community bodies.

Liliann: That’s an interesting viewpoint. Community bodies offer a window for seeing collaborative knowledge. There is another project that uses collaborative avatar-making to create new bodies. It is called World of Female Avatars created by Evelin Stermitz, Jure Kodzoman, Ljiljana Perkovic, and Loritz Zbigniew. The project asks visitors to submit images of and text about the female body that make some kind of personal statement. These images and texts are saved on the site to create “the avatar of female bodies” (Stermitz, Kodzoman, Perkovic, & Zbigniew, 2004, para. 1). The new bodies are an assemblage of female identities.

Alice: It seems that assembling digital bodies is an eloquent way to present identity in the digital age. But how is assembling my avatar body, art-making? I know I enjoy the little moment of assembling as something pleasant, but I suppose this is different from those artists’ ambitious projects.

21 See http://females.mur.at/ to view the Net art piece.
Liliann: By ambitious project, do you mean artwork that is intended to express a political meaning? From the viewpoints of many modernist art critics (see Benedetto Croce, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell,22 in Harrison & Wood, 2003), you can argue that the fun and joyful feeling of assembling an avatar is similar to that of, for example, drawing a figure, yet the figure drawing, though it is often considered art, does not necessarily intend political meanings or impact. However, viewers of a figure drawing can interpret political meaning, and many will decipher art through historical or other kinds of references. So, although you are using the same medium as other artists, the difference is your intention. The Net artists I mentioned did not create their work based on the modernist idea. Their works stem from ideas introduced by Dada, Happenings, Fluxus, and Situationist International23 artists. That is to say, they believe art is not so much about the form of representation, but about the (political) meaning and intention.

Alice: What you just said about figure drawing reminds me of my childhood doodles. I always liked drawing figures, especially girls. I would create stories for those girl figures. They are not me, but my imagination. I did not intend to make any socially significant statement, but they were important for my personal growth. So, if we consider the 3D virtual world as a medium, my avatar re/assembling is much like figure drawing from my childhood. As powerless as when I was a kid, I

22 Benedetto Croce stated that art is vision or intuition; Roger Fry argued that art is expression and a stimulus for the imaginative life; and Clive Bell claimed that aesthetics start with personal experience of a peculiar emotion (see Harrison & Wood, 2003).
23 Situationist International was a group of artists who sought to “redefine revolutionary praxis.... [They proposed] a critique of capitalism that weighted heavily in favor of the spontaneous realization of the revolutionary potential of everyday life” (Burkowicz, n.d., para. 1).
don’t think my avatar creation can have any impact. I am not an artist like those that create political impacts.

Liliann: Let me go find some examples of how avatar creation can have a political impact.

Alice: OK. I am interested to see how I can express political meanings through my avatar creation.

**Avatars as Political**

Log date: February 8, 2011, 2:36 PM

Liliann: Hey Alice, did you remember last time you asked me how avatar creation can make a political statement. I found some examples.

Alice: Sounds good. But I also have been thinking about why I want to make my avatar political.

Liliann: There was an art project called *A Manifesto for Avatars* (1991–1999) by artist Gregory Little. That was long before Second Life even existed. His avatars were created by assembling different body parts. They look like monsters:

> Let us construct the avatar as a revolutionary site of resistance inside the belly of an armed-to-the-teeth multinational monster of exchange. Polymorphic, bi-gendered, unstable nomadic, pained and maimed representations of the self as subject could act, in Donna Haraway’s terms,
as “trickster figures,” “potent wild cards” to undermine, infect, and terrorize the monster from the inside out. (Little, 1999, para. 25)

His project is a political artist’s call for imagining alternative images of avatars. He observes that

the vast majority of avatars inhabiting cyberspace today are drawn from the image database of advertising, fashion, and entertainment. These countless generic representations—big breasted, small-waisted babes, idealized, perfect-skinned, trim and tan hunks, Disney-derived characters, bowling pins, smiley faces, coffee cups, exotic animals, and steroid-driven snarling, hard-bodied war machines—are not just the tools of the user behind the screen, but covert instruments of multinational capitalism. (Little, 1999, para. 8)

I agree with his observation. Look at the avatars in Second Life and the highly commodified avatar body parts. In his novel Snow Crash, Neal Stephenson (1992) describes a world where the quality of visual representations of avatars shows the different socio-economic classes of the people who created them. This tells us something about the current SL avatars. Avatar appearance tells us about the experience level in and commitment to the virtual world although we might not be correct in determining the socio-economic class of any particular avatar’s creator. However, leisure time and access to a computer and the Internet are needed for participating in SL, and therefore, most avatar creators are probably not experiencing poverty. No wonder some people call SL a fetish world. No matter
what, Little’s project calls attention to the representations of avatars in cyberspace. His avatar creations are his statement about avatar body images. He provides strategies for avatar creation that resists reproducing images that act for capitalism. These strategies include:

1) the freedom of choice of self-image and the lack of need for consensus relative to self imaging; this frees the avatar from any singular representation and opens the individual to a plurality of possibilities; 2) an emphasis on radical embodiment, on all that is the literal body, and on all that it is to be grounded in the body at the expense of social, biological, cultural, economic, psychoanalytic, and religious discourse; this can free the individual from lack-based desire and myths of wholeness and transcendence that cause us to abandon the body to rehabilitation by capital; and 3) drawing from various alternative narratives of abjection, the alien, and the other; this can offer us visual and procedural models for constructing unconsumable images. (Little, 1999, para. 24)

Alice: The artist makes me feel bad about my own consumption of fashion items. You are right. I assemble my avatars without considering deeper meanings hidden in the images. But I don’t think that I would like to use avatars like he created. Those images are a little scary, and they don’t have too much meaning for me beyond his claim of “freedom of choice.” I think of my avatar as personal, but his idea is political. Many of the items I pick for my avatar are in direct relation to my real-life experiences and memories. Why did I choose to have my avatar wear an old
video game console controller? Because the controller is associated with so many
of my childhood memories of playing console games with siblings. By wearing it,
I assemble my avatar from these memories or, put another way, my avatar
expresses these memories. Turkle (2007) calls these “evocative objects.” She said,
“some objects are experienced as part of self” (p. 7), and further, “we often feel at
one with our objects” (p. 9). I think this is the reason why I selected specific
“objects” to assemble my avatar. Again, I think my avatar is personal, but I
believe avatars can be political. What it would take to make personal political,
however, is beyond my knowledge.

Liliann: What if you were to create an avatar to resist the dominant imagery of avatars
(stereotypical representations of gender and media standards of beauty)?

Alice: Hmmm... I’ve never thought about it. I might create an old fat body. But why
would I? Even if I really have an old fat physical body, when I have a chance to
choose, I would choose a young and thin body instead. Doesn’t dominant imagery
of avatars reflect most people’s choices? Why would I want to make a political
statement through my avatar?

Liliann: “The goal of art is the personal but it automatically becomes political when seen
by the public” (Sameshima, 2007, p. 268).

Alice: I see what you mean. Since my avatar is seen by other people, it is public and
political, even if I did not intend to make any political statement. People might
interpret my message differently. So, if I create an old fat avatar, it might become
a political statement about ageism and body image.
Liliann: Another artist created her avatar in an ironic way to disrupt the images that objectify women. Gazira Babeli is an SL artist who claims that she only exists in SL. One of her acts, Ultimate Submission (2007), uses irony, parody, and humor to challenge the hegemonic visual culture of the virtual world. In the performance, her avatar wore a barrel and performed a strange dance, making movements like those of a chicken in front of advertising images of female avatars in a shopping mall. These images presented hyper-sexual and objectified female avatars for sale, and Babeli staged the performance to parody and challenge the images and all others like them. The strangeness of her dance disrupted notions of what feminine movement and appearance can and should be, and her performance in the shopping mall venue disrupted the representation of the culture of capitalism.

Alice: Although the artist performed by herself, this makes me think of “flash mob” events. I like her strategies of irony, parody, and humor. Making a political statement through an avatar can be fun. Now I feel I want to try it. Maybe, I will make an old fat but fashionable avatar to attend the coming fashion fair.

Liliann: Interesting that you think of “flash mob.” As the artist calls her performance, act, I think her performance is more related to Happenings, a performance art/event movement began in the late 1950s with artists connected to the Fluxus group. Happenings, as the key artist Allan Kaprow (who came up with the term Happening) defined it, is assemblage/collage of events in a certain time and space.

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25 She called her performances, acts.
26 A flash mob is a group of strangers who meet at a certain place at a certain time in order to create certain non-sense tasks or performances. The event is not usually publicized before it happens, and after it has taken place, participants return to their normal activities or disperse from the scene.
(Kaprow, 1995). The disjunctive narrative of collage provides a critical approach (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008) for artists like Babeli to create disruptions for the fetishized virtual environment. I like your idea, but you need to be careful not to be kicked out of the event, like what happened to me when I created an old lady avatar and went to a sexy female clothes store (Liao, 2008a). :P

Alice: Ha ha, don’t worry. I am invited as a VIP because I am a well-known fashion blogger. People know me, but they would be surprised to see my new avatar. :P

**Avatars as Media for Knowledge-Making**

**The Virtual World and Education**

Log date: February 15, 2011, 9:38 AM

Alice: You told me the other day that you are trying to find out how educators are using Second Life. Did you have any luck? I know a few educators here in SL. One of them told me that her primary source about education in Second Life is from an e-mail list called SLED (SL Educators). Do you know about it?

Liliann: Yes, I subscribe to that list and get a lot of useful information from it.

Alice: Well, I guess I won’t be much use to you, as you know more about education than me. But I am curious to know what educators are doing in SL. I heard that some have created simulations so that their students can visit and even be educated in that environment.

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27 The SLED email list (https://lists.secondlife.com/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/educators) was created by Linden Lab for educators who are interested in using SL in the classroom.
Liliann: Yes, lots of educators see the value of virtual environments as simulated learning opportunities (e.g., Chodos, Stroulia, & Naeimi, 2009).

Alice: I keep thinking about the question you asked about why I want my avatar to be as close as possible to my RL body? I think one of the reasons is that my avatar is my simulation of my body. Through my avatar, I learned how to dress and I can try different outfits on to see what I would look like in RL if I dressed like my avatar. Is this similar to what those educators are doing?

Liliann: I suppose so.

Alice: So maybe I can be an example of learning through simulation. :P

Liliann: There are many discussions about the benefits of using virtual worlds in (art) education (e.g., Lim, 2009; Lu, 2008, 2010; Stokrocki & Andrews, 2010; Taylor, Ballengee-Morris, & Carpenter, 2010). However, I think I need to focus on how avatars are pedagogical instead of looking at all the different ways that virtual worlds are being used in education.

Alice: I think you’re right. Are there many educators focusing on avatar-making in their teaching?

Liliann: There are some educators working in this area in machinima. But other than that, a few educators are looking at avatar construction as a way of discussing identity and body image with students.

Alice: What kind of machinima do educators and students create? I have seen some made by artists that blow my mind, but I don’t know too much about educational machinima.
Liliann: One of the most well-known projects was created by Global Kids,²⁸ a non-profit organization that works with youth. They have created several machinimas²⁹ that reflect the issues of social justice. Youth create avatars to perform stories that address different issues. These youth’s avatar creations and performances are their “personal expression and civic engagement” (Global Kids, n.d., para. 1). You might want to watch some of their machinimas on their website.

Alice: The project sounds fantastic. I didn’t know machinima could be an educational and political tool.

Liliann: Yes, machinima is one educational use of the virtual world that involves avatar creation.

Race and Stereotypes

Log date: June 18, 2009, 4:05 PM

Alice: Remember the free skin I told you about? It turns out that the creator made it free because it was a dark skin and the demand for dark skin in SL is quite low. I wasted my time getting that free skin because I know I won’t use it.

Liliann: I know some people see skin as an accessory and try different skin colors. Why don’t you try it?

Alice: I don’t see skin color as an accessory. Skin color is not the same as make-up. In reality, it is almost impossible to change one’s skin color (other than to the extent

²⁸ Global Kids (http://www.globalkids.org/) is a non-profit origination. Its mission is to help youth to develop leadership skills and acquire the knowledge and skills to be successful in the global environment.
²⁹ See http://www.olpglobalkids.org/virtual_worlds/machinima/ for information about their machinimas.
that tanning does). If you could change skin color that easily, there wouldn’t be problems about racism.

Liliann: What do you mean? Do you think people would all choose the same skin color, and if so, what color would that be? Would choice of skin color eliminate racism?

It is naive and utopian to view skin color as accessory. But this possibility of changing skin color might be a pedagogical tool to expose institutionalized and internalized racism as a first step toward social justice.

Alice: Do you mean if I were to try the dark skin, other people might treat me differently?

Liliann: I think that is possible, although it is a little bit too simple to say that. It can become a powerful and pedagogical tool in that way. An avatar can be used as a lens to examine issues such as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. One example I have is from a university professor’s course.

Dr. Phylis Johnson (2008) conducted a graduate-level course at Southern Illinois University that challenged students to look through the lens of their avatars in SL to consider social, political, and economic issues relevant to virtual communities. She asked students to examine the social issues within the context of a virtual community and to build, experiment with, and interact with structures and people. She found that “students came into class with strong opinions on how they might change the world, and found themselves struggling with the same social dynamics and roadblocks in SL as in RL” (Johnson, 2008, Slide 20). In this example, avatar construction is a lens through which students are challenged to examine the socio-cultural conditions of SL. The social reality and hegemony of the virtual world,
revealed through gender, race, and ethnicity, were exposed to Johnson’s students through their participation in SL. For example, one of Johnson’s African-American students who kept her real-life identity in SL found her online identity to be significantly different from that of others, and this further indicates the social barrier of race. This practice suggests a way to reveal social hegemony for students. According to Johnson, her students realized that “change would have to come from within them, regardless of what space they occupied” (Johnson, 2008, Slide 20).

Alice: I see. It is not just about living in the virtual world and finding out if being able to change skin color or gender easily would make our society better. It has to do with people, no matter in the virtual world or the real world. The virtual world is not a different world but part of the real world, and the real world is part of the virtual world.

**Identity Construction**

Log date: February 17, 2011, 11:33 AM

Alice: Liliann, do you need new clothes? I.P. has released new clothes recently that you might need in the future if you are going to present again.

As I was racking my brain to remember the clothes I bought from I.P., Alice sent me a picture that showed their new skirts. It reminded me that a year or two ago, I had asked Alice to help me select clothes for presenting at a conference in SL. I had no idea
where to find clothes to make my avatar look professional. Alice helped me pick up a suit skirt from I.P., a women’s clothing store that sells a professional look.

Liliann: They look beautiful. But I already have a skirt from the store, so I don’t think I need more.

Alice: You can’t wear the same thing again and again. A professional woman needs more than one look.

Liliann: I don’t think I need to look professional all the time. Sometimes I want to be different. This is the avatar world.

Alice: As you told me, constructing an avatar is constructing an identity, and you are a researcher and teacher in RL and SL, I think the image of you as a professional woman is fixed in my mind.

Liliann: Yes. Constructing an avatar is about creating a specific identity. Many educators are using avatars as a tool to address identity-construction issues. For example, Rain’s (avatar of Ballengee-Morris) class asks students to “critically [analyze] SL avatar construction as a means of exploring the construction of identity and community” (P. G. Taylor et al., 2010, p. 215). She argues that “doing this in and through SL gave them both a freedom and sense of security that enabled them to interact more quickly and honestly than in their RL classroom” (p. 215). Second Life may be experienced as a safe space in which students can freely examine and explore different identities. However, it is also important to know that there are
also dangers in this space. As the virtual world is an open space, some people might find it disturbing to meet people who are not respectful.

Alice: Second Life provides a way to construct identities that are not easy to put together in real life. I think this is why many people are attracted to this world. But what does this really mean? Just like the artist as the dragon, you can’t become the identity you constructed.

Liliann: Here’s something to think about. In a pilot study, Sanchez asked students to create avatars based on their personal heroes. “The users held discussions with each other in character about the role of leadership and compassion, leadership and creativity, and leadership and morality” (Sanchez, 2007, para. 1). Through this activity, students used avatar construction to engage in role-play and thus to consider questions of embodiment and identity. Although the students did not actually undergo metamorphosis to literally become their own heroes, they did construct a moment of shift; that is, they inhabited an in-between space in which the question of personal identity came to hold center stage. The imagining and building of a different kind of body in which to embed one’s identity is the process that brings about the moment of shift. The possibility of transgressing and transforming exists in this in-between space (Grosz, 2001).

Alice: Sometimes I would imagine a specific identity, such as a character from a movie, and try to create my avatar as the character. But I think this is just my imagination.
Liliann: I guess that’s good. Imagining being someone, according to Walton (1990), is crucial to learning many things including learning about oneself.

**Body Image**

Log date: September 12, 2009, 1:15 PM

Alice: Do you have time to give me some suggestions about my new shape?

Liliann: I thought you would never change your shape.

Alice: This is temporary. I am participating in a blogger challenge[^30] that asks bloggers to create beautiful “big-sized” avatars.

Liliann: Why do you want to participate?

Alice: Well, the purpose of this challenge is to show people that they can be beautiful even if they have a bigger body size than average. My shape is not really “that big,” but it is a little bigger than average avatars. I always have to adjust those prims[^31] to make them bigger in order to fit my avatar. But I want to try an even bigger shape as a statement that I support all types of bodies.

Liliann: As you change your clothes so often, why don’t you make your shape smaller so that you can fit into most clothes easily?

Alice: I thought of doing that, but it doesn’t look like me. I don’t want a body that doesn’t represent me.

[^30]: A blogger challenge is a competition whereby interested bloggers try to create a certain kind of look for their avatars.

[^31]: A prim is a 3D object that can be attached to an avatar. In order to make realistic-looking clothes, designers use a sculpted prim, created in a 3D modeling program, to represent parts of clothing such as a collar or entire pieces such as a skirt.
Liliann: I understand that. Creating different avatar bodies is also used in teaching about body images. Peggy Sheehy (2008), a middle school teacher, describes her practice of exploring body images through constructing avatars in teen SL. In order to teach students to analyze and contextualize body images presented by media and pop culture, she asked students to create three types of avatars on separate days: avatars resembling their actual appearances as closely as possible; avatars resembling the media’s representation of perfect beauty; and avatars with the opposite gender to their own that also represented the media’s standards for beauty. Sheehy found that her students generated in-depth discussions that would have been difficult to duplicate using traditional media education. The decision-making that goes into shaping and dressing an avatar and the embodied experience of using an avatar to perform identity coalesce into a unique phenomenon. Sheehy stated that in a traditional class it is easy for students to discuss their feelings about the media, but difficult to talk about how the body images affect them personally. The embodied experience that avatars afford helps students construct a more subtle analysis of their personal relationships to the ideal body images so ubiquitous in the media. Thus, dialogue crucial to understanding the self, particularly the self as it exists in society and as it is constructed societally, takes place.

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32 Teen Second Life closed in January 2011, and Linden Labs transferred teen accounts to Second Life. The minimum age for joining Second Life has been lowered to 16. Teenagers as young as 13, though, can join Second Life if affiliated with an educational institution or organization; however, they can only stay in the designated parcel associated with their organization.
Alice: Not in the class setting, but in the blogging environment, I am doing two of these tasks frequently, except the gender change one, though some of my peers do that. Liliann: Do you think you have different ideas and feelings about body image after these experiences? Alice: I think that question assumes too much. I don’t know how to measure it. But just like your example, Sheehy’s students were able to discuss their feelings more in depth. I learned about the embodied experience with different bodies, and that is a valuable experience. Changes in how you perceive your body cannot happen overnight. Liliann: You are so right. I guess many educators are eager to know if a tool or method can work immediately. Alice: If there were really such a thing, there would be world peace. :P

**Summary: Medium of Potentiality**

As my dialogue with Alice makes clear, many issues in regard to identity, art, and education are embedded in avatar re/assembling performance. Avatars are used as a medium and also focus discussion in art by many artists. Such art pieces not only show the aesthetic potentiality of this new medium, but also how it connects to questions of body and identity. Artists such as Schomaker and Cárdenas perform their avatars as a way to construct a self that is not easy to achieve in real life. Their self-making through avatar construction enables them to redefine identity. Using an avatar as a medium for art-making adds layers of meaning of identity to the artwork, because artists need to
construct virtual bodies that speak identities. Therefore, creating avatar bodies, for these artists, becomes identity knowledge in the making. Combined with performance, avatar creation can be a powerful way to express ideas and initiate dialogues about racism, sexism, identity, stereotypes, self-worth, and other difficult social issues.

Using avatars as an educational device, students have a chance to step into someone else’s shoes. Discussions about body image, identity, gender, and race become more vivid to the students, as they embody different identities. Such experiences create a learning self that is “in transition and in motion” toward previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 16). That is, students learn to think differently and create new knowledge. Avatars become sites where pedagogy resides and reflexivity happens. Students, seeing their constructed selves in their avatars, can critique and transform themselves through this experience.

Neumark (2005) discusses the relationship between technology and culture as follows (as avatars are a technological and cultural product, I have used avatar in place of the term “technology”):

[An avatar] ... always/already perpetuates the relations that construct it. And when people use, interact with, or connect with [an avatar], it is not some culturally neutral act. Rather they are engaging with “embodied” social relations, and this engagement in turn (re)constructs their subjectivity. (p. 10)

These social relations provide important concepts relevant to understanding the force of using avatars as a medium in both art and education. Learning occurs in between these relations. The potentialities of art-making and knowledge-making through avatar-making
lead me to ask what the experiences of avatar re/assembling are and what these experiences can do to identity and self. How do different kinds of experiences become stories about self-making? In what ways is creating an avatar, art-making? How do these experiences create knowledge in the making and become pedagogical? Through presenting different individuals’ stories, I map\textsuperscript{33} and theorize the experience of avatar re/assembling. In the following chapters, I will present my analysis of the information collected about different avatar creation and embodiment experiences.

\textsuperscript{33} Mapping is a qualitative research method (see Powell, 2010). I use the word, map, here as a metaphor for laying out different avatar re/assembling experiences.
CHAPTER THREE

NEWBIES’ AVATAR CREATION EXPERIENCES

With this chapter, I begin to unfold the different experiences of avatar creation. I first present the method I used for analyzing data and interpreting the findings. This chapter presents the avatar creation experiences of newbies. In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss SL fashion bloggers’ avatar re/assembling experiences and fantasy players’ avatar embodiment experiences, respectively.

I have adopted a case-study approach (see Patton, 2002), which arranges data in terms of the people (subjects) to whom it refers, to organize and report my data because I consider each individual participant as constituting a unique case, and the purpose of qualitative research does not inhere in generalizing the findings. Furthermore, each group in my study presents different experiences of avatar creation; therefore, I analysis them separately. The analysis of qualitative data depends on “working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 159). Patton (2002) stated that there is no recipe for data analysis, but because each qualitative research study is different, “[applying] guidelines requires judgment and creativity” (p. 433). My data analysis is inductive; that is, instead of using an existing framework to filter the data (deductive), I derive my findings from the qualitative data: “Inductive analysis involves discovering

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1 The case-study approach can also organize data around critical incidents or various settings (see Patton, 2002), but in my study, individuals are the basic unit of analysis.
patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). I began with transcribing the interview data. Then, I read and reread the raw data, which included my notes and interview transcriptions, to identify and categorize emerging themes. The data from each group of participants produced different categories. For example, data from the newbie group show that the theme of technology barriers is common to all members of the sample in this group; however, for the blogger and fantasy player group, this theme is not in evidence. Instead, in the blogger group the theme of body shape emerges, whereas this theme is not apparent in either of the other groups. In addition, some of the categories are found across different groups. For instance, both the blogger and fantasy player groups show self-expression as one of the emerging themes. These themes are further divided and organized according to my three frameworks: self-making, art-making, and knowledge-making.

In proposing a distinction between analysis and interpretation, Wolcott (1994, 2001) stated that interpretation is “sensemaking, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, [and] emotion” (2001, p. 33). Denzin (1994) argued that “the methods for making sense of experience are always personal” (p. 501). I interpret my data based on my participant observation experience (i.e., my avatar lens) and the theories that inform my study. Additionally, in performing this task I have drawn on ideas and insights offered by Alice. Our dialogues are, again, presented, as they detail interpretations of the participants’ avatar creation experiences from both my own and Alice’s perspectives.

Before presenting the findings from the newbies’ avatar creation experiences, I present my own experiences and the technological challenges of avatar creation for
newbies. My own experience as a newbie functions as a crossing-checking device with participants’ experiences. This does not mean that I am only comparing similar experiences among the participants. Instead, similar experiences validate the data, but the differences between my and the other participants’ experiences reveal more information about the complexity of avatar creation.

**My Newbie Experience**

Newbie (or noob) is a term that people who are established in Second Life call newcomers. Newbies do not know much about the system and culture of SL. Their avatars tend to look “funny” from an experienced user’s point of view, because many use the avatar provided by the system, sport strange hair, or wear ill-fitting prim\(^2\) clothes, etc. Generally, their avatars do not have detailed design (Bartholl, 2007).

I heard about SL from the news media in 2007, when there was considerable coverage of this newly established world. Knowing very little about SL—only that people are represented here as avatars, I joined out of curiosity. However, from the moment I had chosen a name, the connections between my identity and my avatar began to intrigue me, even though I had not yet taken on a visual form.\(^3\) In her book exploring the new relationship between people and technology, Turkle (2011) described her own experience:

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\(^2\) Prim is the term for objects that attach to an avatar.

\(^3\) A user chooses an avatar only after selecting a name in the SL registration process at the time when I joined.
When I joined Second Life, I was asked to choose a name for my avatar. I have often imagined having a name other than Sherry. It has never seemed quite right. ... But when I finally had the chance to be known as something else, I was confused. It was easy to dislike the name Sherry but not so easy to know what name I wanted. Fortunately, the system offered me choices. Once I chose, I felt relieved. Rachel. Something about this new name appealed. What was it? And with a question that simple, life on the screen became an identity workshop. (p. 212)

Turkle’s experience resonates with mine. My first avatar was named Liliann, which has a similar pronunciation to that of my Chinese given name. I don’t have straightforward feelings about my Chinese name. I have never quite felt comfortable with it. It has an uncommon Chinese character, which many people, including some of my teachers, cannot pronounce correctly. I have even considered changing it. However, when it was time to choose a name for my avatar, I decided on one that is pronounced similarly to my Chinese given name. I cannot give very clear reasons for this choice, except to say that I associated my avatar with my identity.

Some people find mentors in SL and through the mentoring relationship learn and adapt to the culture and system of SL quickly, but I was not one of them. I did not intend to communicate with anyone in SL, and in learning how to use technology, I generally prefer a trial-and-error approach. For these reasons, I did not seek help; therefore, I spent about a year as a noob. I know that there are almost endless ways to adjust an avatar’s

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4 Name changing is not uncommon among Taiwanese people. The law allows each person to change his/her name twice. Most people change their names because they believe that by doing so they can change their luck or even their personalities.
shape, but I did not know much beyond using the sliders in the appearance-editing function menu in the SL program. Though I am not particularly comfortable with my physical body, and though I know I can be whomever I want to be in SL, when I created my avatar, I still wanted it to project certain aspects of my physical body. For example, I gave my avatar big feet and though this decision means that I must adjust almost every pair of shoes I buy, I am happy with it. By giving my avatar big feet, I projected my physical body’s experience onto my avatar: Just as I cannot wear most of the women’s shoes available in Taiwan, my avatar cannot wear most of the shoes available in SL, at least not without adjusting them. Even at this early stage, though I have not actually used it or performed through it, I already thought of my avatar as a sort of mini representation of myself.

My first SL avatar was a default female avatar with long brown hair and a purple top (Figure 3-1), jeans, and sandals. There were only a few choices when I registered my account. Cybergoth, City Chic, Harajuke, Nightclub, and Furry (Figure 3-2) were among the choices, but I chose a female avatar with a “girl-next-door”5 look because I did not like the other avatars’ clothes and appearance. This avatar had a plain look and plain clothes, just like my daily style. That is the reason I chose her. I didn’t even think of using a male avatar.

5 At least that was how the avatar was described on the menu.
I searched the menu in order to change my avatar right away, because the first thing I wanted to do after logging in was to make adjustments. But why did I care about my avatar’s appearance? I had seen many people create avatars just to attend events, such
as a conference, in the virtual world. Their avatars are just their cameras, and they tend
not to change them. But unlike them, I was not participating in the virtual world in order
to attend events. Nor did I have a clear understanding of what SL was about when I
joined. However, either way, people are forced to choose an initial look. And even if the
choice is made quickly, people must still make choices among genders and the looks the
default avatars present.

When opening up the avatar-appearance-editing menu in SL, I saw that the first
option presented for possible adjustment is height. I slid the bar to the maximum to make
my avatar as tall as possible. As the shortest child in my family, I have always wanted to
be taller. Making my avatar tall was a projection of my desire. I also made an obvious
change in regard to skin color. In Eastern Asia, lighter skin tones are considered prettier
than darker ones. Having grown up in Taiwan, therefore, I observed that most girls use
many different skin-lightening products to achieve lighter complexions. Therefore, I
consciously chose a lighter skin tone for my avatar. I chose a beauty standard based on
my own cultural background. Hair is also an important feature that can be changed. I did
not identify with the brown hair, so I changed the hair color to black, my real-life hair
color. Long, straight, jet-black hair is my dream hair style. Although I usually wear jeans,
I quickly swapped the jeans that came with my avatar for a skirt. In this action, I clearly
see my own strong desire to wear a skirt. The female gender identity and the link between
being female and wearing a skirt is strong in my mind. Part of the reason I favor skirts is
because people used to tell me that I looked good in them, especially long ones—perhaps
people thought I looked good because the long skirts hid the shape of my legs. I created a
long white skirt and added long white pants to wear with it. Along with the white skirt and pants, I also created a white long-sleeved blouse. Dressing entirely in white gives me a sense of being pure and clean, like a goddess. My avatar fully embodied my identity and desire in this regard (Figure 3-3). At the beginning of my avatar creation experience, I imposed identity markers on my avatar. My initial experience of avatar construction reflected the difficulty of thinking outside of representation.

![Figure 3-3. The first avatar I created.](image)

My newbie avatar creation experience is likely to be similar to the experiences of others. It is a process through which I carefully selected parts of my identity to display through my avatar. My identity, my body, is known, understood, and experienced through the avatar image (Coleman, 2009). Like an artist, I assembled my avatar with bits and pieces of my identity. My avatar assemblage connects to the past and future and functions as a repository of my body image. It is a souvenir of my identity voyage.
I have been teaching students how to create avatars and how to use them in SL since Fall 2008 in a class titled Visual Culture and Educational Technologies. Specifically, I taught undergraduate art education students about new media technologies in art-making and education. Second Life is one of the projects in the class, although the integration of SL varies somewhat from semester to semester, typically the projects include having the students create their own avatars and new media artwork in SL and/or having them create machinima movies in SL. The purpose of the projects is to introduce the potential of SL as a forum for art education and to provide students with opportunities to reflect on and use cyber visual culture as an art medium. All 76 students whom I taught from 2008 to 2011 were new to SL when they started the class. Although they had not participated in the virtual world before the class, their experience with avatar creation provided me with a basic understanding of how avatar creation triggers reflections about self-identity. In all my classes, most of the students immediately chose avatars that looked like themselves—same gender, same race, same age. Some told me that they had made their avatars’ bodies a little more attractive than their own physical bodies. Some wanted to make a dream self. Yet, even with these modifications, few students created avatars far from their own physical appearance. Of all the 76 students, 10 males and 66 females, only two, both male, created avatars that differed significantly from themselves and from those created by others. More confident with computer technology than were most of the other students, these two students each created an idiosyncratic-looking avatar: a middle-aged fat guy with a big belly and a bald-headed, blue-skinned man-monster without clothes. These two students figured out the system quickly and were able

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6 That is, five semesters of teaching this subject at the time of writing, Spring 2011.
to play with its possibilities more extensively than could the others, many of whom found the system quite challenging. Technology certainly played a role that influenced their choices as newbies. However, the female students who did come to grips with the technology relatively quickly all created ideal versions of themselves or at least better-looking versions based on the inscribed cultural values of beauty to which they had been subjected. Most of them reflected in their journal blog posts that they chose to be some version of themselves because they did not want to pretend to be something other than what they were in this “fake” world. Their reflections indicate that they saw themselves as projecting themselves onto their avatars and that they were aware of how they wanted to be perceived. They learned to think critically about their avatar creation and they quickly detected the lack of diversity in that virtual world. In other words, they were able to critique the stereotypical identity representations in SL. In doing so, they led me to ponder many questions important to my research: Why did they want to be themselves in the virtual world? Why did they tend to choose avatars with the same gender as themselves? Are their critical responses about creating their avatars a momentary awareness for an assignment and grade, or is there a greater impact?

To understand newbie avatar creation and the knowledge that is gained through this experience, I observed and interviewed five newbie participants. The goal was not to find a universal model to describe the initial experience of avatar creation, but to identify common themes and grasp the differences between individuals in regard to how the newbies create their assemblages. The five SL newbie participants were not instructed to think critically about their avatars’ appearance or possible references to social stereotypes
when creating their avatars. They started with the default avatar set provided by SL (Figures 3-4 and 3-5) and were simply asked to create avatars. Of these participants, none of whom had an art background, two were male and three were female. One of the male participants was middle-aged, but the others were between 20 and 30 years old. Similar to my students, they were not necessarily virtual-world users, but two of the female participants were experienced at playing *The Sims*, a video game in which players also create their own avatars. One participant joined the study because he had heard about SL during work from colleagues and two others have heard about SL from the TV show *The Office*. I observed how these participants created their avatars and interviewed them to understand their experiences and choices.

*Figure 3-4. Second Life default avatar set (2008 June–2010 April).*
Figure 3-5. Second Life default avatar set (2010 April–present).

**The Technology Barrier**

People new to SL can find the complexity of the program frustrating. Most of their first impressions in regard to using SL center on negotiating the complications of its interface. For example, although I usually learn how to use new technology quickly, it took me a long time to learn the system by myself. Because of the detailed customization functions, there are many sliders and menus for changing different body features. In addition to the complexity of body-shape adjustments, there are different layers involved in creating individual clothes and sometimes the categories are strangely inaccurate. For example, a pair of jeans is not created in the pants layer but in the underpants layer. Some clothing items require more than one layer to complete; for instance, a tank top can
comprise a shirt layer and a pants layer. And, for a jacket, several objects may need to be worn together (Figure 3-6). This creates confusion, because most people expect to find jeans in the pants layer. However, this assumption is not correct in the default avatar sets, where the jeans are actually created in the underpants layer. For the hair, there are two different systems. There is a system tool for “growing” hair on an avatar’s head; however, most people do not like the outcome, because it looks like a plastic helmet. Another more popular way to create hair is by making a “wig” and attaching it to an avatar’s bald head. But most newbies do not understand the difference, such that some end up wearing both kinds of hair at the same time, which looks very strange to say the least (Figure 3-7). Additionally, the default avatars have a layer of skin with a nice texture and good make-up. However, it is not possible to use the system skin tool to change the make-up, and the color adjustment for the skin is limited, as the skin texture has pre-created color (Figure 3-8). However, when the skin’s “tattoo” texture is removed, it is possible to create skin with the system tool adjustment. It should be noted, though, that skin created in this way is usually criticized as “rough” and “unrealistic” (Figure 3-9). Most experienced users wear skin from the painted textures (Figure 3-10 for comparison). In addition to the skin texture called “tattoo,” there is a tattoo layer presented along with the clothing layers, from which some users create new make-up for existing skin with painted make-up (Figure 3-11). Further, the shoes layer is usually used to change the shape of the avatar’s feet such that prim shoes will fit them, not to change the prim shoes that an avatar is wearing. And, changing an avatar’s body size can result in some object attachments (some clothing) not fitting the avatar (Figure 3-12). Object
attachments include hair, clothing, accessories, and shoes. In order to make clothes fit any avatar, it is necessary to adjust the object size, but most newbies do not know how to do this. Overall, these are some of the most confusing problems newbies are likely to encounter. The complexity of avatar-appearance editing expresses the limits of current SL technology. However, the complicated menu also provides one of the most flexible avatar-editing systems among the virtual worlds.

Figure 3-6. Example of a default avatar’s components. The jeans were created from an underwear layer, and the tank top is from the pants layer. The jacket comprises an item from the jacket layer and five object attachments.
Figure 3-7. Example of an avatar wearing system-grown hair and a wig at the same time.

Figure 3-8. The skin-editing menu. The skin texture is made from tattoos. However, skin color cannot be changed radically using this technique. Compare the left and right pictures for the range of the colors.
Figure 3-9. Extent of changes that can be made to skin color without tattoos. Without skin texture (tattoos), the system skin can be adjusted quite radically.

Figure 3-10. Comparison of system skin and skin created using skin texture.
Figure 3-11. Example of wearing a tattoo layer of make-up on top of a skin texture.

Figure 3-12. Comparison of body shapes. Notice that when the avatar’s body is made bigger, some of the attachments, hair, jacket, belt, and boots, do not fit anymore. It is, therefore, necessary to change the size of these objects so that they fit the bigger avatar.
During the face-to-face observation with my participants, I began by showing them the basic control functions in Second Life; then I explained the appearance-editing system. While they were creating their avatars, they were able to ask technical questions about how to alter their avatars’ appearance. Although this helped them learn about SL more quickly than would have been possible through their own efforts alone, most of the participants still felt that the technology created considerable barriers. In our interview, one of the participants, Betty, repeatedly referred to her frustration and confusion in this regard. Characteristic comments from Betty include the following:

- I was kind of nervous and I got frustrated with it.
- It was confusing for me, and I didn’t know what all the buttons meant. And I kept [thinking] I would forget what I was doing. Like I forgot, and I wanted to backtrack a lot. But again that’s something you learn with time. I’m sure the second time … it will be a lot easier.

Another participant, Oliver, generally agreed, although he was more specific about what could be easier to manipulate: “It takes a little while. I feel like the hair, the skin texture something like that would be nice and a little easier to change it right away.”

However, the system’s complexity did not meet with negative reviews across the board. For example, Cindy, who has experience playing *The Sims*, was “a little bit surprised” at the level of detail possible, considering it unlikely, therefore, that any two avatars would look exactly the same. Tara, another participant who had also played *The Sims*, noted the similarities between that world and SL. She commented that because of the similarities, she had not encountered difficulty functioning in SL and that others

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7 All the participants’ names used in this study are pseudonyms. All quotes from the participants are drawn from my interviews (personal communications). I interviewed Allen on November 11, 2009; Betty on May 23, 2010; Oliver on May 25, 2010; Cindy on May 18, 2010, and Tara on May 25, 2010. I recorded all the interviews using a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed them.
“might take a while to figure out what you want to do.” Tara also had a more favorable view of SL than of *The Sims*; she noted that in the latter “people look really fake like I even thought this person doesn’t look 100% real.”

Betty also thought that there were many possibilities for avatar creation. However, she noted that it would take a long time to learn about them and how to execute them:

> It seems there is a lot you can do. It kind of looks like you can be creative. But I still don’t totally understand how to change everything. And, I feel like if I try to change, like how I exactly want it, it takes a really long time. But I learned a little bit like how to use those buttons on the bottom. I am not very familiar with computers, again. So it’s kind of complicated for me.

This confusion and frustration is familiar to me in terms of my own efforts and in my experiences watching my students start to use SL. The technology barrier means that some people stay with their first efforts using the technology; that is, it constitutes a barrier to their ability to express their ideas fully. Cindy, for example, initially wanted to create white hair for her avatar, but she found that it did not look as she had imagined:

> “Originally, I wanted to have my hair white, but then I feel like it looks kind of old.” She commented that the way the system hair presents white hair is more like aging hair not the cool dyed-white color she wanted. I felt the same way when I created my first avatar. I did not like the hairstyle I had chosen for my avatar in the first instance. I do like long black hair, but I thought this hair looked unnatural and I did not like the bangs. Though I stayed with the system’s long black hair, I was not comfortable with the hair and tried several times to change it. In fact, several months passed before I found out where to get free wigs that were more to my taste. Such limitations—inhering in a lack of information
about what is available and the complexity of the technology—is important to newbies’
choices and any evaluation of what their avatars represent or are trying to represent.

Experimenting and the Technological Limitations of Self-Creation

For newbies, knowing what the technology can do is important. Newbies
experiment with the system to see what they can find and what they can create. For
example, although Oliver chose a male avatar, he looked in the female avatars’ outfit
folder out of a sense of curiosity: “I thought of looking in there just like a shirt or
something. Just to see what would be in [there] and see if it would work.” Thus, the
participants created their avatars through reassembling different body and clothing
pieces.

Not all the options provided by the technology were too difficult to master. For
example, most of the participants were able to use the sliders, designed to make it
possible to change the shape of an avatar almost instantly. The participants said that they
“played” with them in order to adjust body shape. Betty, for example, wanted to make her
avatar a bit taller, so she just “kind of [went] up and down” until she was satisfied with
the adjustment. She also did the same with the eyes through a process of tinkering with
the image: “I didn’t have any preconceived idea of what I want[ed] to look like. I just
experimented.”

While Betty was playing with the slider, I noticed that she had adjusted some of
the sliders to the maximum but then had changed them back to the middle range. Her
reason: “I want[ed] to see what the extremes were.” In fact, Betty did not like how her
avatar looked when she pushed it toward its maximum possible size. The big size and consequently, given the limitations of the system, overly thin avatars shown in Figures 3-4 and 3-5, support Betty’s opinion that such avatars are “not in proportion.” In addition, she stated firmly that she had “never seen anyone with that body type before.” I would have to agree.

Not only is the system limited in terms of the proportions that can be achieved with increasing height, it is also limited in terms of the size (i.e., the apparent weight) that an avatar can have before its clothing becomes problematic (see the righthand image in Figure 3-12). On this point, Tara, commented that “When you make them bigger, the clothes look very weird”; that is, both the object attachments that do not fit automatically, and the clothing layers (texture) stretch in ways that are disproportionate. The limitations of the technology are likely to be both the cause of limited representations in SL and results of social expectations about physical beauty.

However, even though Betty made efforts to experiment, she acknowledged that she had not tried everything because there was, as she put it, “a lot of adjusting.” The experiences that the participants reported expose an important limitation of the technology and, therefore, of this research study. The participants had not participated in virtual-worlds before joining this study, and even though I did not limit the time they could devote to creating their avatars, they became overwhelmed and settled for the production arising from their initial efforts instead of exploring more possibilities. Therefore, their experiences may in some ways not be representative of newbies who have decided to join SL independent of any research. Nevertheless, I recall that I did not
work on my avatar for a long time when I first created her either. It took me several login
times to (temporarily) finish adjusting my first avatar, because I would get tired of either
making errors or going through a series of steps and not achieving a shape or color that
matched my vision. The time commitment necessary to become proficient with the
technology certainly had a great impact on newbie participants’ avatars.

Cindy, too, experimented with the system, although she had a definite image that
she wanted to create. She originally wanted to create an avatar resembling the elf
Galadriel in the trilogy movie *The Lord of the Rings*. However, she quickly found that
realizing this idea was not easy. So she was obliged to rethink her avatar and opted
instead for an idea that would be easier to realize. Although the final result was far from
her original idea, Cindy did manage to keep one aspect: her avatar sported a pair of
pointy ears such as one might see on an elf. I was surprised to learn that she had wanted
to created an avatar resembling Galadriel, because my first avatar, the one dressed
entirely in white, was also based in part on Galadriel’s image. Although I did not think of
being an elf specifically, even though there are many elves in Second Life, her image as a
pure goddess was what I wanted to be. However, similar to Cindy’s experience, I was
unable to create an avatar that resembled Galadriel in the ways I had envisioned. The
only similarity I could achieve was the all-white garb. I do not know where this desire for
Galadriel as an alter ego arises from, but interestingly, Cindy and I are both originally
from Taiwan. The influence of media and pop culture on one’s ideal body image is
shown in both of our choices.
Cindy, though, was the only participant who began with an image in mind. In this regard, Tara’s position typified that of the majority of the participants: “I didn’t have anything in mind until I saw the one, like the first one that I chose and I thought she looked pretty. And I changed her a little bit.”

**Newbies’ Avatar Creations**

![Avatars created by newbie participants.](image)

*Tara, Cindy, Allen, Betty, Oliver*

*Figure 3-13. Avatars created by newbie participants.*

Aside from the limitations of technology, the newbies each created an avatar in accord with their own specific reasons and vision. I took pictures of their avatar creations, as shown in Figure 3-13. Their avatars all used the system default animations, which come with every avatar. Therefore, some of their stances look alike. In fact, they have no
control over posture—the system randomly changes the posture every few seconds. Next, I describe and analyze their avatar creation through a theoretical lens of art-making, knowledge-making, and self-making.

**Allen: Younger and Better-Looking**

In describing his avatar, Allen commented on its “good facial characteristics,” indicating that the avatar was better-looking than himself. He also expressed enthusiasm about his avatar in general: “[When] I see him I go ‘wow it’s pretty cool.’” Moreover, Allen noted that though his avatar was like himself, the avatar “is obviously exaggerated.” Allen was a soft spoken middle-aged man, but his avatar looked much younger. He automatically connected his avatar with his physical body: “I guess automatically you can give yourself a little plastic surgery or whatever without actually doing that. This is important.” What he meant was that through creating an avatar, anyone can have a better-looking body. In fact, although Allen stated that in general he is not overly concerned with body image, he thought the point was to create an attractive avatar: “The game is that you generally want to be attractive when you are able I guess.” He discussed the popularity of online dating and how young people use the Internet for this purpose. So his comment hinted at his idea about the purpose of avatars, and he took the conventional route of creating a good-looking avatar without thinking about challenging this idea.

He also compared avatar creation with image editing through the Photoshop program: “I [have] spent a lot of time Photoshopping, so I was kind of good with this. ... I
was able to play around." He considered the process of modifying and changing an avatar as similar to the process of editing an image—that is, it is necessary to make aesthetic decisions and adjust an image in order to achieve a personal vision. Allen further expressed the notion that creating an avatar is similar to creating art:

> What’s attractive about the picture you look at is the composition, the lighting, the shading, all those things…. some things can be manipulated and some are not…. It’s kind of just like sculpture, I suppose….You [are] kind of perfect and [are] able to learn.

During the process, he spent some time changing his avatar’s clothes in order to find something that he would likely wear in real life. This provides cues about his connection with his avatar. Given that he considered the proper purpose of an avatar as presenting a more attractive version of one’s body, why did he choose to wear everyday clothes that were similar to his own style? Why not wear something gorgeous or completely different from his real-world style? Though he could have chosen to be a non-human, he decided to stay with a human form because that is what he knew: “I suppose a tomato plant or an apple tree, but I just don’t know. ... It doesn’t mean too much to me.” Like most people, he chose a familiar form and gender for his avatar, because he did not relate to or find meaning in other forms. Allen’s understanding of avatars and virtual worlds came from media news reports, which generally give the idea that living in the virtual world is about escaping reality and presenting an idealized self. Allen saw avatar creation as a way to modify the body, thereby becoming more attractive. Although his response to avatar creation was rather conventional, he hinted at the similarities between art-making and avatar-making, which are the decision making and aesthetic choices in
the process. Although he created a body that was more attractive than his physical body, he remade himself through giving his avatar clothing similar to his own.

**Betty: Plain Looks**

Betty considered her avatar to be plain, but she specifically did not want to create an avatar that looked like a model: “I feel like a lot of people do that. I just think it is so fake.” Unlike Allen who described his avatar body as exaggerated, Betty did not want an exaggerated body or a typically attractive shape like that of a model. She wanted an avatar that would be “a little bit kind of unique, maybe kind of plain in a way.” Her notion about faking oneself as a model in the virtual world is a common perception of the avatars in SL, among users and non-users. From her choice, I understood that she connected her avatar with herself, and did not want to present herself in a “fake” way. Preferably, she wanted to be seen as a plain and normal person, and in her view such a choice would actually make her special in SL. She was aware that her avatar would represent her; therefore, she carefully crafted her image. Although she did not think that her avatar either was her or resembled her, her projection of herself onto her avatar is evident.

Dressing up her avatar and trying on different clothing was exciting to her, although she found this enjoyment “weird, because I am not really into fashion in real life.” This is part of the reason she chose to create a female avatar: “I think females are more fun. Like to do their body shape and then to choose their clothing.” Like girls playing with dolls, Betty played dress-up with her avatar, using the opportunity to
experiment with different looks. Is this playful experience her art-making? While she did not reproduce her specific body features on her avatar and did not choose clothes that were similar to her real-life style, her avatar creation was still an example of self-making, because she had a clear idea of how she wanted (plain look) and did not want (model look) to be presented. It is not immediately clear to her what she could learn through this process, but she compared her real life with her virtual experience through her clothing choices.

**Cindy: Unique Body**

Cindy was in agreement with Betty in that she did not want an avatar that looked too normal (like most other avatars in SL), but she did want it to look fashionable. Although she had begun by wanting an avatar that looked like Galadriel, she was unable to realize this idea because of the limitations imposed by the technology. And, though she changed course, she still wanted a unique avatar:

As you can tell, I purposefully made big hands and big feet. It’s kind of my [intention to] distinguish it from normal human beings. ... And the ears, I think I put the ears a little different too. ... but still I don’t want to be ugly, that’s why I kept the face looking nice.

She further explained that the avatar’s face was what others noticed first; therefore, “the face is probably the most important thing.” Her idea of being unique but also pretty reveals that she considered avatars to be a means of self-expression. She could express herself by being unusual, but at the same time, her avatar was, at least, part of a representation of her; therefore, she does not want the avatar to look unattractive.
She created a tall avatar because she considered herself to be too short in real life. In explaining this decision, she laughed at herself: “Maybe it is like compensation.” She also gave her avatar a pink skin, which gave it an unreal appearance. Unlike most people who, if they knew how, would prefer to use a wig, she chose the system tool to create the hair because she thought this made her avatar unusual. She made her avatar’s hair pink as well to go with the skin. Cindy commented that she had chosen a female avatar because she was more familiar with female features, and she noted that her avatar reflected herself in some ways:

If you notice I put muscle on her, because I am sort of athletic, so I didn’t want my avatar to be weak. I wanted her to have muscle and look athletic, so I guess this is just part of my reflection.

After all, although she wanted her avatar to be different, she connected some of her physical body’s features with her avatar. If self-expression is one of the purposes of art-making, her avatar creation could be considered art-making; however, she did not think of this possible perspective on avatar creation. She did, by way of re-creating her physical characteristics, remake herself with this virtual medium.

**Oliver: The Same Body?**

Oliver’s avatar is a version of him: “I don’t see it like totally creating a whole new persona to really live out of Second Life. I see it kind of like another version of your life. So I went for a male character.” That is why in the process, he spent considerable time on the details. He noted that overall his avatar reflected his physical appearance, but he still improved himself in some specific ways. For example, he gave his avatar a thicker neck
and broader shoulders. However, he also added a little body fat to his avatar, because he considered it unnatural to be skinny. In short, he made it more conventionally masculine than himself. He also worked on the avatar so that what he perceived as its initial femininity would be remodeled in a more masculine way: “There are a lot of angles that look very feminine. I was trying to kind of make it a little more like a guy.” Oliver’s list of modifications reads like a want list of someone trying to perfect their appearance through plastic surgery in the physical world:

I wanted to shape the chin a certain way. It’s kind of like a square jaw but not totally just like a square. When I was doing that I thought the nose needed to be a little bigger to match up with it. Because I don’t want part of it to be like oversized one way and another part to be too small and have it look like just a bunch of parts stuck together. I wanted it to look like just one face, because you can’t stretch the eyes really apart. It was really small. You can do extreme things, but I didn’t want it to be extreme. I wanted it to be kind of together.

During the process, he asked me how to add facial hair. Later, he explained:

I usually have some facial hair…. So [I wanted to] put it on an avatar or something like that too…. It helps to set up a more masculine character. Because sometimes [the avatar’s] face shape can still look kind of feminine.

Oliver’s interest was primarily in physical shape. However, in terms of clothes, he wanted sandals as these were his usual footwear. He connected his avatar with his physical body not only through the body shape but also through wearing similar things. His efforts to find the desired footwear failed, though, and he eventually settled on sneakers. Overall, he was satisfied: “I think it is pretty close to me.” Oliver’s avatar creation is a remaking of his physical body. Is his avatar-making akin to creating a self-portrait? Maybe, as his idea of the avatar was not that it presented another persona. Instead, he saw it as a straightforward representation of his own body and clothing style.
His knowledge of his physical body was reflected through this process. However, I did not see new knowledge about his identity being created.

**Tara: The Perfect Body**

Tara imagined a story for her avatar:

She looks cute. She is going to a party or something fun. I don’t really want to create someone who looks like me…. I kind of want to do something different because she looks the complete opposite of me. And, I don’t think it would be fun if I make someone who looks like me. ... I wish I had better hair and I wish I had a tan or things like that. And, I wish I had better clothes. So I kind of keep these [wishes] on her.

She projected her desires onto her avatar and made her avatar an ideal version of herself, even though she admitted that her avatar looked completely opposite to her own physical body. She mentioned that it would not be fun if her avatar were to look like her, which I interpreted as her willingness to explore more possibilities in the virtual world, rather than settling for conventions.

For Tara, the hair was the most important thing to change: “I really want to make mass hair. The thinner hair before was ok, but that’s the thing I think about the most.”

This emphasis resonated with my experience and those of many others from my observations. The first thing I obtained (for free) from a store for my avatar was wig hair. For many SL residents, hair is an important part of self-expression and representation, and it even shows one’s experience level. A few years ago, wearing system-grown hair would have marked an avatar out as a newbie; therefore many people would try to find or buy nice wigs for their avatars.
She also changed her avatar’s clothing. She started with a default avatar wearing a student outfit, but she soon exchanged the student garb for party clothes: “She has a whole different persona. Before, she looked like a school girl, and now it’s like she’s going out to a party. So totally different I think.” This is unlike many other newbie participants who although they changed their avatar’s clothes, combined the original clothes that came with their choice of default avatar with other clothes. However, Tara’s new outfit came from another default avatar that she had not initially chosen. It is interesting that she did not choose to start with that default avatar. She admitted, though, that she made her avatar very thin:

[It’s] probably because I am not thin, so I want her to be. I don’t want her to be like me. I just think the clothes look better like when they are thinner. Even when I play *The Sims*, if you make them really large, the clothes never look good on them.

Her reflection shows that she had started to think about her own body image and found herself not to be sufficiently thin. In addition, she noted the limitations imposed by the technology in that she had noticed that the clothes looked better in small sizes. But in addition to her reflections on making her avatar thin, she observed,

One thing I notice is she looks very muscular and I made her look as minimal, as unmuscular as possible. And she still looks like she is very muscular. So I wish there were more [ways to] change your body type. ... I wish you could just be a little bit of muscle. ... And, I wish the hair almost like you can start with long hair and cut it. ... Her hair is not going to change. It will probably stay perfectly flipped.

In contrast to Oliver, who considered his initial avatar to be too feminine, Tara thought her avatar, even though she tried to adjust it, was too muscular. She also discussed her opinion that changing her avatar’s hair ought to be easier.
Like Betty and Cindy, Tara thought that female avatars were more fun to play with:

I don’t think it would have been fun if I’d made a guy. I mean you can make a very strange-looking guy, but I don’t think guy clothes are fun, and you can’t do hair or anything. You wouldn’t put make-up on a guy usually. So I think it was more fun to create a girl.

Tara’s avatar was a representation of her desired body. Based on her previous experience playing The Sims, she viewed her avatar in a playful way. This playfulness allowed her to explore her desires. New knowledge about herself may have been created in this process.

**Envisioning a Future Body**

Although most of the participants found creating an avatar to be enjoyable, I do not know if any of them continued to explore SL after our interviews. When I asked them if they would come back to explore SL, Allen said that he planned to look around with his avatar in the future if he has time, but all the others felt that participating in the virtual world would take more time than they could spare. That is why some of them had participated in this study; that is, they had heard about SL before, and they wanted to find out more but they wanted guidance in order to do so. I also asked them what they would like to change about their avatars in the future. Cindy commented that “maybe next time I will make like a funny little fat and short male just to be distinguishable.” Betty, who was still very focused on clothing, commented that she wanted her avatar to be “more artistic-looking, more like bohemian, that kind. But I want her to be a person even though she is
in a fairy community.”

Like Betty, Oliver also focused on the clothes—which is to be expected given that he had not focused on this aspect initially. Characteristically, too, Oliver gave a very detailed account of the changes he envisioned for his avatar:

I probably wouldn’t change too much like the appearance or the body shape, but I want to change the clothes eventually. I think I am going to get a pair of sandals and a watch too. I like watches. And I would be interested in finding more clothing options. There are a lot of outfits in there, but I am sure there is a way to get other clothing items. Like other pants or shirts, things like that. I like the clothes they get here, but I’m sure there is other stuff you can get eventually or find.

Tara wanted her avatar to look more realistic: “I think I would like to be a human, but I [would] like to be more creative.” Allen, on the other hand, did not imagine making changes to his avatar, though he did state that he would use it to explore the virtual world. Overall, the participants wished to improve the visual quality and details of their avatars so that they would come closer to meeting their respective visions.

Why Did the Participants Create these Particular Avatars?

Each participant had a different reason, a different idea about self-making, for the kind of avatar he/she had created. This suggests different ideas about self-making. Allen enjoyed the plastic surgery he had given his avatar; Betty preferred a plain-looking avatar over one with model looks because she considered the latter type to be too common. Cindy wanted a unique avatar; therefore, she created one with big hands, pink skin, and pink hair. Oliver’s priority was to create an avatar that would resemble him, though in a

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8 Once a person has joined Second Life, she/he can join communities. Betty chose to join a fairy community.
more masculine way; therefore, he projected many of his physical features onto his avatar and made them more masculine. On the other hand, Tara wished that she could change her own looks, and her avatar reflected those wishes. Although the participants were not asked to connect their own bodies to their avatars, all projected some aspect of their bodies or their wishes to improve their bodies onto their avatars. This might have been because the general understanding about avatars is that they are representations of people in virtual environments. No matter what one’s wishes are, creating an avatar encourages conversations about body image, identity, and desire. In an article in which she talks with her avatar, Ballengee-Morris (2009) revealed how her avatar construction taught her about aging, because her avatar Rain can stay beautiful, never age, and can wear things that Ballengee-Morris cannot wear in real life. She said that “through Rain, I learn about areas of my self that remain silent in RL” (p. 26). These participants’ self-perceptions and their reasons for creating the avatars they did also mirror social expectations. For example, Betty and Tara both thought female avatars would be more fun because they can be dressed up and have more clothes from which to choose. The connection between women and fashion is deeply rooted in most societies. Allen’s view that avatars are supposed to be attractive exposes the possibility that virtual-world participants want to be attractive, thus popular, in this world as much as they and society in general want the same in the real world (White, 2006). Conventional ideas about avatars, that they should be charming and look like models, influenced Allen and Betty in quite opposite ways. When thinking about creating an avatar, Cindy chose an image or character as an ideal that she wanted to become. However, others, Oliver for example, wanted to replicate
their physical bodies. Each participant retained his/her own gender, although they might have had different reasons for doing so. These newbies’ experiences and choices show that even though limited knowledge of the SL technology did compromise their ability to create exactly the avatars they had envisioned, they were still able to produce avatars that broadly met their goals as they related to image and self.

**Newbies’ Avatars and Selves**

Although these participants were new to creating avatars and, therefore, had not performed through their avatars, some could already see the connection between avatar and self. Cindy, for example, thought of her avatar as her baby. She even felt that she needed to take care of it. Allen saw his avatar as taking on a life of its own: “He is getting a life of his own and I am becoming a friend with him I guess.” Further, he stated that,

> I guess at some point it is just like your offspring. They are certainly some of your traces but they are not you. So I mean there are some familiarities in the way you act, but I suppose they are kind of getting some of it on their own.

A comparison of Cindy’s point of view on her avatar and Allen’s point of view on his suggests that women and men may have differences in their ideas about what it means to reproduce the self. Cindy used language indicating that she wanted to take care of her baby (avatar), whereas Allen, though he thought of his avatar as a sort of reproduction of himself, did not express any sense of wanting to care for him.

Allen referred to his avatar in the third person. What he meant was that his avatar included some elements of or references to himself. Allen’s sense that the avatar represented elements of himself is supported by Betty’s view of her avatar. However,
Betty put her sense of a blurred boundary between herself and her avatar more strongly and vividly than did Allen: “It’s me, it’s not me, but something I could be.” Betty’s relationship with her avatar was a complicated one—the possible self she created here—was in some ways attractive to Betty and in other ways repellent:

I guess there is an aspect of her that is attractive in my eyes. But I wouldn’t want to look exactly like her. ... I think, like I said, if I can find the perfect clothing and do the hair exactly how I want it, I will be more connected to [her]. But if she just looks like what I saw on the street and class, then we probably wouldn’t be friends. She looks a little snappy.

However, an emotional connection with an avatar can only be built over time. Both Betty and Tara acknowledged that they did not have specific feelings toward their avatars, because they had not spent much time with them. On this point, Tara commented that “I think it will become [me] if I actually play with it. It didn’t feel like me now, because I was just making her. But if I … look[ed] at her I would probably feel like that was me.” Her last point reminded me of my SL friend Alice, who stares at her avatar’s picture for long periods of time, even though she created a look for her avatar for the sole purpose of taking pictures of it rather than for directly interacting with others. I wonder if she feels that her avatar becomes her through this activity. I remembered, too, that as a young girl, I used to do something quite similar. When I was about 11 years old, I liked an illustrated Japanese-anime-style girl in a comic book. I would stare at illustrations of her for a long time, hoping to become her or at least to become like her. It was a sort of ritual. By gazing at the image, I hoped for some kind of alchemy to transform my physical body. Indeed, researchers have found that when certain manipulations are
performed, people are easily led to perceive other bodies (real or artificial) as their own (Petkova & Ehrsson, 2008). 

Although Tara had not established an emotional attachment to her avatar, she compared the gaming avatar with the SL avatar:

I don’t feel really emotionally attached to it. But it does feel kind of like when I play *The Sims*: I make a character that is never supposed to be me. This is kind of supposed to be me, so I felt a little different, like I was wondering if another is going to talk to me or something, so I was kind of thinking about it as myself.

I recalled that when I first created my avatar, I would use her to try different things in SL. But that is something that I did not do later. For example, I would initially venture into a place where people role play or try on strange props. I did not have strong feelings for my avatar at the beginning. Yet, over time, I came to feel bad if my avatar were in an unfamiliar place, as I was afraid something untoward might happen. I am not sure what I thought might happen, as avatars do not die in SL. This point, I think, though it references my own experience, does suggest how profound the connection can be between people and their avatars, and overall the participants’ connections to their avatars also provide information about how creating avatars is related to self-making.

**Knowledge-Making through Projection and Reflection**

Through creating their avatars, some participants reflected on their actions and choices in relation to matters of identity and body. For example, Tara described her experience as follows:

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* See Chapter 1 for a description of the research.
I created an avatar that looks nothing like me. So [I was] thinking about why I would choose certain things, like what part of me, because obviously I do not have really tan skin and blonde hair and blue eyes. But that’s what everyone sees as beautiful. So even though I don’t look like that, why did I create this girl that looks like that. So I was thinking about that as I made her.

It was important to Tara to create a beautiful avatar. In short, “I feel good because she looks good.” However, she also found the lack of similarity between herself and her avatar to be troubling: “Part of me is wondering maybe it’s not good that I created someone that is totally opposite of me. Maybe I think I am ugly or something.”

Ultimately, Tara reflected on the idea that a less-attractive avatar, one more like herself, would “sadden” her. Tara confronted her dissatisfaction with her own physical body during her avatar creation. There is a conflict between the appearance she gave her avatar and her idea of herself—at least her appearance. The avatar is conventionally beautiful in a way that Tara considered herself not to be. However, she was glad that her avatar was prettier than herself, although she did worry about what her own perception of this disparity indicated about her body image.

Clothing style reflects on body image as well. Betty reflected on her avatar’s clothes thus:

I am not very comfortable in these kinds of clothes. Just it’s not even like what I think I look like. I’m just so used to covering up a little bit more than that. I guess if I saw somebody wear that, I would just think it’s normal. I’m just not used to dressing like that. I’m sure I could get used to it. But I don’t really have a desire to.

She reflected on and compared her real-life dressing style with her avatar’s clothes and thought that she preferred to cover up more because she was not very comfortable with her body shape. Through dressing her avatar (and she reported that she had fun doing
that), she also thought about her real-life clothes. Her lack of desire to dress like her avatar in real life shows that either she was satisfied with her style or she thought that it was better to cover up her body shape. Either way, her reflection shows how she viewed her body.

As well as considering issues relating to body image, Allen contemplated online identity formation. In Allen’s view, creating an avatar and creating a Facebook account have much in common:

I guess I find that similar about Facebook too. ... That’s the sense. That’s the weirdness to it. I mean at what point are you in the continuum? You are not really something else but you are presented in a certain way. There is a degree of your personality [that] you saw in your avatar.

Allen recognized creating an identity as an ongoing project. Also, he noted that creating an avatar or a Facebook profile are just two possible activities, themselves ongoing, among many aspects inhering in that work. In addition, he stated that “I guess sort of you can analyze how much you value. I guess he’s got more hair than me. Do I use this body? No, I don’t really care, but that’s an example of, you know, you evaluate characteristics.”

According to Allen, in creating an avatar, a person can engage in understanding and analyzing his/her own characteristics. This position is close to that stated by Bélisle and Bodur (2010), whose research shows that particular cues of an avatar (i.e., the avatar’s appearance) disclose the personality of the person behind the avatar.

Participants’ reflections also reveal that they were able to see how they had projected their desires onto their avatars and that some saw benefits to this activity. Cindy projected her desires onto her avatar as follows:
You know you are always like, oh, I wish I had bigger eyes and a pretty nose. So I was like oh if I play with this, maybe I can have my dreams come true, although I don’t want to have this kind of ears.

Tara also saw the enjoyment to be derived through working on an avatar:

I think it’s really fun. And later on, if you get more experience on the game and all of a sudden you change yourself. I think it’s fun to create, because in real life, you can’t draw. It’s like you try to change the way you look. ... [You] can change it in seconds and be totally different.

Creating an avatar for Cindy and Tara afforded them an opportunity to change and even perfect themselves.

Oliver, although satisfied with his avatar, reflected that, “I wonder what you do with them now. Or you create them and you get the shape exactly the way you want it. I would just wonder where you go from here.” Although indicating that he was not well versed in the culture of SL, his question struck me: What is the purpose of creating an avatar? Using an image to hide behind or extend the possibility of the body? What does it mean to have a replica of yourself? Is this miniature self like a self-portrait? If so, does using an avatar as a medium for this kind of art-making have different meanings than using, for example, charcoal?

Despite learning about body image, identity, and desire through their reflections, I do not think this one-time experience will have much long-term impact on these participants’ ideas and feelings about their identities and bodies. However, they did raise interesting questions. The participants were undeniably aware that their decisions had meaning, that they arose from the self, and arose from culture and that they expressed the self and expressed culture likewise. Even though most of the participants did not have a preset image in mind when they embarked on the process of creating their avatars, when
they began to make selections, they were generally quite decisive. For example, Tara did not want to create an avatar that looked like her physical self, but Oliver wanted to create himself in miniature. Their decisions to assemble their avatars to look the way that they did reflected their ideas about body image and their knowledge of themselves.

**Do Newbies Learn Anything?**

I had told Alice that after the interviews with the newbies, I would give her a progress report. Although I was a little disappointed that the newbies’ reflections on self-making and avatar-making were not very clear and I wanted to rest, I logged in. Alice was already waiting for me.

Alice: How’s your research going?

Liliann: Well, it is as I expected. People don’t know why they created their avatars. It was like an experiment for them, a little bit like trying a new photo-editing program. I hope they will come back to change their avatars in the future.

Alice: Ha. I don’t think so. From my experience, many newbies don’t return to SL. Unless they discover the creativeness and usefulness of the virtual world, most people are fully occupied with other quick and easy online social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, if they are interested in social networking. A virtual world with difficult-to-learn technology would not become their priority for spending their precious time. Why create an avatar and “hide” behind it to interact with others?

Liliann: So why do you stay?
Alice: I wasn’t too interested in the potentiality of social networking, and I didn’t know what to do with my avatar at first. I didn’t want to spend money on this. However, after seeing others’ avatars on blog sites, I found it interesting to play dress-up. This is like a game for me. An identity game. I read somewhere that a video game engages people because there are goals and feedback rewards (McGonigal, 2011). SL is generally not considered a game because there is no tangible goal set up from the creator of SL. But users create their own goals and game here. I, for one, think my goal is to make as many different looks as possible and mix different clothes from different designers. So I play dress-up games and post my pictures on my blog. People who read my blog or even those I meet in-world tell me that they like my avatar and pictures. That’s the reward I get. So I am motivated to create more looks. I challenge my self to mix items and be creative.

Liliann: Interesting, but I don’t think everyone would be interested in the same things as you.

Alice: I know. Maybe it’s just me. But there are many people like me who also enjoy this game. Did anyone from your research also see the fun part of this game?

Liliann: Well, I suppose. Betty and Tara both think that dressing up their avatar is fun. But I think that means their experience creating avatars just reinforces stereotypes of women, who are meant to be manipulated. But most of the newbies I interviewed do see how their avatars are connected to their identities and how through creating them they manipulate identity. However, it is easy to follow
social expectations and the ready-to-hand technology\textsuperscript{10} to create an avatar. These participants come with preconceptions about avatars and the virtual world. For example, Allen assumed that creating an attractive avatar is a “rule.”

Alice: It is obvious that newbies would not challenge the ready-to-hand technology or their socially constructed ideas of identity and the virtual world to create their avatars. This might be one of the most important things you want to discuss. After all, everyone could have different opinions about avatars and identity, and it is impossible for you to address all of these distinctions. The technology certainly is a factor that has an influence on people’s decisions.

Liliann: I think not only newbies, but oldbies like you (LOL) also are trapped by the technology. Why do you use other designers’ items to assemble your avatar? Why don’t you create your own entirely?

Alice: Ah. That’s a good question. I do want to create something, and sometimes I have created little things, for example, necklaces, gloves, leg warmers. However, I am not really good at 3D modeling and graphic editing, so I am limited in terms of the things I can create. Of course I know many people out there, especially some designers, can create almost anything they want. So, in this limitation, I work with what the whole fashion and technology system provides. Besides, I appreciate other people’s “art” too. Some designers are artists. They make things that blow your mind.

\textsuperscript{10} “Ready-to-hand” is a term that Heidegger (1953/1996) uses to describe a lack of thinking about things (technology). For example, people do not think about a hammer when using it; instead, the hammer becomes a part of the hammering action. The hammer itself is transparent when hammering. Here, newbies did not thoughtfully assess the technology, but just used whatever they had to create their avatars.
Liliann: Yes, it is interesting that some—not only my participants, but also my students—think that creating an avatar is like creating artwork. I guess there is a mental activity in this that is close to art creation.\footnote{For example, Allen thinks that modifying his avatar is similar to photo editing and sculpture.}

Alice: Maybe, but there is more than that. Your newbie participants have not performed through their avatars (yet). Although I don’t interact with others too much and I don’t role play, in some way, I think of dressing up my avatar as a performance. Like performing a ritual for myself. Maybe, celebrating my identities.

Liliann: Do you think you re-create yourself through the ritual?

Alice: That’s an interesting metaphor. This makes me think of some ancient rituals, such as in Hinduism practiced by Sadhus, which were performed for the purpose of rebirth after death. Anyway, avatar creation and these rituals are different things, but I do see this ritual (avatar creation) as a way to symbolize the emergence of a different self, just like rituals are symbolic of something. Do you find anything similar in your research?

Liliann: Do you mean emerge and so participate in remaking the self? If following their desires or re-creating their body features is to remake themselves, the remaking of the self depends on knowledge about the technology.

Alice: But why do they want to remake themselves or their bodies? Just because this technology allows them to? I think in order to get to the point that avatar creation is meaningful (or not) to them, you need to find out what they learned from doing it.
Liliann: It is difficult to measure their learning. But their reflections do provide evidence that this process forces them to think about body image and identity, and even reflect on conventional ideas about avatar images.

Alice: Then, cheer up. I think you have found some value in avatar creation. Don’t be frustrated. Your goal is not to find out everything.

Liliann: Thank you. :-}
CHAPTER FOUR
FASHION BLOGGERS’ AVATAR RE/ASSEMBLING

The basic setting of many virtual worlds, e.g., Second Life (SL), simulates the physical world,¹ and virtual-fashion systems generally replicate the fashion mores and conventions of the physical world. In Western society, at least, clothing is strongly connected to self-expression and identity construction. In this regard, designer clothing expresses social status. However, the purchase and wearing of any clothing has socio-cultural meanings that inhere in complicated relationships among price, quality, design, and aspirations—relationships that hold for both those who dress in mainstream styles and those who dress in alternative styles, punk, for example. If avatars are our virtual bodies, then virtual fashion must play an important role in the making of our online selves.

Yet, so much more than clothing goes into an identity represented by an avatar. Every body part and attribute can be customized in SL: eyes, skin, hair, body shape, and even gender constitute fashion accessories. Changing one’s body shape or skin color is much easier in a virtual world than in physical life. In the hyper-real culture of 3D virtual environments, the body representations of avatars have taken on a new importance. That is, identities are re/assembled online through the process of donning and frequently changing clothes and accessories, including body parts.

¹ Although users can create different world settings and play, operate, function, or work according to the imagination of each, most choose to play in worlds that simulate the conventional real world.
This chapter presents SL fashion bloggers’ experiences re/assembling their avatars. Before presenting my findings from the SL fashion-blogger participants, however, I discuss my quest to understand the meaning(s) of virtual fashion in terms of apprehending the relationships between clothing, body, and identity. I also provide background information about the SL fashion industry.

My Quest to Understand Virtual Fashion

Before I relate the stories of the fashion bloggers, I want to discuss how I came to know about SL fashion and thereby provide background information about myself as a researcher. I do not consider myself to be a fashionable person in real life. Indeed, some of my friends tell me my clothing is “boring.” I spent two years in SL without changing my avatar’s clothes or even buying anything. However, I came to know about this world’s fashion industry because I happened to see an SL fashion magazine online. I considered it merely a simulation of real-life fashion magazines characterized by prevailing standards of Western beauty and a dearth of representations of different ethnic groups, and populated with images of hypersexualized females and stereotypical representations of gender. I criticized such practices through the lens of feminist critical theory. In my attempt to create a gender-ambiguous avatar (Liao, 2008a), I was confronted with SL’s limitations in regard to manipulating representations. Some scholars also draw on critical theories in order to critique the visual representations in SL
(Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009; Vander Valk, 2008). However, this approach does not consider the creativity of the avatar creation process. And, as jagodzinski (2010) has argued, one of the drawbacks of visual culture art education is that it ignores the bodily affect between the object and the spectator. In other words, bodily affect constitutes our feelings and our feelings can drive our actions. I began to see limitations in taking an approach based on critical theory as I experienced a contradiction between my critical eyes and my desire—a contradiction that was only amplified through my participation in SL fashion.

Sometimes, I read news blogs about SL to stay updated with the community. One day, a post on a news blog caught my attention. The post was about how to dress casually in SL. One of the looks shown was a grandma-style sweater (Figure 4-1). The sweater gave me a very comfortable feeling. It also reminded me of my grandmother who had taught me how to hand-wash my sweaters. I decided to find out where the sweater could be purchased. There was no direct link to the store in SL in the blog post, so I did a Google search and found some fashion blogs. This was my introduction to SL fashion blogs, and I have been reading them ever since. I eventually bought this sweater and another sweater in the store—my very first clothing purchases in SL. Neither sweater was gorgeous or sexy, but something made me want to own and wear them. In the course of

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2 Here critical theories refer to broader theories concerning social change through the approach of social criticism. Based on post-structuralist feminist theories, Dumitrica and Gaden’s (2009) paper articulates the position that gender is performed and that in the virtual world such performance is influenced by the embedded social and technical constructs of the virtual environment. They observe that stereotypical representations of the gender binary can be naturalized in the infrastructure of the virtual world. And, they argue further that the virtual world is not necessarily a place of empowerment, that it can also be a place that perpetuates stereotypes. Vander Valk’s (2008) article is based on critical pedagogy. He, too, points out that the virtual world is not a neutral venue for identity construction. Instead, gender and racial stereotypes are reinforced. Therefore, he calls for a critical approach to the use of the virtual world in education and a critical engagement of these issues in teaching.
time, I found a fashion feed where hundreds of SL fashion blogs are syndicated, and I have continued to read these blogs from time to time.

Figure 4-1. My avatar wearing the sweater made by Eko Strom.

SL, for me, is not a social media. My friend list has fewer names than I have tan fingers. However, Alice (the fashion blogger with whom I converse in Chapters 2 and 3) is on my friend list. I felt a little bit like I knew a celebrity when I added her to my friend list after meeting her for the first time at a treasure-hunting game in SL. Although she is not one of my interviewees, I decided to write about her first in this chapter as a frame for the stories from my interviewees. I don’t know if Alice has a real body, as I only know her as her avatar, but real experiences are generated through her virtual body.

In order to write about Alice, I logged in to SL to check some information and started writing down what I knew about her. A few minutes later, an instant message popped up on my screen, and Alice and I began a conversation.

Liliann: Interesting, I will take a look a little later.

Alice: Virtual fashion has finally gotten attention from the media. I wish they could have shown more pictures. It says virtual fashion helps people to live their dream lives, like owning luxury clothing in this recession. But I think there are more reasons than that. Their pictures are only showing some high-couture fashion, there is a lot more than that.

*After a short silence, she sent another message.*

Alice: What are you busy at?

*Alice keeps sending her messages as if she has to find someone to talk with.*

Liliann: I am thinking about how to write about you.

Alice: Me? Why do you want to tell people about me? I am just a happy and pretty avatar who runs a fashion blog and has some readers, which makes me happy.

Liliann: Well, I think your story about how you mostly spend your time just changing your clothes and making different looks is interesting. Do you want to see the story that I have drafted to talk about you?

Alice: YES, please!

I sent her a notecard with the text I had written so far on it.
Alice: What about me do you think is interesting to mention? I did not see anything special here.

Liliann: Well, this is just to give people a general idea about you. I have not finished yet. I want to use you as an example to say that creating avatar (looks) is like creating self-portraits or story telling. You are not wearing these clothes to create a beautiful image and social status to make friends in this virtual world. But in some sense you make friends through your images on your blog.

Alice: Interesting, I create those looks to record the virtual clothes I have and to make myself happy.
Liliann: So these images say a lot about you because these are your clothing choices and your ideas of mix and match.

Alice: I guess. ... People know I like a cute and girly style. There are not many similar styles in the Western blog circle. I do see a lot of high-couture fashion and (bad-taste) sexy clothes. Mine are more daily-life wear or creative cute styles, which you can find a lot more of in Japanese blogs.

Liliann: Do you really wear these kinds of clothes in your RL?

Alice: Well, not really. I am too old for these. But I would love to if I had them :P. This is the good thing about virtual fashion. You can have many clothes that you cannot have in RL.

Liliann: I just watched a screening of the new *Art 21* program, which introduced Cindy Sherman. I was thinking of you when watching it.

Alice: What about her made you think of me?

Liliann: She has lots of clothes and accessories and she stores them in an organized way. I thought that was similar to how you had lots of clothing in different folders in your inventory. And she uses them to create different looks just like you mix and match different clothes. She uses her body as a medium, canvas, and playground to create images and convey different ideas. I remember reading an article about Cindy Sherman by Knafo (1996), who argues that “Cindy Sherman creates a safe space, akin to a child’s playground, in which to play and work through issues of self-image, identity, gender, and object relations” (p. 158). And your pixel avatar...
body can be seen as your medium to create these images and perhaps work with your identity and creativity.

Alice: Interesting comparison. But I do not think that my images are as meaningful and influential as hers. Mine are more like playing a dress-up game. Like little girls dress up their paper dolls.

Liliann: But you are making something, works that are meaningful to you and to me, because I get inspiration from your images and information about where to find those clothes :P. Nevertheless, don’t you think this is like a visual photo diary of yourself?

Alice: Yes, I recall when I was a little girl, I had many paper dolls. I would also make my own and draw clothes for them. I wish I still had them. The difference is that by dressing up my avatar, I am also dressing up myself. Because I always think of my avatar body as my body. Somehow, I tried to make it represent my RL body in some way, even though there is not much at the end. I found that sometimes I have difficulty fitting clothes to my avatar. Isn’t that interesting, *The New York Times* article says that virtual clothes always fit, but they don’t really, especially the prim parts. It depends on your avatar’s body shape. Sometimes you have to adjust them, but sometimes they still don’t look right after the adjustment.

Liliann: So, don’t you think that there are a lot of things about you worth mentioning when I want to say something about the experience of creating avatars? You create your avatar, but you are also creating yourself, in a sense.
Alice: I agree, my avatar is part of my identity and I am re/creating it over time. But what is the main point you want to make and where do you want to use me as an example?

Liliann: I want to present the different possible ways of looking at the avatar-creating experience and find the things we can learn from this experience. Just as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) follow Spinoza in asking “what the body can do,” I think the things an avatar can do go far beyond the functional description. You are an example of one who creates a virtual body and an embodiment in this experience.

Alice: You mean blogging?

Liliann: Yes, and what you do in this world is to mainly create different looks. You are not only creating your self-portraits, but also extending your body. People see your blog and may know you in this way. They might also learn about your style and decide to dress similarly. So your pictures extend you in some sense. If this is seen as an embodied experience, as many suggest it should be, you are embodied through your avatar (pictures) and this embodiment might be more real for you than your RL experience in some way.

Alice: That is interesting. I think you are like my psychoanalyst. How do you know I value this experience so much?

Liliann: I know you are happy when people comment on your blog and say they like your pictures.
Alice: Yes, even when I just look at the traffic statistics of my blog going up, I am thrilled. I dream about ideas for my next look, but I don’t often think about my RL look. LOL!

Liliann: I know that you are emotionally attached to your avatar body, because I have experienced this myself with my experiment of creating a gender-ambiguous avatar.

Alice: I have read your article on that. I know that many people, including you, criticize the overwhelming number of sexy and idealized avatars. I don’t want to say that being critical and revealing the messages behind these representations is unimportant, but I do think there should be a different way to understand these avatars that can explain my experience. I am not super beautiful and sexy, but I am pretty in some way, and I like my body shape. I do not think that being pretty is wrong. People know what they are doing. They use the virtual world to realize their desires.

Liliann: I think avatars reflect a lot of real-life visual culture. On the Internet, I have seen many pictures and blog postings that try to simulate fashion magazine pictures. There are also virtual-fashion magazines and model agencies in SL. So it is not easy to refrain from applying a critical theory approach to understanding these images.

Alice: But even if this is true, what are you going to do? You know, as I said, some people are taking this opportunity to experience what they are unable to do in RL.

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3 See footnote 2.
Liliann: Well, you are right. That is why I want to interview other bloggers and tell about different experiences. I think it is only through their stories (and yours as well) that we can start to think of a different understanding of avatar creations.

Alice: Good luck to you. I am going to finish my new look. This time, I want to become a deer girl. I just got new antlers from SB [a Second Life store]. They look so cute on me.

I still need to think about how to tell the story of Alice, but her last message stays in my mind. I am distracted by imagining her avatar in the guise of a deer girl image, and I start thinking that I want to have antlers too. My logical brain tells me “No,” that I am not to go shopping in the virtual world. I am, instead, to focus on my work. I log off, even forgetting to say goodbye to her, and I start sorting out my interview data from the SL fashion bloggers. Although I want to write about Alice, her story is fragmented in my memory. Yet, I do think that I may find her story in the fashion bloggers’ narratives.

**Clothing, Body, and Identity**

The relationship between fashion and identity is complex. Using Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Entwistle (2000) explained that “the experience of dress is a subjective act of attending to one’s body and making the body an object of consciousness and [it] is also an act of attention with the body” (p. 30). In the physical world and most of the time, it is through clothing that the body is made an object in public space. Further, clothes are an important way through which the body gains experience and experiences itself. Calefato (2004) stated that “the clothed body expresses the way in which a subject is in
and of the world through his/her aesthetic and physical appearance, his/her relation with other bodies and lived bodily experiences” (p. 2). In the virtual world, clothing also provides avatar body experience, and this is one influence on how avatar identity is formed.

Clothing is an extension of the body (Cixous, 1994; Svendsen, 2006) in that it creates meanings and fashions a status for the body. Clothing constitutes, rewrites, and transfers the shape and expression of the body (Svendsen, 2006). As Entwistle (2000) argued, “human bodies are dressed bodies” (p. 6), and “dress or adornment is one of the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity” (p. 7). In most situations, the virtual body needs clothes, just as the physical body does. As clothing is important in constructing culture and identity in the physical world, virtual clothes are equally important for the same reasons in cyberspace.

Clothing communicates many things about a person: social class, status, gender, profession, taste, and socio-cultural background. One of the most dramatic expressions of this is the representatives of subcultures. For example, in a study of the United Kingdom’s punk subculture of the 1970s, Hebdige (1979) presented a semiotic reading in which style features as a way of constructing group identity. In subcultures, clothing is coded, intentionally communicating, “giv[ing] itself to be read” (p. 101) as transgressing the main culture, and reinforcing the subculture. Hence, it establishes a distinctly differentiated identity of its own. Davis (1992) also viewed clothing as a visual metaphor for communicating subtle things about a wearer, such as his/her “reflexive awareness of what is being ‘said’” (p. 25). Thus, clothing becomes a technology for managing identity.
Second Life Virtual Fashion and Fashion Blogs

In order to discuss fashion and identity in the virtual world, I draw on definitions of fashion as set out by Lipovetsky (1994), Svendsen (2006), Hollander (1993), and Entwistle (2000), all of whom perceive fashion as a systematic operation. The fashion system in SL largely mimics real-life fashion practices, in terms of presenting collections, notions of commerce, and, of course, a focus on producing designs that customers will buy. However, SL fashion diverges from real-life fashion in terms of advertising, sales, and events. A crucial difference is that it is much easier to create a fashion business in SL than in the physical world, as the costs involved in producing and advertising SL fashion are minimal. In fact, some people start businesses without spending any money at all, so that anyone with some computer graphic design and/or 3D-modelling skills can become a fashion designer. Supply and demand, therefore, work differently in the SL context. For example, unlike real-world fashion houses that follow a strict schedule of showings that includes spring, resort, and fall collections, SL designers can market anything at any time. This is partly because buyers of SL fashion live all over the world and because of the fantasy aspect that means a Londoner in the winter may still want to buy summer fashion for her/his avatar. Yet, it is interesting to note that the majority of SL designers follow fashion seasons in the physical world, but with a very important difference: they are less likely to discard styles than are real-world designers as the traditional fashion seasons change. Nor do SL styles sell out, unless the designer has decided to create a limited edition. Overall, though, there can be no doubt that SL fashion, just like real-
world fashion, operates according to rules of business and according to the aesthetic creativity of its designers.

The fashion industry is an important activity in SL and a significant contributor to its economy. It is important to the extent that even avatars with the appearance of fantasy creatures can still wear clothes, as designers of SL fashion also create fantasy or period clothes and most fantasy creatures are anthropoathic—meaning that they stand up like humans do and have body shapes that are similar to those of humans. In fact, *The New York Times* reported that clothing and accessories account for about 40% of SL’s marketplace (La Ferla, 2009). Because the SL program itself provides only limited opportunities for advertising and for disseminating information, SL residents look to other sites on the Internet for their news and information needs.

Although, overall, I refer to the blogs about SL fashion as fashion blogs, these blogs have a range of purposes: some are dedicated entirely to posting information about freebies and/or good deals for bargain hunters, some serve as a news source for new releases from designers, and others focus on displaying personal lookbooks or personal experience with SL fashion. The bloggers I interviewed all primarily use their blogs to

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4 In SL, virtual fashion has become a million-dollar industry. The official Second Life blog reports that the Second Life economy (user-to-user transactions) totaled 567 million US dollars in 2009. The New York Times reported that clothing and accessories account for about 20% of the Second Life economy for the same year (La Ferla, 2009). Therefore, as of 2009, the Second Life fashion industry was worth about 113.4 million US dollars.

5 There is no effective means for advertising using the SL program itself. This is because SL is not like a website in that it cannot be viewed in a linear way. Shops are scattered in SL; therefore, it is not easy to find a shop or find out what items it has for sale. Although some vendors do send out information about their merchandise, this is not very efficient as not everyone checks their messages and some messages get lost during transmission.

6 In real-life fashion, a lookbook is a book that shows the fashions a designer is currently marketing and from which a customer can order. Some people use their blogs as a way to document their different outfits—a sort of historical lookbook.
showcase their own style and to reflect on their fashion experiences in SL. Their blogs are not specifically created for advertising. Yet, their avatars do wear designer clothing, and the bloggers sometimes offer reviews of the designers’ products. Predictably, if the presentation of the avatars is anything to go by, there are more female than male SL fashion bloggers. In addition, some female bloggers have created male avatars in order to present looks designed for men. As many people who are interested in SL fashion read several blogs, there are also several blog feed sites that gather hundreds of SL fashion blogs for the convenience of viewing them on one site. In addition, some individuals and groups post their SL fashion looks in arenas such as Flickr.7

Some SL fashion bloggers have both friendships with designers and a large general readership. Such bloggers often receive free review clothes and accessories from designers, who hope the freebies will bring them some publicity. Blogger groups engage in a related practice, whereby designers join a group in order to distribute their products gratis to bloggers, and bloggers join in order to receive free items that they then review. It seems that for some people the privilege of receiving free products is their key reason for writing a fashion blog. For others, though, especially those whose blogs are established, a relationship with a designer is an important reason for blogging about a new product. However, most bloggers’ central reason for creating a fashion blog inheres in a wish to share their SL experience and fashion style; therefore, most bloggers state in their blogs that they only blog about the fashion that they genuinely appreciate. Regardless, every

7 Flickr (http://www.flickr.com/) is an image-sharing website that allows users to upload their photos or videos and build social networks.
fashion blogger must be highly enthusiastic and well-informed about SL fashion and clothing in order to establish a following.

In sum, fashion in SL is a systematic operation, just like it is in real life. Although the virtual fashion system does not directly relate to the bloggers’ avatars, it is in this context that many bloggers reassemble their avatars. Furthermore, it appears that to a great extent the bloggers’ avatars reflect new releases in the virtual fashion arena. Therefore, no matter the reason for assembling an avatar, be it for self-expression and/or business purposes, the influence of the virtual fashion system is evident.

**Fashion Bloggers’ Identity Re/assembling**

SL fashion bloggers are users of SL who blog about their fashion practices and consistently change their avatars/looks. They create avatar body images that circulate on the Internet and embody the visual culture of virtual worlds. I interviewed five fashion bloggers in order to understand their experiences reassembling their avatars. The interviews were semi-structured. I asked questions regarding their experiences of and thoughts about avatar reassembling and their fashion-blogging practices; however, the interviews also had an open-ended element, as I asked follow-up questions as necessary (see Appendix E for interview protocols and questions). Most interviews with the individual bloggers took place in SL via text chat, but for two interviews, I actually talked with the bloggers. I found the bloggers through reading fashion feeds, and I selected them because they represent different ways to assemble avatars through fashion and because their blogs express their personal experiences in SL. However, they do not
represent all the styles of SL fashion, nor do they represent all SL bloggers. These bloggers are part of the SL fashion system because they show designers’ new releases and sometimes review products on their blogs. Though each blogger is different in regard to style and experience, they also have some important common ground in that they all embrace and practice “assembling” to a greater extent than do those who merely offer themselves and their blogs as advertising boards. In referring to assembling, I mean that they creatively mix and match clothes from different designers and wear them in ways that express their own ideas and sense of self. As well as interviewing the bloggers, I collected data and images from their blogs and observed the SL fashion system as a whole in order to provide context for the study. These stories are meant to show the different relationships between the physical and the virtual body and to describe how these bloggers construct identities and re/create selves and knowledge about the self through fashion.

**Embodied Becoming: Margarita**

I generally don’t differentiate between “me” and my avatar. “Me” in my offline, real-world sense. My avatar and I share the same experience of being inhabited by my personality, so I truly consider this an extension of myself into another avenue of expression.

—Margarita (personal communication, October 12, 2009)

I only knew Margarita through reading her blog. However, I visited her skybox after she had agreed to be interviewed. This was the first time I had seen her in her avatar

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8 All the quotes (personal communication) from Margarita are drawn from my interview with her on October 12, 2009.
9 A skybox is a living space or house that floats in the sky in SL. Many SL residents build their homes in the sky to gain more privacy and to escape from the ugly and unorganized ground space.
form in SL instead of in her avatar images on her blog. If I were to pick a color to describe her, I would choose orange (Figure 4-2). It is an October color. As Halloween was drawing near, many related products were being created and sold, and Margarita’s avatar was living in an orange Halloween-themed skybox at the time I visited her. She told me that the skybox was a 30 L gacha. However, I felt a sense of her as orange not only because she was surrounded by orange decorations, but also because she wore a pair of orange-rose heels with a matching orange-rose choker, a hat with a pumpkin decoration, and an orange-brown vest and trousers. Her make-up was orange too, both her eye shadow and her lip color. Throughout the interview, we lounged on a giant orange-striped cat-shaped couch. It was a setting that would be hard to achieve in physical life. This setting and my feeling of her as orange gave me a way to understand how she chooses what to wear in constructing her avatar. That is, somehow she constructs her avatar based on real-life seasons and feelings. The real-life influence is strongly embodied in the virtual world. Because of her charming living space, I wanted to live like her in SL. My desire to become her avatar identity was aroused by the material objects she owns, which I realized indicates the role that material objects play in constituting identity. Yet, she told me that her existence in SL is a lonely one. She said, “I am mostly up here in my sky box putting on inventory or photographing.” This is not the first time I have heard that people spend considerable time in SL just playing dress-up.

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10 Gacha is a term that comes from the Japanese word gachapon (ガチャポン), which refers to toys sold randomly via a machine vendor. Buyers do not know in advance which item they will receive when they pay the machine. Gacha machines have become a popular way to sell things in SL. And, 30 L means 30 Linden dollars, which can be exchanged for U.S. dollars and other currencies. The exchange rate varies according to the trade market. On average, 1 U.S. dollar is equal to 260 Linden dollars.
My friend Alice is the same. I wondered, why, when there are so many things a person can do in SL, people emphasize this activity. What is special about it?

![Figure 4-2. Margarita’s Halloween-themed outfit worn during the interview.](image)

I am sure that I recognized Margarita’s avatar immediately when I saw her, because I noticed her shape, which was like that shown in her blog pictures. The shape of the virtual body is important to constructing identity; as she said, “I am ‘me’ in this shape—I’ve used it for over a year now. I don’t feel or look like ‘me’ in any other shape, unless it’s my male shape.” The shape she chose supports her sense of self. It is a base that creates a territory of identity in the virtual world. It is also the “body” of the virtual body. Without a definite shape, an avatar would look like a cloud floating in virtual space.
Margarita’s feeling that her avatar constitutes an extension of herself shows how the boundary of machine and human, real and virtual, is blurred in the culture of simulation, as Turkle (1995) suggested. Her virtual body is her body, and the body is “no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communications with it” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 54). Margarita’s avatar is a means through which she communicates, and it is “never isolated in its activity but always already engaged with the world” (Weiss, 1999, p. 1). And, for Margarita, the way her avatar connects with others is through different fashion styles.

Identity politics creates dress codes (Calefato, 2004), and the dress and style of those codes establish and communicate identity. Margarita uses more styles than do most of the other SL fashion bloggers. I do not know if in real life she would wear the same things as she wears in SL. Corsets, high boots, horns, and tattoos are among the items she has worn. Her style vocabulary extends to Goth, Lolita, and steam punk (Figures 4-3–4-8). Sometimes, I wonder if she creates her styles with the intention of disrupting the mono-standard of beauty presented in many of the other blogs. I would never even consider dressing my avatar in such a way, even though it is the virtual world, so I admire her bravery in combining these different styles. My view of my own identity is defined by the clothing my avatar wears, but Margarita’s different styles make it difficult to define her identity.

The pictures on her blog give the sense that each image could be of a different person. For example, I cannot connect the one pictured in a sexy body suit (Figure 4-3) with the one that looks like a devil (Figure 4-4). In real life, the only people I can think of
who have the opportunity to take on such different appearances are performers such as actors/actressess. From this perspective, her images are performative. Bolt (2004) argued that “performative potential constitutes the power of imaging” (p. 8). Performative, she explained, means that there is a “mutual reflection between objects, images and bodies” (p. 8). She stated that “reality can get into images. Imaging, in turn, can produce real material effects in the world” (p. 8). Margarita’s avatar images are not only her imagination of different selves, but they function to constitute her identity. In other words, she is all of these avatar images.

*Figure 4-3. Margarita’s blog picture 1. Figure 4-4. Margarita’s blog picture 2.*
She tells me that SL fashion gives her “a means to express [her] self artistically through fashion that [she] can’t afford or wear IRL [in the real world].” This seems to be one of the best aspects of SL fashion play. As clothing embodies different social
identities (Calefato, 2004; Entwistle, 2000), there are always some kinds of clothes that one appreciates but does not wear, because of the price, associated social roles, and/or the shape and size of one’s body. SL fashion, for Margarita, provides a medium through which she can explore herself beyond the constraints of the physical world. These fashion items are important to the virtual body because they give rise to embodied feelings. The feelings not only involve a sense of satisfaction at owning things that are hard or even impossible to acquire in physical life, but, in Margarita’s words, there is also a sense of “avatar envy.” For example, she envies her avatar because it has a tattoo that she would like to have. The tattoo, therefore, is no longer just an image in the virtual world; instead, it is a connection between her physical and her virtual body. Her virtual body embodies her desires.

Although her avatar images present many different styles, she does not think they are different identities. She said, “When I create different outfits, I don’t consider my avatar different. I generally stick to a unified shape, the ‘me’ shape. Then I put on different skins, hair, outfits, etc., but it’s all simply dressing up one main avatar.” Thus, although style and clothing construct identity groups in real life (Davis, 1992; Hebdige, 1979), different fashion styles do not necessarily assign different identities in SL, at least not for Margarita. Her avatar re/assembling embodies a single self, but this self does not need to have a fixed way to represent itself except for the shape of the avatar. All real-life identity markers, such as skin and clothes, collapse into a single plane in her avatar re/assembling experience.
As Margarita noted, as well as the variety of styles she creates, she also has a male avatar/shape (Figure 4-7) that she uses from time to time. Male is not her identity, though: “I make sure people know that I am an old mom even in [a] boy avatar.” The male shape, then, is a medium that she uses to present men’s clothes.

Margarita’s fashion style is not easy to define, and it is in this indefinability that she presents aspects of her identity. Although her avatar re/assembling embodies a single self, that self is in the becoming because of her ever-changing styles. The becoming allows her to form new connections with other identities.

Self-Invention: Stella

My avatar is very much an extension of my RL self, so I try to behave in SL as I would in RL. However, when it comes to fashion, obviously some things I wear aren’t very realistic, and I do love dressing up. So in a way, my avatar is sort of a doll, but mostly just me.

—Stella (personal communication, March 22, 2010)  

Whether as an extension of herself or as a doll, Stella’s avatar identity is deliberately constructed. She gives the impression of being an independent and successful woman. She always creates and arranges her avatar images carefully, and she thinks she tends to overanalyze her work (Figures 4-9 to 4-14). The clothes she wears are all high quality and well designed, which in terms of virtual fashion means that they must have good image quality and be expertly crafted (with matching seams, etc.). Her styles are not

11 All the quotes (personal communication) from Stella are drawn from my interview with her on March 22, 2010.
necessarily high fashion; instead, they are everyday urban styles. The image I have of Stella is of a person continually inventing herself through avatar re/assembling.

The day I visited and interviewed her avatar was bright and sunny—very much in keeping with my impression of her. I could look out the window and see the beautiful water surrounding her house. I expected to find her nicely dressed but in a casual style, just like her avatar images pictured on her blog. She wore a very simple dress and very fashionable boots. I personally did not think the dress and the boots matched, but she may have been in the process of changing her outfit when I arrived. Certainly, creating a coherent outfit is time-consuming, and she confirmed that it takes her at least two hours to construct a look, in part because she chooses each accessory carefully. This time-consuming process seems unavoidable. The images on a blog do not necessary reflect what the blogger really wears in-world to interact with others. I recall Alice telling me that some of the clothes were just “impractical” to wear because they are constructed from too many prims12 or they will not work with the AO.13 Many times, Alice would only wear these clothes for picture taking. Stella also confirms that more than half of the looks she has posted on her blog have never been seen by others on her avatar:

I tend to be very private and quiet in SL, although I do hang out with friends and socialize a fair amount. But, for the most part, the process of creating a look and blogging is very personal, and sometimes not a single person sees me in my look.

12 The 3D object unit that is used to construct clothes or other things in Second Life is called prim. Sometimes, if one wears something with too many prims the result is a lag in the movement and loading time in Second Life.
13 Animation Override (AO) is a set of animations that control avatar movements.
This says a lot about bloggers’ avatar re/assembling for the sake of image-making. Bloggers re/construct their selves on a flat 2D image, which is not unlike how self-portraits are traditionally made.

Unlike Margarita’s avatar, Stella’s avatar represents an image of a person who can be found in the real world. Even though she has many different looks, I can identify the avatar in each image as representing the same person. Real-life standards of beauty and dress codes are clearly reflected in her avatar images.

Figure 4-9. Stella’s blog picture 1.  
Figure 4-10. Stella’s blog picture 2.
In considering her experience, I asked myself if an avatar that is so close to real-life norms of beauty could transform a real-life identity. I did not see any evidence that she engages in a critical examination of the clothes her avatar wears. That is, her fashion and avatar representation appropriate real-life concepts of beauty, and she does not try to
challenge these representations. She noted that, “It’s funny how we tend to look more and
more alike, but I think that’s just a product of the fashion community tending to shift
toward particular designers.” This statement implies that the assembling of an avatar can
be strongly influenced by popular clothing styles. According to Entwistle (2000), dress is
a “situated bodily practice” (p. 39). That is, dress, body, and embodiment provide a valid
account of fashion and identity inasmuch as they emphasize the wearing of clothes as an
embodied activity within a social environment. Avatar identity re/assembling is
unavoidably bounded by the fashion industry.

Her practice appears to center on transferring her real-life identity to the virtual
world, although I do not know what she looks like in real life. Stella talked about her
style and what this process means to her:

I don’t tend to blog too many things that are extravagant. I tend to stick to casual
looks, everyday outfits, which are generally very ME. And I sort of use my blog
as a way for people to get a better sense of who I am.

Stella’s perception that her style of dress is representative of herself connects with the
idea that clothing participates in the creation of “the body as a socially constituted and
situated object” (Entwistle, 2000, p. 12) is managed and disciplined under the operation
of power, and dress is an expression of that lived and embodied experience. Stella’s
avatar re/assembling situates her avatar body within her physical body’s experience, and
her fashion play is an expression of these experiences.

Real-life identity is important to Stella, and one of the ways in which she
embodies her real-life identity is through her clothing styles in SL. Stella, then, moves
seamlessly between real and virtual; there is no inconsistent transition. Her real-life
identity determines how she constructs her virtual identity. Likewise, her virtual-fashion experience affects her real life as well:

I’ve found that I have a better sense of fashion now than I did before. And I tend to be a bit more adventurous in my RL clothing choices. I was very conservative before, but I’ve found that my SL fashion choices have pushed me to make more-creative RL clothing choices.

She does not see her practice in the virtual world as transforming her identity. She views it, instead, as extending her identity into SL. Yet, her avatar re/assembling experience does change her physical self. Thus, there is no visible boundary between the physical and virtual self for her. Her physical and virtual bodies are like a Möbius strip, which “through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another” (Grosz, 1994, p. xii). Her body is extended through her avatar re/assembling, and it is through her avatar that her body and identity become fluid but not fragmented.

This change is the effect of her avatar assemblage. Stella does not escape from her real-life identity; instead, she unproblematically brings her real-life identity into the virtual world and opens up more potential for her real self through a virtual-world self—a process that she considers to be very “therapeutic and personal.”

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggested that assemblage creates territory but also unmakes territory (their term for the latter is “determinantalization”). In this way, the assemblage Stella creates functions to reterritorialize her physical self. At the same time, because of the virtuality of the assemblage, she also deterritorializes her physical self. This is where change happens; in her words, it is a “freedom [that] allows me to really be creative and look in a way that I could never look in RL.” The change is in both
directions. Her real-life identity invents her avatar, but her avatar also re-invents her physical body and identity.

**Avatar Doll as Prosthesis: Leah**

It’s not how I look like in real life, and I kind of think of my avatar like something I can experiment with. Something like the blank canvas that I can try on different clothes. You know, it’s kind of like a doll that I like to put on different colors and patterns and shirts. It’s a canvas for me. It’s more like a doll of sorts.

—Leah (personal communication, April 6, 2010)

The complex relationship between avatar and self can be seen in Leah’s statement. Although she thinks of her avatar as her doll, she also thinks of her avatar as herself: “I am just my self. I don’t role play or anything like that. I’m just myself. I am always myself in terms of what I [my avatar] wear.” In my opinion, Leah is one of the most talented bloggers in terms of her ability to create fashion looks. Her avatar images are usually presented in ways that are similar to fashion photographs in real-life magazines (Figures 4-15 to 4-20). Her avatar look is often dramatic and decorated with many accessories, including a hat, a necklace, and even a cigarette. Her avatar’s shape, however, is unique, and although very thin, like much-criticized real-life models, her avatar’s face is unique among other avatars. She told me that she took her inspiration for her avatar’s shape from real-life Asian models. She confirmed that she is Asian and that her avatar had been part of an SL model agency for a short time. In talking about her

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14 All the quotes (personal communication) from Leah are drawn from my interview with her on April 6, 2010.

15 Many feminist theorists criticize the practice of real-life fashion and media industries of female body representations. Susan Bordo’s (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* is a representative example of these criticism.
experiences with the model agency, she expressed concerns that some model agencies have created a standardized shape (referred to as a “mold”) for their models. She said, “I don’t think it’s right. I think you are stripping identity from somebody when you send them to a mold.” For many, as for Leah, an avatar’s shape is not just an identity marker; it is the basis of the avatar’s identity. And, this is so even though the shape can be changed. What Leah expresses, here, too, is that it is a question of the avatar reflecting free choices rather than being pushed toward a particular appearance. This free choice or agency is an important aspect of avatar identity, and it is related to the concept of self-expression.

*Figure 4-15. Leah’s blog picture 1. Figure 4-16. Leah’s blog picture 2.*
Figure 4-17. Leah’s blog picture 3.  

Figure 4-18. Leah’s blog picture 4.  

Figure 4-19. Leah’s blog picture 5.  

Figure 4-20. Leah’s blog picture 6.
I actually never met Leah in her avatar form. However, as our interview was through Skype, I did get to hear her voice. I had not formed any ideas about what her voice would sound like, but I did think that her sophisticated voice matched her avatar. Leah told me that she has always been interested in fashion:

In real life I’ve always wanted to go into styling as a professional job. And I think this is, at this point in my life, this is kind of the closest that I can get to it. So, you know, I love styling, like I said, in fashion and in real life, and this is kind of a version of that. Like sort of practice for me. So I like to stretch my brain and I like to challenge myself in what I can put together and what I can create, because I love to do this in real life. I love to have a model there or a mannequin so I can style in the store.

This statement definitely explains why she prefers fashion-magazine looks. On the surface, her SL identity appears to differ from her real-life identity; yet, this is not the case. Instead, the former can be seen as a prosthesis through which she can achieve things that are outside the limits of her physical life. Her avatar doll is a part of her that is inseparable from her desire.

Fashion is a way for her to challenge herself and establish her identity in the virtual world. As she said, “It’s all about pushing yourself and about creating new challenges to yourself and to your styling. It’s about stepping outside of your comfort zone.” Although she confirmed that she has never had an identity crisis in real life, she recognized that “the hardest part is finding yourself and really being comfortable with it”; that is, she tries not to be influenced by others in the currents of SL fashion. Her focus is on establishing and enjoying her own style. Fashion styling is her means of enacting identity in SL. Leah stated that in her opinion fashion can also conceal one’s identity. In her view, this is especially true in SL; that is, for her, when people wear the same clothes
as others do or mimic others in other ways, the similarities mean that people lose their identities. I consider her challenge to herself the beginning of becoming because “becoming explodes the ideas about what we are and what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us” (Sotirin, 2005, p. 99). Her explorations of avatar re/assembling challenge her to move from familiar territory to unfamiliar territory that is capable of inducing change. Thus, she started a process of becoming that has the potential of identity transformation. As becoming is always in-between (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), her challenge to herself to become will never end as long as she continues her avatar re/assembling process.

Although she observed that her avatar is like her doll, her avatar is also the embodiment of the process of finding her identity. This process is mediated through her avatar doll/virtual body. As Weiss (1999) suggested that embodiment is intercorporeality, her experience of finding identity through avatar re/assembling consists in a series of interactions between her physical self, her avatar body, and the cultural forces she encounters. This is clearly reflected by Leah’s avatar re/assembling—her finding of identity through changing her fashion style. The (virtual) body is a process for understanding embodied identity (Budgeon, 2003). Leah’s avatar embodies identity not as a fixed object, but as a fluid and ever-changing process. She proudly stated the point as follows:

[It is about] finding your own style and being used to it and being comfortable and proud of it. And getting to that place has been a very pleasant journey for me ... kind of where I am now with blogging and my style and my identity.
**Virtual Body, Real Feelings: Carlie**

I love her! She’s adorable. She’s like a pet to me…. She has the same style, the same features, the same attitude. The only thing different about her is there is no “I can’t.” She always tries something and never gives up. With my avatar in SL, I feel much more comfortable and I don’t feel like I could fail at anything.  
—Carlie (personal communication, March 24, 2010)

Carlie is a talkative girl. With a soft voice, I might add. Carlie, in her avatar form, occasionally swung her petite body\(^{17}\) when she talked to me. I would say that she is a relatively casual blogger. Unlike some bloggers who blog almost every day, from time to time, when her real life is too busy, she takes a break from her blog. She also mainly wears clothing that is casual in style. Wearing a red cardigan with only some of the buttons fastened so that flashes of skin are visible, a pair of green high-waist pants, and loosely laced boots, she looked a little like a tomboy (Figure 4-21) when I met her in-world.

Her avatar skin is from a Japanese designer whose main aesthetic is an Asian girly look. When talking about her skin and shape, she said, “I’m half Japanese and half Trinidadian in real life. I like to represent each of my races. Sometimes Japanese girl. Sometimes I wear black skins. Heh, hence I have to make my lips smaller for these skins.” She adjusts her shape, especially her lips, to fit the different skins she chooses. Each skin design in SL can have its own special make-up effects on various avatar shapes. Wearing different skins can make an avatar look like another avatar even if the

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\(^{16}\) All the quotes (personal communication) from Carlie are drawn from my interview with her on March 24, 2010.

\(^{17}\) Many people’s avatars in SL are much taller than their creators are in real-life terms. Carlie mentioned that her avatar had been referred to as a child avatar because of its short stature. As my avatar was also significantly taller than her avatar during our interview, I consider her avatar to be quite short in comparison with both my avatar and with many others.
shape remains the same. This is especially true for an avatar’s facial features. Therefore, Carlie changes her lip size to make her lips look consistent with the overall facial features she wishes to present. She thinks that changing her shape in SL is like plastic surgery: “It’s an addiction. Plastic surgery on SL for free is what I call it.” SL skin, however, presents a limitation to her: “If I could, I would probably wear one skin all the time I guess. But I really don’t like the black skins. They are not like my skin you know. Like my skin is brown, but it’s not like really dark brown. It’s not like amber tan. It’s like a Caribbean color. I can never find the exact skin that looks like mine in real life.” Her constant skin changes and adjustments to her shape mean that she jumps back and forth between different identities. In this process, she embodies two defining aspects of her real-life identity through her avatar re/assembling practice. The continuing changes in her representation constitute her identity—different aspects of it.

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18 For example, some skins emphasize different lip shapes or present the nose differently. Even changing skin color can make an avatar look quite different, like another person. In a comparison of Figures 4-22 and 4-27, for instance, it is evident that although Carlie did not change her body or face shape, the two different skins give her two distinctly different appearances.
Although it is not a perfect resemblance, Carlie thinks that her avatar is close to her real-life look: “I have smaller eyes. I wear prim lashes, so it’s hard to match up with the small eyes on an avatar. But yes, my height in SL is exactly the same in real life: 5’7”. My hips, bust, waist are all correct, I think … my face shape the same.” When asked why she wants her avatar body to be similar to her real-life body, she explained that a different body shape would portray her as someone she is not. Through her avatar, she becomes the body with which she identifies.

Her blog images (Figures 4-22–4-27) show her as girly but sometimes also boyish. If I didn’t know that she had a two-year-old daughter in real life, I would think she was a teenager because her avatar looks very young, almost like a child in the picture showing her in a T-shirt and shorts (Figure 4-24). Given that she is half Japanese, her
avatar’s appearance makes more sense to me; that is, in Japanese media and culture, images of very young childlike girls dominate visual culture even more so than in Western culture. Each image of her represents more than one identity. She constructed her avatar based on her cultural identity (aesthetics), her life experience, and her knowledge of her body images.

Figure 4-22. Carlie’s blog picture 1.  
Figure 4-23. Carlie’s blog picture 2.
Figure 4-24. Carlie’s blog picture 3.  
Figure 4-25. Carlie’s blog picture 4.  
Figure 4-26. Carlie’s blog picture 5.  
Figure 4-27. Carlie’s blog picture 6.
When talking about why she had started her own blog, Carlie commented that “I couldn’t stand the blogs in SL. They were all high fashion and just ... the same. I thought I could be different and bring my style to SL. Though ... it’s pretty much the same haha.” High fashion gives her a sense of unreality, because it is not what most people wear in real life. She talked about the influences that inspired her styling:

I don’t really get inspiration from, you know, like looking at a real-life fashion magazine. I don’t, I don’t want to do that, because it is not really me. So I just look through my inventory and figure out what I want to wear and what I think is cute to share with the world, the whole Second Life fashion world.

Her style is not easy to define. Just as she constantly changes skins, she has a variety of styles. Style defines her identity. She talked about her style: “SL fashion is just like my RL. I wear [about what] I would wear in real life or what makes me feel comfortable, sexy and unique. That’s my style I guess.” And, this is the case in her real life as well.

She talked about her real-life dress style thus: “I call myself a chameleon, because I really am all over the place with my styles. ... It’s just me coming through my avatar.” She does not have a non-human avatar because she feels that to do so would be to portray herself as something she is not. She thinks that “being real” makes her unique in the virtual world because in her view most people in this arena are play-acting as others: “I’ve met only a handful that enjoy wearing a T-shirt and jeans and look like their RL.” Although there are some things that are not easy to find or own in her real life, she still wears them in SL because she thinks that fashion is a way to be unique: “I would wear big bows on my head if I could find some in irl [in real life].” Therefore, to her, real depends on her feelings not the tangible object. Her avatar is real because there are connections between
her real body and her avatar. Representing a similar dressing style makes her avatar real. Although she thinks that being real is important, she feels a greater emotional connection through her virtual body. “RL is better, but SL gives you more emotional connections.” What she means by emotional connection is that she feels connected to herself and can enjoy a feeling of happiness without feeling herself to be flawed as she does in the real world. So, she is more connected with the virtual body. Her avatar re/assembling does not challenge or change the real, but she does mix the real and the virtual to create a mixed reality. For her, real bodily feelings are created through the virtual body.

Blogging gives Carlie a sense of happiness and accomplishment:

I love blogging, I love people reminding me that my designs are beautiful. I love hearing that they appreciate my blog and they think it’s beautiful. And, I find interesting clothing and my style is, you know, adorable, whatever they want to say. Their compliments make me happy. … With Second Life, I get so many compliments. I found my readers are people that just look at my pictures, and it kind of makes me feel like they like my style and the way I put my outfit together so why not in real life too?... So after that I would start wearing the kind of things I would wear in Second Life. … It has given me a boost to my self-esteem. I guess you would say I was so [self-] conscious because I would blog about it. People would put beautiful comments of how they loved the look or whatever even though this is just a game. … This game has really changed me.

In referring to blogging, Carlie does not just post images on her blog; instead, she is referring to the whole process of choosing clothes for her avatar and designing her style for her pictures. Her avatar self-making has given her a new sense of confidence.

Besides her emotional investment in her avatar re/assembling, she considers the process to be a creative one:

I think one of my biggest reasons why I like blogging is because I like pictures. It is not just like getting dressed up; you have to get your hand in there. I use a tablet for editing photos. It is just like drawing. You know, my inspiration comes from my imagination, and I try to put it into the picture by using objects in Second Life.
I am also an aspiring photographer in real life, so that is my way of making my art because I don’t think I am a very good painter or a drawer. I love to take pictures. So my art, I guess you would say, and my biggest art and the art that I can say I would hang this on the wall and 100 % probably are my pictures both from Second Life and real life.

She compares Second Life photography to real-life photography and thinks them to be equally artistic endeavors. Her blogging process is her art-making process. She further explains that she makes the pictures tell a story. Each story construction is a remaking of the story of herself.

In keeping with statements made by other bloggers, such as Stella and Leah, Carlie considers her avatar re/assembling experience to be very personal:

For me ... to come to this game and have the option of creating a tree or creating clothes or blogging is really a way for me to express myself or it’s like a diary for me. Blogging is different, because it is very personal. It’s me.

Silent Activism through Avatar Image-Making: Brooke

I was a thin AV [avatar] when I came in, because those were all the shapes that were available. But I never really felt comfortable and I never saw “me” in the avatar. When I began to alter my body and make it more appealing to me, then I saw myself. And thus my AV began to take on a life of her own.

—Brooke (personal communication, October 28, 2009)

Among hundreds of SL bloggers, Brooke is one who stands out because of her avatar’s body size and race. Her avatar is an African American with a plus-sized body, which is not very common in the virtual world where everyone can have a Barbie- or Ken-type body. She told me that

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19 All the quotes (personal communication) from Brooke are drawn from my interview with her on October 28, 2009.
I came into SL with the express intent of being “me” just in a cyber world. Like I wouldn’t come in as a White or Asian, I don’t know what that would be like to play that. And the interactions I would get from people might not be genuine to me as the player behind the screen. So I came in as a Black avatar that is plus-sized. To be skinny was to be like the crowd, which I could have done, but I felt like it would be a misrepresentation of who I was. To be honest, if I were to ever meet any of the people on here in the real world, I could feel good about that and not feel like I had lied. The ethnicity piece was far more important to me than body type.

There is a sense of pride in her text. Brooke is confident in being herself. Her avatar is the relocation of her physical body in cyberspace and an embodiment of her honesty.

Her avatar (Figures 4-28 to 4-33) often wears modern urban clothes. Sometimes, she wears very casual clothes, but sometimes she wears gorgeous gowns (Figure 4-30). Like Stella, Brooke has created an avatar that she feels accurately represents the self behind the image. She could be a woman you pass by on a street. She is an everyday person, not a model or a star. In describing her avatar to me, she said, “[Brooke] is very much like me. She is a tad younger, perhaps early 30s, late 20s. She works in SL. She is single and no children. She is plus-sized.” It seems to me that she created a background story for her avatar, and she constructs her avatar based on this story. This is somewhat like the relationship between a director and an actor/actress. However, her relationship with her avatar is more complex than that. Her avatar is not only her “pet,” but also herself and someone she wants to protect, like a mother and child relationship. She said: “I love her. Like a pet or something. LOL. No she is me and I am her. So I am protective of her.”
Figure 4-28. Brooke’s blog picture 1.

Figure 4-29. Brooke’s blog picture 2.

Figure 4-30. Brooke’s blog picture 3.

Figure 4-31. Brooke’s blog picture 4.
Talking about other people’s reactions to her unusual choice, she said that she has had many bad interactions with other avatars in SL: “I have had people be very negative with me regarding my size and my color.” In one incident, which she discussed on her blog, she was publicly criticized with degrading language such as “fugly” and “fat.” She said:

I am questioned all the time about that. And I say what’s wrong with me being “me,” even if it is in another world where I can be “perfect.” They can’t understand WHY I would want to be fat in SL or why I would be Black in SL.

I am not surprised to hear that she has encountered what sounds like more than her fair share of questions and criticism. My own experience with an old and gender-ambiguous avatar also attracted negative commentary (Liao, 2008a). The virtual world reinforces the negative attitudes people have toward difference. Her avatar experience teaches her to think more critically about different viewpoints on body type and race. She further reflected on the virtual world: “If one is not White, tall and thin, it then becomes a struggle for the AV [avatar] to create an identity they [oneself] can connect with.”
explains that it is even difficult to find fashion for an identity that does not belong to “White, tall and thin.” Even finding clothes that fit is difficult. I recall Alice telling me about a news story celebrating clothes in the virtual world because they fit everyone, and telling me that this was not in accord with her own experience in SL. The news is true for avatar shapes that fall within the “normal” range in SL, but not for avatars like Brooke. The challenge, however, becomes a force for Brooke: “that’s why I remain as I am in SL, and remain steeped in fashion.” She intended to challenge and fight within the existing system.

Although she had tried to create an avatar body that would accurately represent her physical body, she encountered constraints. Specifically, she complained about the system sliders for adjusting body shape: “the larger or more to the right the sliders go the more distorted the body features are and it’s not right.” She thinks that is why “either you’re skinny and cute or larger and gross.” Although she is satisfied with her choice of body shape for her avatar, she still “tweaks” her shape often. One reason is that sometimes she needs skinny legs for boots or a longer neck for jewelry. However, such changes are minor and not particularly noticeable. Her shape is her identity. She told me that her friend in SL jokes that if she lost weight they would see her change her avatar’s shape.

In the blogging sphere, her avatar presents a sophisticated and confident image. I admire her being a blogger with a different body type than most people. She said that “my goal is to show those ‘non model’ AVs [avatars], ... that you don’t have to be a certain way or look a certain way to have fun and enjoy SL fashion.” The reason she
started her blog is because she saw that there was a lack of large Black avatars blogging about fashion. Although her style is modern and urban, a popular style among bloggers, she told me that not all designers are happy to see her in their clothing. This is probably why she usually pays for all the things about which she blogs. This is unlike some popular bloggers, who receive free review copies of clothing. Clearly, she does not create her blog for the privilege of receiving freebies. Her blog and her avatars constitute a form of activism.

Brooke has some experiences in modeling in SL. She said:

I didn’t know what I wanted at first. Just a chance to model really. But as time went on it seemed as though even SL was not ready to embrace someone that looked different. Now I see modeling as a chance to break through some of the barriers for larger AVs [avatars].

She further stated that, “SL is not quite as forgiving, LOL. But I am determined to be successful even if it takes time.” In support of this point, she told me a story about her experience in an SL model competition:

One of the organizers said that she purposely included me, because they wanted to show a different body type. Now on the one hand that was good of them to want to have diversity. But then on the other hand, what does that really say. Was I the token fat chick? Token Black chick? I never had a real chance of winning. So really was it a benefit or a hindrance? Now, the feedback from folks during the show was awesome. Many folks were “happy” to see a larger AV [avatar]. ... But in the end, I came in near last in the voting, which was a two-part thing.

Brooke’s experience illustrates how the virtual world reflects the real world and how her avatar is a misfit in the virtual world. Her misfit avatar is her tool for opening dialogues about the dominant images in the virtual world. Through her avatar construction, she is able to challenge those images and offer alternatives. However, this does not mean that she is not restricted to a given identity. Quite the opposite, she is bound by her real-life
identity. Her avatar body is not a way to escape from this identity, but it is a device for resisting other representations that threaten it. The idea that she wants to be herself brings up many questions. Does being herself mean always manifesting the same representation? What does it mean to be oneself in the virtual world? If one has many selves, which self does one represent in the virtual world? Her avatar’s visual representation operates in the categories of identity and stereotypical representation of the body. She does not transform her identity through avatar creation; she reaffirms the identity categories to which she is physically bound. Nevertheless, her experiences provide many learning opportunities about social reality and the ways in which taking action to challenge dominant ideas is possible.

Summary: Self-Making, Art-Making, and Knowledge-Making through Fashion

Each blogger’s experience is different. However, self-making for these bloggers does not consist in transforming their real-life identities into one or more different virtual selves. It consists in how this process allows them to reinvent themselves based on their physical bodies and identities and so connect to other (physical and virtual) bodies and thereby form new assemblages. To understand what it means to conceive of avatar re/assembling as assemblage, we can consider avatar creation as a virtual body image–computer interface–screen–body assemblage. This assemblage not only comprises the avatar’s individual body parts and its clothing, it also includes the computer device on

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20 See Wise’s (2005) example of a mobile phone as a “thumb-key-software-transmission assemblage” (p. 84).
which the avatar is rendered and displayed and the physical body that clicks the keyboard, moves the mouse, and sees the avatar image. It also includes how each body part and piece of clothing comprising the avatar is perceived in the cultural context and the communication experience that the avatar is integral to creating. The outright changes and minor adjustments made to an avatar (re)create (another) territory, but they also deterritorialize the avatar. The in-between in this assemblage inheres in decisions that are always shifting and so always becoming, giving way to, or at least with the potential of yielding to decisions to come. These new assemblages can, in fact, turn back to affect a person’s real-life identity. Margarita does not differentiate between her avatar and herself. Her difficult-to-define fashion style has made her always in the becoming. Stella’s avatar is also herself. There is no boundary between the virtual and the real for her in re/assembling her avatar: her fashion is about self-expression. Leah’s avatar is more like her doll, which she uses to realize her own ideas. Through her fashion, she challenges herself to find and construct her identity. Carlie’s avatar affects her inasmuch as she feels her avatar body should resemble her physical body. Her avatar re/assembling practices change her in a way that brings her a sense of happiness. Brooke constructs her avatar to reflect the truth about her and continuously challenges others’ perspectives on beauty.

Participating in virtual fashion to these bloggers may or may not be the same as re-creating themselves online—some see their avatars as dolls or pets, but others think of their avatars as themselves. Nevertheless, the projection of the self through an avatar body is unavoidable. Clothing for these bloggers is a way to creatively express the self
and to embody their identities, which is very similar to real life. However, the body constructed in the virtual world through avatar re/assembling cannot be seen as representing a specific identity. Instead, a virtual body image is only a slice of the continuum of ongoing identity reassembling. Given that a fashion blogger’s online identity is mediated through ever-changing clothing and sometimes also an ever-changing avatar body, virtual fashion creates an embodied identity experience online. Although it can be argued that using different body images constitutes “identity tourism” (Nakamura, 1999), these fashion bloggers do not consider doing so as an attempt to construct or try out another identity. Rather, their physical and virtual bodies are integrated such that they form an assemblage. And, it is this assemblage that continually constructs and deconstructs identity.

Even though their stories are by no means uniform, there are some striking similarities. They all see the shape of their avatars as an important identity marker. They also think of the process of re/assembling their avatars, in one way or another (depending on their ideas of art), as creating art and of designer clothes as art to wear. All reject the idea that they are living in a fantasy identity in SL; instead, they consider their lives in SL as an aspect of their real-life identities. They construct stories through their avatar bodies. When assembling avatars in order to create their blog pictures, they usually have a vision to achieve. Their avatar body images do not stop functioning after being published. These images are new assemblages that they use to constantly reflect on their own processes, serving as connection points for others to interact with them, and, thereby, create new assemblages.
An avatar’s shape is an important starting point for identity construction in SL. Because it is inevitable that different avatars will wear the same clothes or even the same skin, shape becomes one aspect capable of rendering an avatar unique. Thus, shape embodies a blogger’s identity. It is notable that each blogger, even Margarita, who evinces the most dramatic changes of style, has her own body shape, which she identifies as her virtual body. However, this identity is not unchangeable. For example, Margarita recognizes both her female and male shapes. Yet, shape is a bound identity. It creates a territory and a possible limit for people who recognize their shapes and do not change them (or at least do not change often). Carlie and Brooke both note that they construct their avatars based on their real-life body shapes. Shape is an important thing through which the bloggers stay connected with their physical bodies, because clothes and even skin make-up can be changed. Even when a blogger changes shape, a particular aspect of personality and desire is expressed and that shape for that time offers the basis for identity and a boundary between and yet connection with the blogger’s identity and the arena in which it is functioning.

Some bloggers consider that by creating avatar body images, they are, in fact, creating art. As Stella described it,

I feel like I’m painting a picture. Especially with my photography. I love to showcase as much as I can of this beautiful virtual world, and until I decide to start creating things of my own, my photos and individual style are my art here.

Carlie also considered her avatar creation and photographs of her avatar to be art, because she understood the creation of the pictures to be an art-making process. Brooke’s process of creating her avatar image is like the process an artist goes through to create art. She
said that when constructing her avatar, “like other types of artists,” she usually has a vision that she is striving to realize, and “that vision will often convey something, a message, a feeling, etc.” Besides her artistic process, she also commented that she has gained a knowledge of artistic elements, such as lighting, color, and composition. The process of avatar assembling positions the avatar as a medium. Working with this medium provides these bloggers with a way to engage in what they think as art-making.

Designers’ new creations are usually a source from which the bloggers draw in assembling their avatars. Some see the designers’ work as art; as Stella said, “I love to see designers that put so much work into creating designs to share with us. It’s like wearing their art.” Likewise, in Leah’s words, the designers “have a vision when they make something. And I can see they took inspiration or they took something that they consider art themselves. It is art.” Margarita even considers avatar re/assembling to be a collaborative art. She said, “I think what I do is a complement to what designers do, so it’s maybe collaborative art.” Their collaborative art forms another assemblage that functions on many different levels, including commercialism (they help designers sell their creations), their own consumption (they enjoy owning and wearing designer clothes), and artistic expression (they express their creativity with this medium).

It is important to understand that commercialism, consumption, and artistic expression all have roles in virtual-fashion play. Sometimes, a blogger’s avatar will wear a certain outfit because it is the blogger’s “job” to advertise for the designers. Although these bloggers might not directly (intend to) address identity construction through these avatar body images, the wearing of designer clothes in this environment may turn out to
connect in meaningful ways to other aspects of real-world and SL existence. However, it is beyond the scope of this research to consider this point. For some, the privilege of wearing designer clothing fulfills their desires, whereas others enjoy creating hundreds of looks that cannot easily be achieved in their real lives. Others enjoy wearing pieces of art or creating their own artwork. Their assemblage does not end at the published images. Instead, they connect to other bodies and create new meanings through the viewpoints of others. As Leah said,

if you look at my pictures you can maybe create a story for yourself and I think that’s what I enjoy. Like some people like to take how they want it and they get creative with their own imagination. You know. Why my avatar in that particular sim is wearing that outfit? It’s a guessing game. So I kind of more leave it to the reader than myself.

Despite the differences and similarities of identity construction through avatar re/assembling, these bloggers’ avatar body images all, in some way, represent contemporary ideas of beauty, like those found in real-life fashion magazines. Even though Brooke’s avatar does not have a model shape, the influence of media images, such as pose, can still be found in her images. Does this mean that their ideas about self and identity are unavoidably shaped by the socio-cultural environment they live in? Or, is it possible for virtual fashion to provide a window through which to look into this aspect of identity, that is, a forum for looking at the very socio-cultural forces that define their knowledge of identity?

Bloggers don’t necessarily think critically about the clothes, accessories, or body parts they use to assemble their avatars. Therefore, the body images they produce can be read as simply reproducing real-world fashion and beauty stereotypes. Nevertheless, we
need to remember that a virtual body cannot be separate from a physical body. These body images are slices from identities that cannot easily be defined. Thus, it is important to understand the different processes through which each blogger creates her avatar. Though formed by the very social and political forces that they express, these bloggers’ avatar re/assembling always partakes in creating assemblages with the possibility of offering new perspectives on the body, self, and identity.

**Story Telling through the Virtual Body**

I logged back into SL. Immediately, Alice sent me a link to her new deer-girl look. I took a quick look. She was wearing the deer antlers she had mentioned on her head with a deer fur–printed vest, a long, brown, ethnic-looking dress, and a pair of matching suede boots. She was also holding a deer in her arms as one would hold a baby (I wondered where she found the deer. I wanted one too). In the distant background, a group of deer appeared, completing this pastoral scene. Alice looked adorable, as did the deer.

Liliann: You look cute. What’s the story behind your image? Are you trying to become a deer?

Alice: Thank you. I am not trying to be a deer. Everyone knows this is not a deer avatar. But the antlers are my fashion accessory. Many real-world designers have their models wear antlers on the stage to create a dramatic effect. I took my picture in a forest to present the background place of the story. This is a story about a girl who lives in the forest with deer.
Liliann: Many other bloggers also construct their images with stories, much like an artist’s painting.

Alice: I think this not only makes the image more interesting so that it becomes more popular (I’ve found that I get more readers when my picture has a story), but also satisfies our inner creativity.

Liliann: But I see you as actually becoming a deer. You are not becoming a deer through the mimesis of a deer. Obviously, you still wear human clothes and have a girly face. But, you are becoming a deer through the cuteness the antler offers. You become as adorable as a deer, so there is a qualitative change happening. Moreover, your gender is ambiguous through the antlers that only male deer have.

Alice: I didn’t think that much. This is too confusing to me. I was only creating this look because I got the antlers. Just like painting a picture. I didn’t know what it would become at the beginning.

*I took this last comment to mean that Alice felt I was over-analyzing her work.*

Liliann: LOL. OK, I am not going to confuse you with theories. But maybe you can help me answer some questions I have for my research.

Alice: Sure, I am also interested to know what other fashion bloggers think about their experiences. It must be positive; otherwise, they would not keep doing it. I, for one, value it very much. But I can’t tell you if I have learned anything that you would be interested in. Do I learn about myself? Sometimes. But I already know my body image and that’s why I constructed my avatar base on that. Do I learn about my identity? I know what I like and what I don’t like already. I bring that
into my fashion. But sometimes I feel a lot of potential. I think it is this knowing that there are many possibilities for me, because I keep creating my self-images, that makes me keep doing it.

Liliann: Yes, all of them enjoy the opportunities to reassemble their avatars. But like you said, it is difficult to pin down what they have learned. All of them told me that they learned about PhotoShopping, which is a side benefit. Most of them also said that they bring the styling skill they learn back to their real lives. But in terms of learning about themselves, they expressed that this is a personal process. I think that maybe I should see this process as part of the whole process of identity formation. It is a process that never ends. So it is not like they can learn about their identity or themselves, but it is about having an opportunity to participate in the process in different ways.

Alice: I agree with your viewpoint. I don’t know when I will stop doing this. Maybe until I find something more fun than SL.

Liliann: I found that something about shape is important to bloggers. I know that you don’t change your shape. Why is using the same shape important to you?

Alice: I think for me, the shape is something that people (including myself) can recognize as me. Everything, including skin in SL is an accessory that can be changed. So keeping one thing unchanged becomes a way to identify a person. But sometimes I think this exposes the problem of the virtual world. People want to have an identification in the virtual world. If you don’t know the name of a person, how can you identify her/him? So the visual identification becomes important.
Anyway, I enjoy being this shape. If I didn’t use this shape, I would feel that I was creating a doll. She would not be me.

Liliann: Interesting, many bloggers told me that they bring their real-life identities, shapes, and/or other aspects to their avatars. Why do you want to stay the same if you can be better?

Alice: What do you mean by better? I think better is very subjective. Besides, if there is no base, how do you know if it is better or not? If there is no trace of my real-life identity, how could I enjoy making myself better? Like I said, it would be like creating a doll, but [I would have] no relationship to her.

Liliann: But some people, like those of fantasy players, would like a whole new self, I think.

Alice: Well, I think it depends on people. But in a sense I got a whole new self by remodeling my existing body. I might not have that much money or courage to tear down my house and build a new one, but I am satisfied with my remodeled house.

Liliann: That makes sense. Would you say you are being yourself as an avatar? I heard from many participants that they are just being themselves.

Alice: Being myself? It is hard to say. It also depends on what you mean by yourself. My avatar looks like me, so I am being myself. But I don’t wear fashion clothes in real life like my avatar does, so I am not being myself in this sense. I interact with other avatars like I would interact with people in real life, so I am being myself. I
I am a famous SL fashion blogger, but in real life, I am not a famous person, so I am not being myself. This can go on forever I think. :P

Liliann: But do you mean these all depend on individuals? Then, what’s the point of doing this research if everything “depends.”

Alice: I am not a researcher like you. But I think maybe you want to let others know that there are these different experiences. And they are all valid stories. You can’t say there is one way how bloggers re-create their selves online, because there is no one way.

Liliann: Thanks for your advice. I also found that bloggers think that their art-making is their styling of their avatar and image-making for blogging. Many people think that creating graphics, images, or pictures, etc., everything that is pictorial is art. From my perspective, this is more of a casual art practice. It isn’t necessarily Art.21 For these bloggers, art is more like a modernist’s ideas,22 in which art is a vision and expression. However, I think the artist’s intention is important to Art creation. These bloggers might be creating art, but their intentions are not clearly formed. Although they consider their process to be like art-making, and some of them acknowledge this is their art, they don’t have clear ideas about why they create their art this way.

Alice: You told me some artists use avatars as a medium for creating their art, for us, non-artists, this is our art that we do and look at. I seldom go to a museum or gallery, so this makes me feel close to art. Like the bloggers you are talking about,
I don’t think of myself as an artist, but I do think what I do is artistic. This is not high art or something that would go to a gallery. But it is still a sort of art-making, and in any case ideas of Art vary.

Liliann: I agree with you. I don’t mean to dismiss these bloggers’ ideas of art. I think there is potential for this kind of art-making to become meaningful beyond picture-making. And indeed, I acknowledge that their art-making could have an impact on others because everyone can connect to or interpret their images differently. So although my idea of Art is different from yours or that of these bloggers, I will include all these ideas in my dissertation. I think by recognizing all these different ideas, I might be able to provide a broader perspective on avatar art-making.

Alice: Ha ha, I am so happy that you are going to use my ideas.

Liliann: I think what you mentioned about story telling is another important aspect. Many other bloggers also construct stories for their pictures.

Alice: Like I said, how do you create a painting? There is usually a story behind it. I learned from my art history class about this. But I am not only constructing a story, I am telling people about my story. My avatar is the story. So these are stories of my selves that would not be seen in real life.

Liliann: Thanks for answering my questions. You helped a lot.

Alice: I am glad that being a blogger, I can be of some help for your research. :-}
CHAPTER FIVE

FANTASY PLAYERS’ AVATAR EMBODIMENT

Embodyment through an avatar demands a new way of considering the subject as both within and without the fantasy of desire.

—Angela Thomas (2007, p. 31)

In this chapter, I present my research findings in regard to the experiences of fantasy players. Before introducing fantasy players’ experiences, I present my own experience of embodiment using a fantasy avatar. Next, I introduce fantasy play in Second Life and then compare it to the concept of masquerade.

Fantasy Play and Masquerade

Second Life (SL) is often credited with being an arena in which people can be imaginative and creative. In fact, the slogan of SL is *Your World, Your Imagination*. Although the majority of people choose to be human in this virtual world, another group of people prefer to be something other than human beings.

One reason for the popularity of fantasy avatars in virtual worlds such as SL is the connection between such environments and video games (T. L. Taylor, 2004). Although many people would not agree, some consider SL a game or at least a game environment. Much like massively multiplayer online games (MMO), SL provides an environment for game playing with others. There are many role-playing game communities in SL, such as
vampire, cyberpunk, pirate, historical, and steampunk. Many people who join SL do so having previously played other MMOs, for example, *World of Warcraft*. Most of these MMOs set their stories in imaginative worlds that typically include roles such as elf, warrior, and fantasy creature. Therefore, these roles have also become popular choices for fantasy players in SL. Other popular genres include sci-fi fantasy, cyborg, steampunk, and robots. In addition, anthro (anthropomorphic), also known as *furry* or *tiny*, is popular. The term tiny refers to avatars that are very small. In addition, most tinies have animal forms. Japanese anime is a dominant influence on avatar visual culture in that avatars based on this style have engendered a sizeable sub-culture community, *Neko*, which refers to a hybrid creature: part human and part cat. Movies are also an important influence. For example, all the characters from *Star Wars* and Na’vi from the movie *Avatar* are popular for fan-based play in SL. In addition, characters from comics, cartoons, and video games are gaining popularity.

Although generally speaking, avatars are identity masks, I consider fantasy avatars to be different kinds of masks from human avatars. Unlike human avatars, which unavoidably have features that are comparable to those of our physical bodies, a fantasy avatar enciphers these visual presentations with different codes. Much like masquerade, these avatars provide costumes for our identities. Masquerade is concerned with the possibilities inhering in the disguise and deconstruction of identity. In Tseëlon’s (2001) view, for example, a masquerade reminds us to think about “the nature of identity, the truth of identity, the stability of identity categories and the relationship between the supposed identity and its outward manifestations (or essence and appearance)” (p. 3).
When we put on a mask, we perform its characteristics. Further, Napier (1986) posited the idea that a mask wearer not only transforms the self by taking on other identities, but “disappears, becomes invisible, or temporarily ceases to exist” (p. 16). From this perspective, avatars can be seen as our masks in cyberspace with the possibility of transgressing real-life identities. Masquerade can be a way to resist identity constructed through social–institutional means, because it can deconstruct and transgress the boundaries of those identity categories (Napier, 1986; Tseëlon, 2001). Masking is both the “technology of identity” and a “means of interrogating it; the tool for self-definition and deconstruction” (Tseëlon, 2001, p. 11). As a means of becoming an other, or at least a different version of the self, creating and dressing an avatar also questions the idea of a stable and unified identity. Because masquerade “replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty with reflexivity” (p. 3), it challenges the idea of a clear-cut, stable, and graspable identity.

My Avatar Becomings

Becomings are always specific movements, specific forms of motion and rest, speed and slowness, points and flows of intensity; they are always a multiplicity, the movement or transformation from one “thing” to another that in no way resembles it.

—Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. 173)

Becoming a Snowman

Shortly after I created my first avatar, for the purpose of practicing how to build things in SL, I created a snowman avatar (Figure 5-1) and thereby became a snowman for
a while. The snowman was my way of reacting to the uncertainty of how to present my body. The snowman is genderless (although it is snow “man”). The snowman is styleless. I do not need to worry about my hair or my clothing. I can hide the image of my body in the snowman shell and tell myself that my body is too perfect to be visualized. It is a comfort shell and a substitute for my body image. When I don’t know how to represent myself, I can hide in the snowman. Although making the choice of a snowman instead of other things, such as a stone, is another layer of identity choice, a snowman is a less intense way than say a human body through which to reveal myself. Besides, everyone agrees that a snowman is cute and gives it a smile. The snowman is my attempt to create a space for hiding my folded avatar body.¹

![Snowman Avatar](Figure 5-1. My snowman avatar.)

**Snowman’s Monologue**

I am a snowman avatar, a generic snowman who consists of two snowballs for a body and two black stones for eyes. I have no mouth and no arms, so I can do no harm.

¹ In order to fit my avatar body in the snowman shell, I folded my body shape using a body crasher tool/animation.
I suppose you could reshape me. You could dress me. But with my cold body, you might not want to get close to me. Or do you care about that in the virtual world?

You can travel with me around the world, as long as I don’t melt. But I like to be left alone. I think Liliann is happy hiding inside me. I protect her and give her a body.

I don’t care if I am just a pixel image, because being an avatar, I can transform. Transform to what, you ask? Transform to whatever you want as long as your body is hidden securely.

Becoming a Tiny Rabbit

Besides the snowman avatar, I have tried to become a tiny rabbit (Figure 5-2). I was attracted to this tiny rabbit avatar because it brought to mind childhood memories of playing with a stuffed toy rabbit with my sister such that being a tiny rabbit embodies some aspects of my childhood identity. The rabbit is also a safe shell. It replaces my newbie look with a better-looking avatar. I did not make the rabbit avatar; instead, I bought it from Wynx Whiplash, an SL resident, who created some of the first tiny avatars. Although I knew that many people would have this same avatar, it did not matter to me. The tiny avatar made me feel like part of a different species that included many family members. I felt safe because I belonged to a community of tinies.
Tiny Rabbit’s Monologue

Being a tiny rabbit is not easy, you know. I am supposed to live in the tiny world. Going outside? That is too dangerous. The big avatars might step on me. They would make me look strange by inviting me to sit on one of their chairs. The next thing I’d know there would be a human leg sticking out from my belly. But being a tiny rabbit can also be safer than being a large avatar in some ways. Those people do not assault you because you look like a kid. But there are also some people who don’t like us tinies. Too childish, they think. But as long as I can be cute walking around, it doesn’t bother me that I am so tiny. Clothes? Have you ever seen a rabbit wearing a dress?

Becoming a Jellyfish

I was also a jellyfish queen once (Figure 5-3). I discovered this jellyfish avatar while I was wandering around among hundreds of dragons, animals, and other fantasy
avatars in Grendel’s Children, a store in SL that sells non-human avatars. I was drawn to the jellyfish avatar because of her clean goddess look and the soft, flexible jellyfish metaphor. I have always liked jellyfish. Despite the dangers that jellyfish pose, in my mind they are magical creatures. I always think that its shape is incredible. It is one of the most interesting-looking animals. I used this jellyfish avatar in acting for my machinima *Metamorphosis.* In the machinima, I transform from a human avatar into the jellyfish avatar in search of the disappearing natural environment. The jellyfish is my metaphor for change and flexibility.

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*Figure 5-3. My jellyfish queen avatar.*

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2 The machinima *Metamorphosis* can be seen here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeizlOTVHhQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeizlOTVHhQ)
Jellyfish Queen’s Monologue

As a jellyfish, I have no brain and no blood. As an avatar, I have no organs. But I have a soft body that transforms. I float and go with the current. I am not weak, although my body is soft. Softness is my power and the secret to my survival in the quick-changing ocean.

Becoming a Shy Sheep

I first spotted a furry (or Kemono in Japanese3) bunny avatar in the SL fashion feed. Furry avatars are popular among people who experiment with SL fashion. Being a furry also means that besides an animal head and other body features, such as paws and a tail, the body is much like a human so that it can be dressed up. The furry rabbit avatar was created by toraji Voom, a Japanese clothing designer in SL, whose clothing is popular among fashionistas. The bunny avatar I saw was a gift for a shopping event. I did not get to own the free bunny avatar, because the event had ended before I knew about it. However, the bunny avatar stayed in my mind. I could not resist its cuteness and wanted to own it. When a similar shopping event was held again several months later, the designer made a shy sheep avatar (see Figure 5-4 left) as a give-away. This time, I was able to obtain a furry avatar from the designer. The shy sheep avatar was similar in style to the bunny avatar. I feel the shy sheep avatar is more like my doll than myself, because

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3 As the designer of this avatar is Japanese, she called it a kemono (ケモノ), which means anthropomorphic animal character. It is equal to furry in Western culture.
I can dress up the avatar with different clothes (see Figure 5-4 center and right for examples). The avatar thus becomes a materialized collection of my fantasies and desires.

![Shy Sheep Avatar with Different Clothes](image)

**Figure 5-4.** My shy sheep avatar with hair, shoes, and clothes from different designers.

**Shy Sheep’s Monologue**

*I am as cute as the tinies, although I am not so very tiny. You can call me a furry, but I think I look much better than the other furries. You can play fashion games and dress me up in your favorite clothing styles. Everywhere I go people say I am adorable. No need to be shy anymore. I will always have friendship. You know I can’t be you, but I am always your doll.*
Becoming Cyborg

I spent many hours trying to find the best cyberpunk-style accessories for my avatar (Figure 5-5). I decided to make my avatar a cyborg, because I wanted to visit a cyberpunk sim. Being a cyborg is a cool thing in SL, although it does not enhance your avatar’s abilities; that is, such avatars do not actually have superpowers. You don’t need to be a cyborg in order to fly in SL. So being one is merely a way for me to exercise my imagination. I constructed my cyborg avatar as a character for my story. I know she is not really a cyborg, but I am.

Figure 5-5. My cyborg avatar.
Cyborg’s Monologue

I empower you. With my steel arms and enhanced legs. I am not a superhero, but I power your fantasy play. “What’s the benefit of being a cyborg in SL?” you ask. It is the ability to act as a powerful body. Although you are always already a cyborg, I make this visible. “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway, 1991, p. 181).

Metaphors of Transformation

All the fantasy avatars I tried on are masquerades for my virtual body. They are costumes that I use to disguise myself. I feel my virtual body is inside them. Indeed, technically, these avatars are costumes for shapes that are based on the human form. To create an avatar that does not resemble a human, most of the time, “objects,” which are like costumes, are attached to an avatar’s human shape. For example, along with wearing a skin that is painted to represent a sheep (which is similar to body paint), the sheep’s head is attached to my avatar’s head shaped like that of a human in order to transform my avatar into a sheep avatar (see Figure 5-6 for example).
These avatars also raise questions. Did I transgress my identity with these avatars? Did they expose my inner desires? Was I influenced by pop culture? Did I re-invent my virtual body with these avatars? What is the relationship between these virtual bodies and my physical body? Are they my prosthesis? What do they mean for my identity construction? What do I learn from becoming embodied in these avatars?

My experience of choosing, creating, and being a non-human avatar is a metaphor of transformation. Because fantasy avatars are usually created with narratives in mind, creating a fantasy avatar is like creating stories, and more importantly, performing as the character. Although unlike most fantasy players, I did not inhabit any of my fantasy avatars for long, or engage in fantasy or role play, my fantasy avatars provided me with attachment points that I know I can extend in the future. For example, I can participate in cyberpunk fantasy play with my cyborg avatar. Metaphorically, these fantasy avatars represent my becomings.
Fantasy Players’ Identity Play

I interviewed people who do not have a conventional human avatar (e.g., contemporary human) in order to understand their experiences with their avatars and how their experiences transform their identities. I did not intend to interview all the different kinds of fantasy avatars, because there are thousands of different representations of these avatars. I did not focus on role-playing fantasy players, who “wear/use” their avatars to play a specific “game.” None of the five fantasy players I interviewed identified themselves as role-players. Instead, they became embodied through their fantasy avatars. I met some of the fantasy players I interviewed in-world, and I met others through their personal sites and invited them to participate. I met with each participant in Second Life and interviewed her/him via text chat. These stories of individuals by no means represent all fantasy avatars. But they serve as an inquiry point into some of these experiences.

Endless Becoming: Mo

It’s varying degrees of me. I identify with it as “me” to some extent, and more so in some forms than others, and more so during some forms of interaction than others. As I said, I actually kind of almost felt most “me” as a squirrel for a while. ... I’m trying to “become” those various images in my head :) Sometimes I also have a purpose in mind…. I’m not trying to be beautiful and fashionable, like an rl [real life] model :). It’s about becoming all kinds of “ideal selves” that I’ve been interested in throughout my life, from squirrels to anime characters to guys with green glasses and long coats. I don’t have just one ideal. :) It’s never totally fulfilled!

—Mo (personal communication, October 10, 2009)⁴

⁴ All the quotes (personal communication) from Mo are drawn from my interview with her on October 10, 2009.
I met Mo at a store opening in SL at which the store was giving out free fatpack\(^5\) clothing. Mo’s avatar looked out of place to me, as the store was a contemporary urban women’s clothing store: Mo looks like a female warrior from the pages of a sci-fi comic book (Figure 5-7). So I decided to talk to her. At the beginning, I was a little hesitant, because her avatar’s face looked cool. Surprisingly, though, she was very enthusiastic about talking to me about her different avatars.

![Figure 5-7. Mo in female warrior avatar.](image)

She said that she has numerous avatars and she changes them often, sometimes several times during an SL session. Among the avatars she has used are a tiny squirrel (Figure 5-8) and a faun (Figure 5-9). Sometimes, she even uses a male avatar:

I use male avatars also on occasion. ... I change looks a lot and it just depends on what I feel like playing with. I do use the male avatar less with friends who know

\[^5\text{A fatpack contains every color of the same item. Sometimes there is even a bonus color inside the package. Usually buying a fatpack is cheaper than buying the item in all the available colors.}\]
me mostly as a female avatar though. ... I get inspired to create a certain image in SL, some of those happen to be male.

From her reference to the word “use” in regard to her avatars, I feel that she sees them as tools for achieving her goals. The reasons she gives for using a male avatar confirm my feeling. She creates her avatars based on images she has envisioned. She explained, “for example, with some looks I have in my head it’s an image that appeals to me; for example, I wanted to be a gangster woman in a fedora and pinstripe waistcoat because I just like the idea.” Her different avatars are means through which to materialize different images:

For me it’s a way to realize various images from culture that appeal to me—like I like anime style, I like Goth style, I like 1920s vintage style, I like cute robots and animals and Miyazaki. And also to find new styles and things that appeal to me too—like this outfit, for example. I saw it in the Bare Rose and just thought it was rather beautiful. Also, Neko and things like that are SL-inspired things that I play with. ... It’s fun to me, and satisfying, to create and embody an image. Like dressing up irl [in real life] but way easier and much less limited. I can’t really change my looks irl [in real life] much, and I don’t experiment with dress but in SL I can do those things.

Like many people, she thinks that avatar creation is an opportunity for experimenting and realizing what she cannot do in real life. Additionally, she said, “I’m familiar a little with anime, and sometimes the anime/manga look inspires me. One of the things I did want to try out as an image in SL was an anime-type look.” This explains her look when I saw her in the store. Her avatar is like her canvas on which she draws images in her mind, as well as her playground where she plays with her imagination and desires. Avatar re/assembling offers a way to make art for her. Gender, species, and style all collapse into

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6 Hayao Miyazaki is a Japanese animator and director who has created many popular animations. One of his best-known movies in the US is *Spirited Away* (2001).
7 Bare Rose is a Second Life clothing store.
a single plane in her avatar creation. From this viewpoint, her avatar creation is the creation of an open space and a variety of assemblages.

![Figure 5-8. Mo in tiny squirrel avatar.](image1)

Although she has created many different avatars, she does not participate in role-playing: “I don’t roleplay here. ... My looks affect how I think others will react to me, possibly, but I think apart from that I’m always pretty much the same in how I talk to people.” Given that she does not role-play, it is reasonable to think that she does not try to create other virtual identities.

![Figure 5-9. Mo in faun avatar.](image2)

Her experiences as a male avatar engages her in critical thinking about gender:
I actually find it interesting how it makes me feel when I meet people in a male avatar and they don’t know my rl [real life] gender. I often am using my male avatar around people who know me and know that I have female avatars to[o].

She told a story about being in her male avatar form and encountering another female avatar:

There was one time when I was in Babbage, the steampunk sim, in a male avatar, and some women were talking to me for a while, and one of them took me to see her house and we did some slow dancing. That is more, incidentally, than I would ever do with a male avatar were I in a female avatar :)... It was rather awkward. She knew a friend of mine who called me a she in IM.8 We had a huge long chat about gender in SL after that. I think it’s interesting how there’s often a categorization of having an avatar other than your rl [real life] gender as “deception.”

This experience helped her to reflect on the issue of gender in cyberspace. As she said, having an avatar with a gender that differs from one’s own in real life is considered suspicious—even cheating. This might be because in the early days of cyberspace,9 many males would pretend to be females in order to gain attention, because most Internet users at that time were male. It also reflects the point that although people can be anything they want in cyberspace, when it comes to gender, there is a different standard. She further said that “often I am non human. I have experimented with androgyny in SL also. My male avatars tend to be on the less stereotypically masculine side.” I recalled my experience as a gender-ambiguous avatar (Liao, 2008a), and I asked her how her experiences differ depending on the avatar she uses:

well, I find always that my looks do not impact the experience of SL, as I do it, as much as they might, because I’m often “all dressed up” with nothing much to do with it except regular SL things—chat with friends, shopping, etc. Most of the

8 Instant Message.
9 Cyberspace, the Internet, started to be used by public in the last 1980s and 1990s. Those early adopters of the Internet are more likely to be males who have access to the technology. See Cummings and Kraut (2002) for survey on domesticating the Internet.
people I interact with already know me. When I meet strangers, the avatar I wear affects how they react to me, yes, but I don’t have strangers approach me too often.

Her experience differs from my experience with a gender-ambiguous avatar: whereas she did not seek to interact with people she did not know, I did try to interact with strangers. This further explains that when avatars interact with each other, gender is one of the most important aspects that people want to know about a person. She mentioned that her male avatar is less masculine than the majority of male avatars, and I also observed that many bloggers who have male avatars have made similar choices in this regard. Female bloggers who have this kind of male avatar may have made this choice in order to have female clothes and accessories originally for a female avatar do double duty by using them with a male avatar. But Mo is also pushing the boundary. By using a male avatar, she challenges these “rules.” Unlike bloggers who create a male avatar to show male fashion, she is embodied in her male avatar for the purpose of interacting with others.

Mo has numerous avatars, but she is not equally emotionally invested in each:

Most people have a “base avatar” but I don’t really. I do have a female shape I often use with different images—that feels a little like “me” in SL. But for a long time, the thing that felt closest to “me” in SL was my tiny squirrel avatar! Yes, I feel more emotionally connected to some avatars than others. The tiny squirrel was one of the strongest. Definitely one of my most used. I think one of the reasons why I felt a greater connection to it was that my friends were also being tinies, and so encouraging me in being tiny as part of my identity and what I was doing in SL. It definitely helps me enjoy an image more if my friends are involved in it too and enthusiastic for it.

Most people have a base avatar that they identify as themselves; however, Mo does not fall into this category, though she does identify with her tiny squirrel avatar most strongly. She thinks that being a tiny frees an avatar from judgment in some regards:
“well, it means you’re not judged by normal appearance standards. It’s fun, and there is still some ability to experiment with clothing, etc.” She also reflected on her experience of gender as a tiny:

mostly I was taken to be a male tiny due to not wearing a dress, at least by strangers. ... Although it doesn’t have sexualised connotations like with human avatars :) People assume you’re male unless you have some feminine signs.

Her experience reflects the visual value of avatars and the gender issues discussed above. To be a female, one needs to have extra “signs.” To be a female is not given naturally. It appears that human avatars are judged according to social standards, such as body size and race, but that tiny avatars and other fantasy avatars can be free from these judgments, although issues of gender persist.

Although Mo is a tiny much of the time, when she uses a human avatar, she projects her body image onto it:

I have an issue with body shape in SL, in the sense that I kind of feel that I ought to be presenting myself as more heavily built. When I was a newbie I was quite plump shaped, but as time went on, I succumbed to the pressure to make my avatar thinner. ... This is my female avatar anyhow. My male avatars are skinny :). ... This is a slightly modified anime shape from mamesoundo [an SL store]. I always edit them to be a bit fatter than they start out, though! ... I feel, mostly because of my feminism, that I want to have a less harm[ful] ... conventional body shape (also more like mine irl [in real life]).

However, she also emphasizes that she doesn’t want an avatar that looks like her. The only personal thing that she wants represented in her avatar is body size:

However, it’s one aspect of me that I feel somehow “ought” to be reflected a little, because making myself into an idealised skinny thin shape seems wrong somehow. That’s the only one I can think of, and I think it’s politically as well as personally motivated. To choose to be thin in SL because I can seems like some kind of capitulation.
Mo’s choice is her political statement to question common body size seen in SL. Interestingly, I have heard many people say that they feel guilty representing themselves as super skinny, when this is not a fair description of their physical body. Yet, I have never heard people who represent themselves using avatars that are bigger than they are express guilt about it. I think that this may be because few people pretend to be fat; I have only heard of people doing this as an experiment. After all, fat is considered by most societies but not all as unattractive, and who wants to appear less attractive than they are?

Besides being her statement of body image, creating her avatars satisfies her artistic desires:

I think some of why I want to create images is my kind of artistic desire to realize an image visually like that. ... I have several images, which I experiment with. There are some male looks, which have so far eluded me, which annoys me somewhat! heh.

Her avatar creation also becomes her sketch book of her roleplaying outside of SL:

Recently, I have become incredibly obsessed with online roleplay on a forum outside of Second Life. This gives me the desire to create in-world avatars that look like my roleplay characters. But I get frustrated at not being able to do so very well.

Her avatar creation in this perspective is like a medium to draw illustrations of her fantasy narrative characters. She expresses that she likes to look at her “artwork”: “Heh I like it when I have a look I like enough that I can just stare at my avatar. For me, it means I’m just really satisfied with it aesthetically.” Her avatar gives her a sense of accomplishment, like an artist looking at his/her own finished artwork. This is her art creation.
She considers her avatar to be herself to some extent, more or less so depending on the form. For example, she identifies her tiny squirrel avatar more as herself. But her interest in different images also changes, which is why she keeps changing her avatars:

I certainly think that I go through periods of being interested in this or that image and then moving on. Deciding what avatar to wear is sometimes very difficult actually if I don’t have a new one in mind. Depends where I’m going, too. ... For a while, I was “cutesy Neko guy” as a kind of default out of not having inspiration to be anything else!

Her comment that she uses a Neko avatar as a default when she doesn’t have any inspiration to create others accords with my own experience; that is, sometimes I would put insipid clothes on my avatar (or even myself) because I could not come up with anything better. I feel this provides me a safe cover, like the snowman avatar I used. From this viewpoint, her avatar is also like her clothes or costume with which she masquerades.

She offers this conclusion about her experience:

that it’s been fun, and it’s allowed me to experiment with things I cannot do in real life, and I think [it] helped to expand my tastes somewhat also, as well as satisfying urges I get in rl [real life] to experiment with dress which I am unable to realize! Second Life made me far more open to cuteness :) I’m also more comfortable presenting as female here than I am in most online places. I don’t get harassed here really, I think I’m too weird looking for it. And I found women on here who I like. I think the visuals introduce an interesting element to things that way because people can judge by an avatar your tastes and the kind of person you might be.

I asked why she thinks she is safer and more comfortable to be female in SL than elsewhere, she said:
well, I found that it’s not so easy to get strangers to approach you in SL. In fact I’m most likely to get attention for wearing a non-human avatar, like a tiny definitely does. I got my first friends through wearing a no-face avatar.\textsuperscript{10}

Her experience seems to contradict most people’s ideas that an attractive female avatar will receive attention from others (White, 2006). From my observation, many hyper-sexy female avatars are actually male. Many experienced SL residents avoid interacting with these avatars. Instead, because human avatars constitute the majority of avatars in SL, non-human avatars present identities that are less often met with, and, therefore, more exciting (although not everyone tries non-human avatars, even if they find these forms interesting).

Mo’s avatar re/assembling experience reflects much about the norms and rules in the virtual world, especially the gender aspect. She uses her avatar as a way to realize her ideas and satisfy her artistic desires. She does not change or transform her identity; instead, these avatars are all existing parts of herself. Thus, she does not have a fixed identity, but has endless becomings.

\textbf{Becoming Raphael}

We are all artwork. Your effort and your ideas presented in a virtual body. I have had opportunities to explore self-presentation in ways I never could have in RL. “Hmm, what would it be like to be a foot taller?” I’m seven feet tall. :P in RL I’d bang my head on everything.

—Raphael (personal communication, October 11, 2009)\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} No-face is a character from the Japanese animation movie \textit{Spirited Away} (2001) by director Hayao Miyazaki.
\textsuperscript{11} All the quotes (personal communication) from Raphael are drawn from my interview with him on October 11, 2009.
Raphael is a Neko. I first met him at a club, where he was the D.J. (Figure 5-10). Being a Neko D.J. is not so very remarkable in SL, as there is a huge Neko community; however, being a transgender Neko is very interesting. Raphael told me he has two avatars in SL, by which he means that he has two different accounts not two different avatar appearances in the same account. A female avatar called Risa and the male avatar Raphael:

I had a female avatar before :). When I was in [Risa], I very much enjoyed making an avatar and exploring SL. … [B]ut, [Raphael] is much more home to me. I am transgender in RL, female to male. I transitioned in both worlds :) [Raphael] is much more comfortable to be in for me.

The reason he first created a female avatar was because he was still in the closet at the time: “Being able to make a female avatar was a way to stay in the closet, at least. I didn’t feel constrained in [Risa]-form initially. It was when I came out, that it became uncomfortable for me.” He further explained, “Well, I have transitioned in RL. People used to call me ‘she,’ now they call me ‘he.’ I have changed how I look and dress. Now when people call me she, as [Risa], I feel odd.”

Figure 5-10. Raphael as a D.J.  
Figure 5-11. Raphael during interview.
As Risa, he enjoyed exploring different clothing, hair, and make-up styles. He showed me a picture of Risa, who is also a Neko, saying “We are similar—we wear the same eyes, ears, and a lot of black, heh.” He thinks he chose this style because he wears a lot of black in RL: “I really like how I can be more extreme in SL and explore more-dramatic fashions. It means both self-expression and a chance for fun :).” He also offered this example: “I love wearing my Neko ears and tail. They are a lot of fun, and let me be more fantastical. They let me be what is not possible in real life.” In SL, Neko is usually presented in a grungy or dark style. Raphael likes wearing black, so Neko fits his aesthetic choice.

Raphael is attached to the avatar Raphael: “I feel very attached to this avatar. It makes me happy to walk around as [Raphael]. I like how I look.” He also noted that he performs differently depending on the avatar he is in:

I’m more aggressive in [Risa]-form. Here, in [Raphael], being larger and male, I can be more gentle. People take me more seriously as a male, so I don’t have to
prove myself as much. I don’t think it was conscious in [Risa], but it was as I moved to being [Raphael] as my main “home.” I came across as intimidating. So I chose to be more gentle in my words, and more feminine in my hair and clothes. ... to not scare people :P Big! Scary! Man!

Even with friends, he still senses a difference in his behavior depending on the gender of his form, although it is somewhat lessened: “It’s interesting—it’s somewhat less, but I’m still more dominant as [Risa] and more gentle as [Raphael]. I think it sort of averages out. Small avatar with big personality, or big avatar with retiring personality.” His observation reflects what is often thought of as usual in real-life situations: females have to work harder and/or be more aggressive to be taken seriously. His two avatars give him a chance to experience this difference.

Raphael calls himself “Bishônen (美少年),”12 commenting that it means “a lovely man, a pretty adult male, androgynously masculine.” He enjoys being in his avatar form. He considers it impossible to interact in a virtual space without some kind of form. So he is not confined to only one form. In addition to Neko, sometimes he is a cyborg. He describes how he thinks of himself and conducts himself as Raphael thus:

I like to be creative, do different things, just to be expressive. If I’m feeling in a not-so-good mood, I can express that by dressing more aggressively, wearing weapons. If I’m feeling silly, I can dress to look goofier :). People are oddly respectful of an avatar in weapons :P. Whereas if I wear a dress in [Raphael], people are more disrespectful :p because people are oddly gender conservative, in a world where you can dress in bacon or put on a goldfish avatar. It’s sad, really. I’d love for people to be more open-minded about gender. Not to make fun of gender transgressors.

12 Japanese visual culture is a notable influence on avatar images, and even its terminology is used to describe avatars in the virtual world. Some SL residents use the Japanese term 草食系男子 (herbivorous man) to describe men (male avatars) who are interested in personal appearance. In SL, especially fashion communities, this kind of male image is popular. For some male bloggers (not females with male avatars), who wear female clothes and/or accessories, their images are not about cross-dressing per se, which usually (and stereotypically) exaggerates sexual appearances. Instead, those referred to as herbivorous men present androgynous images.
He reveals how even just different looks, people would react differently to him. However, he is very happy with what SL offers to him:

Gender transitioning in RL is different than here. It’s slow and it’s more limited. I can’t grow a foot taller there. :P I can be as distinctive as I like here. I can look bizarre or very ordinary. I can change my body to suit the company I’m in. It’s easy to fit in, or to stand out. One has more control. That it gives a person a sense of flexibility, or control, or beauty.

His avatar is himself: “I am not role-playing. I am presenting myself through my avatar :) myself [and I] believe all is performance, including the self :) I’m just conscious of it.”

He further explained that though he refers to his avatars as “them” in conversation with me, he “experience[s] them as ‘me’ while I am in them.” He believes that his avatar is his performance of self. In describing his relationship with his avatar, he noted that

I feel generally warm. I like seeing my self-created me. I like my Second Life. I like how I exist in it. I like to be creative with my avatar. I like to see photos of myself with friends as I would [see] RL photos of myself with friends, as reminders of happy times together.

As well as these feelings of satisfaction, though, he also remarked on limitations:

“It’s hard to do good nonhuman forms. The tools presume human and four limbs. It’s the presumption, which goes into how the technology is constructed.” Moreover, he commented on how this presumption reproduces itself through imposing limitations: “It’s a limitation in the thinking of the designers that turns into a limitation on what people do here.”

Raphael and I had a conversation about what his avatar does for him. His guiding questions led me to more fully apprehend the potentiality of his avatar; therefore, I present our dialogues below to represent the learning moment I experienced:
Raphael: What gender do you see me as?
Liliann: For the first time I see you, I would think you are male, but I heard you are a she as [Risa].
Raphael: go on :)
Liliann: To be honest, if I didn’t know anything about you, just seeing your avatar, I might think you belonged to an LGBT group.
Raphael: ok :) 
Liliann: I think stereotypical images make me think in that way.
Raphael: Then let me ask you this... What do you see my “real” gender as being?
Liliann: What do you mean? Do you mean my guess of your real gender?
Raphael: The real me, whatever that means. :) 
Liliann: As I have been sitting here and talking to you for a while, I imagine I am talking to a male person.

*Raphael nods.*

Raphael: Well, as I said earlier, in RL I have transitioned from female to male.
Raphael: Oh, I should ask what you would understand my RL gender to be then.
Liliann: Do you mean before you tell me about you?
Raphael: No, I mean after.
Liliann: I think as I know that you were a female, I tend to also think part of you is female. :P
Raphael smiles.

Raphael: Ok, but as I sit here before you as [Raphael], you see me as male.
Liliann: yes.
Raphael nods.

Raphael: That is what being in avatar does for me.
Raphael: What I can do here, and not in RL.
Liliann: Tell me you are a male?
Raphael: I can be fully male to people.
Raphael: People take the avatar at face value.
Liliann: Yes, very true :).
Raphael: Well, I like that. It’s good for me.

Through this dialogue, he tried to explain how he uses his avatar to his personal advantage. That is, people can accept him as fully male in SL, but in real life, especially during the physical transition process, many non-transgendered people recognize him as a transgendered person.

He concludes that through this experience he has learned a lot about people, such as people’s different reactions to gender and how people are confined to unnecessary
rules. Most importantly, he thinks that being adventurous and creative is central to a sense of self:

I learned how differently people react to me in male or female form, for sure. I learned things about fashion, maybe. I learned that in a world of infinite possibility, people are pretty conformist :P Most people use SL for rather limited wish-fulfillment. “I can buy fancy mall clothes!” There’s great potential for doing all sorts of things with the avatar. But most people don’t try. It’s like if somebody granted you three wishes in RL and you used one to lose 25 pounds. You could have had world peace! Or, at least gotten wings.

He also offered the criticism that “people tend to think of themselves as unchanging :P, [that] many people seem to like being still … even when they are not actually still :P.” He finds it sad that “rather than embrace this process of constant change and use it to grow, people try to deny it.” In addition, many people do not want to try something different: “I meet a lot of people here who complain about how everyone is young and tall and beautiful and these people are young and tall and beautiful :) it is very human :).” His comments raise questions for me. Why am I not more adventurous in SL? Why did I choose to be a human avatar? I think it is insecurity (even in a simulated virtual world) that confines me and many people.

Raphael’s avatar embodiment allows him to experience what is difficult in real life and embody this in his ideal gender form. Raphael is a fantasy player in a sense not because his avatar looks unusual, but because of his ability to creatively use his avatar as a means for personal fulfillment. His observation about people’s behavior in the virtual world is critical. His avatar fulfills his desire to become fully male. His avatar is his transgression and political statement on the real-life situation of being transgendered.
Neko Assembly: Violet

Neko isn’t my life, but it’s definitely a very fun aspect of my life. [Violet] is me, the way my hand is me/my hair is me. I brush my hair/color it/style it... I groom [Violet], change out her eyes, clothes, hair. But she is more. She is my vehicle to the rest of this beautiful world. Through her, I have met more people from around the world. ... This is what brings me back to SL. Whether I was human, Neko or furry... that is why I have a second life. And to me... it’s all life. And thus, [Violet] is just another aspect of me.

— Violet (personal communication, May 12, 2010)

Violet is a Neko too, although I think she looks very close to human (Figure 5-13). She concedes this point, but adds that there are many looks among the Nekos.

Initially, I wasn’t sure if she should be one of the fantasy-player participants in my study. She looks too “human.” But she engages in the Neko community to help people better understand these forms. She has a blog site that she uses to publish fiction she writes about her avatar. In her stories, her avatar “plays” different roles but the main character is always her Neko avatar (see Figure 5-14 to 5-19). Her experience of being “non-human,” her fantasy stories, and her community engagement qualify her for my study.

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13 All the quotes (personal communication) from Violet are drawn from my interview with her on May 12, 2010.
Figure 5-13. Violet during interview.

Figure 5-14. Violet as Explore Kitty.  

Figure 5-15. Violet as double agent.
Figure 5-16. Violet as Cyber Neko (front).  
Figure 5-17. Violet as Cyber Neko (back).  

Figure 5-18. Violet in Africa.  
Figure 5-19. Black Angel Violet.
She told me that she is a graphic designer in real life and that she had played Xbox before coming to SL. She had initially thought SL was a game because of the beautiful avatar graphics she had seen in a magazine while on vacation:

I come home from vacation, visited secondlife.com ... started the “game” and immediately I realized ... this is not a game. This is Oblivion/Morrowind, only better. On my first night, I met people from Germany, Italy, Japan, Hungary. I am ... hooked. Right away and just like I did in Morrowind, where I carefully chose my avatar, and customized its look ... I quickly wanted “[Violet]” to “look like me.” (Only a little better, of course ... we all have things about our bodies that we wish were different, so ... we “improve” those things in SL.)

Her first avatar was a girl-next-door avatar: “I think I’m a basic girl at heart. She looked the least ‘Weird’ too, hehe. But I quickly found her some jeans :-) that’s how I run around usually, jeans :-).” Her experience illustrates how she thinks about her virtual identity. She wants her avatar to look like her because her avatar is a representation of her. She said that she had a very good mentor when she was still new to SL. The mentor gave her many things, and she also played around with her shape. That was how she started to change her avatar from newbie looks. She discovered fashion stores and blogs and learned how to “have fun ‘dressing up.’” She said that the reasons she decided to spend money here is because she appreciated the creativity and time people put into making clothes in SL:

I was SO impressed with the time that people took to create clothes. ... [And] since I also do Photoshop, I have an appreciation for the work they invested. ... I felt it was only right to “give back” to this creative community. Second reason was ... to look better of course! Free stuff, at least back then, wasn’t always so good, hehe. Look better = the textures of clothes were more “real” looking, and I could mix/match to create my own unique “look” that expressed “me” better.
In some ways, she is like many of the bloggers I interviewed in that both she and they think of clothes as a way to express themselves. One important aspect of her Neko stories is that she constructs outfits around stories she has written for her avatar. For example, Figure 5-16 and 5-17 show her avatar as Cyberpunk Neko. The story she told is based on a cyberpunk science fiction novel called *Mindplayers* written by Pat Cadigan (1987). Her avatar is the illustration of a character, Allie Haas, from the novel.

Becoming a Neko wasn’t her own idea; instead, one of her closest friends influenced her in this regard. According to Violet, her friend is always finding new avatars. She said that one day her friend showed up wearing ears and a tail. At first, although Violet thought this was interesting, she also found it weird. However, after a week of watching her friend being a Neko, she wanted to have ears and a tail too. She explained her attachment to being a Neko:

Many Neko, who remain Neko ... “feel like a cat” inside. They have always identified with cats in their RL. Me ... I love animals ... cats, dogs, horses ... any animal. To me an animal spirit is on an equal plane with a human spirit. So I can’t say that I “chose” the cat specifically ... but once I started wearing those ears and tail ... somehow, they felt right. When they came off one day, as I was putting on a skirt ... it felt wrong. I quickly put the tail back on.

She strongly identifies herself as a Neko such that she had felt uncomfortable when she took the “Neko body” off. Neko has become part of her embodied experience. She explained that it is because SL provides this opportunity for being different species, there is no reason for her not to be something she enjoys, even though she has been discriminated against in this guise. She told a story about how she was discriminated against for not being human:
I am not one of those “OMG I will never take them off!” people. But honestly, it’s SL ... there’s no real reason to. The last time [my friend] and I were at a dance place ... the hostess said “only humans, you must remove your parts.” We said “this is SL!” and left.

Being a Neko is special to her in Second Life, but not necessarily her wish in real life:

Would I want to “cosplay”¹⁴ a Neko in first life? Nah ... maybe for Halloween ... hehe. But in SL ... I have this extra little ... mm ... unique thing that to me, characterizes my willingness to be a little different ... to be a little aloof, or playful, or prankster ... much like cats are “given allowance” to “be cats.”

Neko communicates a part of herself that is not apparent in real life. By constructing her Neko avatar, she constructs characters that are undeveloped in her real life.

Her Neko avatar is her base avatar. She has other avatars that she sees as costumes for fun and special occasions; these include a dragon, a “shadowcrawler” avatar (a cross between a lizard and a kangaroo), several robot avatars and tinies, an ant, a dragonfly, and a butterfly. These avatars, for her, are like masquerading with costumes. They might be fun to “wear,” but the Neko avatar is her “real” body.

Talking about her Neko stories, she explains that she usually works with a friend to construct these stories. Her avatar construction in these stories functions as a “prop” for story telling. Her stories are usually inspired by beautiful sims or cool outfits and pictures she and her friend took, and she prepares clothes and accessories based on these accordingly. She thinks that writing a narrative from those pictures is really a creative

¹⁴ The term cosplay comes from costume play. Players dress as a specific character from comics, anime, or movies, etc.
process. But she added, “was Rachel\(^\text{i5}\) an alternate identity? No. :-) She was my story. :-)
and [Violet] gets to help me tell that story :-) in essence, she is a ‘prop,’ just like an actor is.” Her stories, thus, are less focused on identity play and more on using her avatar as a medium through which to create her art.

However, when her avatar is not “at work,” Violet’s avatar dresses in a similar real-life style (see Figure 5-13). She states that through her avatar she achieves comfortable feelings and emotions:

I can honestly say I almost never dress like [Violet’s] blog stories, hehe. Those are all “story costumes”:-)). But when I am not preparing [Violet] for a story? Yes, we dress alike: jeans, simple shirt, a bit of jewelry ... comfy/cute shoes :-). It “looks” comfy, so I “feel” comfy. What I see on my avatar evokes an emotional response in my human (and you can say that about a lot of things) :-) when someone “bumps” into me in Second Life ... I feel bumped into in first life. When a noob guy walks up to me in Second Life, and runs into my face asking for sex, I’m just as offended as if he had done that in first life.

What I took from this statement is that the connection between a virtual body and the real body means that each can affect the other. In this, Violet’s experience is in accord with Seigworth and Gregg’s (2010) observation that “affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body” (p. 1).

She recognizes her avatar as herself, but she also separates her online and offline identities in some ways:

I am [Violet], [Violet] is me. Though I do have a little wall of privacy between her and my first life. So ... she is me ... in another world ... able to explore ... able to be her(my)self ... but with the ability to be private and escape back to the quiet of home, when needed.

\(^\text{i5}\) Rachel is a character from the cyberpunk movie Blade Runner (1982) directed by Ridley Scott. The movie is based on the novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick. Violet created a story based on the character of Rachel.
The contradiction between the idea that her avatar is herself yet a wall separates herself from her avatar raises interesting questions. What is the difference between her real-life self and her avatar? If she needs to separate these selves, does it mean that her selves are not vitally connected? Unlike many people who respond that SL helps them to fulfill their desires, Violet thinks of her avatar as her vehicle for exploring another world:

I’m pretty darn happy with my first life, so ... I don’t see that SL “fills missing” parts of my first life. I come to SL to visit/explore/learn. Just like I would drive my (first life) car to visit a friend, explore a park, learn from a class. It’s all just life.

Violet’s avatar re/assembling experience involves her artistic and creative composition of her Neko stories. She does not use her avatar to transform her identity; she uses it to explore and experiment with different possibilities. Her self-making does not consist of a different self. And, although her avatar is not human, it is a continual excavating and making of different aspects of selves invested in her avatar re/assembling experience.

**Real-Life Furry: Pixie**

I consider it like myself. In a sense, I guess it is my doll but I just see this as an extension of my real self via the virtual world. I don’t really roleplay like some people do, some people like to separate their “real” self from their “furry” self and have different personas.

— Pixie (personal, communication, March 31, 2010) 16

Pixie is a talkative and energized furry, to be precise, feline, a white cat (Figure 5-20). She expressed the view that there is no difference between herself and her furry

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16 All the quotes (personal communication) from Pixie are drawn from my interview with her on March 31, 2010.
persona. I first met her in-world when I was waiting for a lucky board. When we met in SL for the interview and before I had even had a chance to ask any questions, Pixie started talking about the many jobs she has in SL. She is a staff manager for a well-known Japanese fashion store, and she provides English-language support for another Japanese store. She also runs events in SL. She is very satisfied with her “second life,” as she said:

I really fell in love with what Second Life wanted to represent to people—it really opened up a way to reach out. Thank you, sometimes I really don’t realize how much I do until I lay it all out.

Figure 5-20. Pixie during interview.

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17 A lucky board or lucky chair is a device often used by SL vendors to attract people to their stores. It chooses a random letter every few minutes. And if the first letter of one’s first name is the same as the chosen letter, one can click the board (or sit on the chair) to receive a selected free product from the store. Many people spend considerable time waiting in front of lucky boards in order to receive freebies.
She learned about SL at the Anthrocon convention (a real-life furry convention), where she saw a projection of an SL furry avatar. She thought that this would be an opportunity to reach out to other furries:

[I] really chose to be furry before this. My RL picture [Figures 5-21 and 5-22] in my profile shows myself in fursuit. I don’t do the conventions as much but I do Second Life every day, which is great because I can always be my fursona.

She also talked about how she became a furry in real life:

I think I was maybe 13 when I was becoming a more active user of the Internet due to not really fitting in at school. I found an online community where there was a forum and you posted art you did. Through that I was linked by a friend to Furcadia, and I learned more about the furry culture and it just stuck.

Pixie’s decision to construct her alter ego as furry is based on the Internet and social-networking culture. Through these means, she learned about the furry community and identified with its members. Her participation in the subculture of the furry community defines her identity. From my conversation with her, I felt a sense of how she deliberately constructs her “fursona” (furry persona). She said: “[I] started [in] RL with creating the character, but once I got into SL [I] just recreated myself here in a sense. Yeah, it’s like just remaking yourself in a sense in SL.” She reconstructs her furry identity in SL, just like others reconstruct their real-life identities there. Talking about her choices, she said:

For myself, it’s what I feel and what I like all meshed into one fursona. For some, it can be as in-depth as their “spiritual animal,” and almost shamanistic qualities. Others just do what the mood fits them, it all depends. Sometimes if you’re a dog or cat person you’re more likely to be a dog- or cat-type furry. A lot of furries sometimes try to overdo themselves to a sense, like tiger mixed with rabbit mixed with dolphin mixed with skunk. There is always the struggle that some people want to make themselves as unique as they can be.
Figure 5-21. Pixie’s RL profile picture.

Figure 5-22. Pixie in fursuit on her graduation day.

Talking about how she constructs her avatar, she said:
Well like a lot of furries we usually create our own “fursona” out of things we like, things we relate to, for most RL furries we do this beforehand. Most SL furries see an avatar they like and sometimes they hop around to what they choose to be. Myself, I’ve always been a white-winged feline. I set myself out as one a long time ago but back in ’05, there pretty much was just Luskwood for furry avatar choices. Now you have many creators. My avatar is actually the Uchi Felis avatar, which is free. It’s really well made and great for those starting out, since most freebie avatars aren’t too great. I just got lucky that he handed out a white cat. My wings came from another purchase and the outfit, hair, and other modifications came with time. Obviously I change around looks like everyone else, but it is very rare you will see me not as a cat. XD.\(^{18}\)

She chose to be a white cat with wings and purple hair. Her avatar was free from an avatar creator. She changes her looks and plays at dress-up, like most people in SL—but she is almost always a cat:

I always stick to my basic look. But as avatars evolve in creation, I try to as well. If I had to name my avatars this would be [Pixie] v4. I’ve upgraded almost every year I’ve been on thanks to amazing creators. I modify avatars, but I don’t think I could really make one myself without the basics. ^^\(^{19}\) I have tried other avatars just for fun, like running around, but generally I stick to just my furry self.

Like many people I have interviewed, she has a basic look as her virtual body. Other avatars are just fun costumes for her. Talking about how she constructs different looks (Figure 5-23 to 5-25), she said:

Just like a human, I have dozens of fashion tastes especially due to the stores I work at it’s tough not to wear such great things. A lot of furries you may see “naked” but it’s personal choice. Just like most humans.

She works in a store that sells a variety of different kinds of SL clothes, including fantasy, period, and contemporary clothes, so she has many opportunities to try on different clothes.

\(^{18}\) XD is an Internet expression means laughing out loud face. See Appendix A for a list of Internet expression.

\(^{19}\) ^^ is an Internet expression means smile with eyes closed. See Appendix A for a list of Internet expression.
Figure 5-23. Pixie’s dress-up picture 1.

Figure 5-24. Pixie’s dress-up picture 2.

Figure 5-25. Pixie’s dress-up picture 3.
Although she says that she does not role-play, I found it interesting that she does not consider using a furry to be role-playing. Instead, she thinks of it as adopting a stance appropriate to a given occasion:

I do have my almost “role-playing” side for when I work or need to put on a professional stance as compared to when relaxed and hanging out with friends. But most people do that, as I do, for real life work as well. Some may say furry and Second Life is a mask, but then one could argue there is a mask for every aspect of life we perform. ^^

Her response indicates that she views being a furry as a natural thing for her. She does not perform through her furry avatar. Although I think that her “fursona” is a performance, her understanding of every aspect of life is also performance, which means it is difficult to categorize this persona as a performance in the same way that other people in SL perform through their avatars. She considers her interactions with her friends honest, just like one would interact with friends in real life, but the difference in SL is that she only interacts through her fursona. So she does not consider her fursona to be a performance. In addition, it is important to note that her definition of performing includes the idea of behaving in a way that is unreal or deceptive. However, she thinks that people interact with her differently because she is a furry:

There is a culture out there based off a science fiction book. They call themselves Goreans (I don’t really know too much about it myself). But if you’re furry and they’re Gorean, they almost will refuse to talk to you for some reason. Some people treat furries differently on SL and RL because of stories and trends and stereotypes. Most people don’t really feel offended by it, though a lot of people are kind of curious about us. Overall, you could say we’re an underground culture to a sense.

Further, she notices that:

Sometimes it can be difficult to get close to people. Like obviously we have our own problems due to our avatars and being accepted. ... On a personal note, and
this applies to most furries, you won’t see a lot of furries and humans dating. The culture can be very different so that it can be difficult to get really close to someone on that level. Now, granted I definitely have close human avatar friends, but sometimes it can be difficult to talk about furry avatar problems or the furry culture with them.

A very good example would be earrings. Now most humans can just attach them on to the ear section of their avatar. But since we usually have ears that occupy that slot, we cannot. So as an alternative we purchase earrings that are no transfer. So we can modify and link them onto our ears or have to make our own. That applies to shoes, bracelets, piercings, etc. It limits us as to what we can purchase, and sometimes you can’t really talk to human friends about it too much without explaining the whole thing.

Well, with my human friends I sometimes can’t understand like the problems with skins like that, since we don’t really switch ours. Um, but for the most part we’re just like normal friends, similar interests and such. If they have a Gorean friend though it can be tough on them. One of my friends has their RL sister in SL and she’s Gorean. For the longest time, she tried to convince my friend not to be friends with me because I’m furry. There was no real rhyme or reason for that dislike besides the being furry thing, but I imagine it was annoying for my friend to have to deal with that. In the end she told her sister to just deal with it, especially since she wasn’t even around us [in] RL or SL when we hung out. XD.

Her observation reveals interesting things about how different cultural groups of avatars assess each other. I recall that in the early days of my SL experience, I went into a place where unbeknown to me a number of furries were gathered together. I felt frightened and quickly teleported away, even though none of the furries had said anything to me. It was like I had stepped into a tiger’s cage or accidently discovered a group’s secret meeting. At the time, I did not know too much about the furry culture, but I instinctively felt that this was not my “place.” In the virtual world with sub-cultures, “rules” are important parts of sub-culture practices, even though such rules may only govern how one’s avatar looks. This also reflects much about real-world group conflicts.

Pixie thinks that her avatar is herself and her extension and that her avatar gives her freedom:
[In] RL, it’s tough. You don’t really get that allowance of freedom. Say I walked down the street in fursuit, some people may call the cops on me thinking I’m some sort of psycho. I think it can depend on the area you’re in. Like I’m more willing to wear my tail out to sometimes see if people notice, but it’s very very rare. I used to do it more when I was younger, because they can excuse it as being young sometimes or just weird. But when you’re more of an adult, sometimes you need to keep that professional face up. Like I couldn’t really bring this side of me out at work.

Thus, she thinks that her experiences help her grow as a person. She concludes:

“Amazing” is probably the one simple word to sum it all up. Sometimes, people can look at themselves after an experience and say “Wow, I’m stronger” or “I really have grown as a person.” But I can proudly say both those things from being in SL. If you let it, it can really open one’s world.

Pixie’s self-making through her avatar gives her a virtual space to explore things that she is not able to in real life. Her fursona can have an outlet. Her fursona is not just her virtual identity; it is also her “real” identity. Her real-life fursona and virtual furry avatar can move seamlessly in between real and virtual space. She creates this mixed-reality identity that is capable of being in-between.

**I, Wolf: Audrey**

It’s very ... comfortable in an odd way. Like I’m showing off part of myself that I wouldn’t normally in real life. Like, everyone has a persona with which they face the world right? For some reason, mine’s a red wolf. A red werewolf, actually if you want to be specific. By wearing a wolf avatar, I can have people see that. They “hear” my words come from the wolf, instead of whatever they’d normally imagine my persona to be. ... I’m not claiming I think I’m a werewolf, or anything. Just that for some reason it feels very “me” to run around online like one. :)

—Audrey (personal communication, April 1, 2010)

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20 All the quotes (personal communication) from Audrey are drawn from my interview with her on April 1, 2010.
I came across Audrey’s personal site and saw her wolf avatar pictures (Figures 5-26 to 5-29), so I invited her to participate in my study. Audrey identifies herself as furry (Figure 5-30). She has been participating in online virtual worlds, such as Activeworlds,\(^{21}\) The Palace,\(^{22}\) and Furcadia,\(^{23}\) since she was in 6th or 7th grade. She said that she adopted a non-human persona from the first time she stepped into an online space: “Usually a ‘feral’ animal. Which in the furry fandom refers to a quadruped animal rather than a bipedal anthropomorphic one.” She talked about the reason she had chosen to be a furry: “Since I was a kid, I’ve had a tendency to identify strongly with animals. I was always kind of nerdy, reading lots of science books and stuff more than the usual hobbies of a little girl.” Her difference from other people carries over to her avatar choice.

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21 Activeworlds (http://www.activeworlds.com/) is a 3D online virtual world.
22 The Palace (http://www.thepalace.com/) is a 2D virtual chat software.
23 Furcadia (http://www.furcadia.com/) is a massively multiplayer roleplaying game (MMORPG).
However, when she first joined SL, she selected the Harajuku avatar. She said, “When I first started, I thought the beginner furry avatars were hideous XD.” She did not
become a furry in SL until after she had left and come back a year later. She talked about the process:

I got lost and bored of SL really quickly at first. I had no idea what I was doing, or where to find people to talk with. I went to IMVU, which I’d joined at about the same time. Mostly because my [friends] were leaving IMVU and going to SL, so I followed them back. When I came back to SL, I remember I was browsing the web, and looking at pictures uploaded by avatar makers of the stuff they sold. I saw one that, which it didn’t really match the picture of “me” in my head, it was more realistic looking than the cartoon-ish stuff that I had seen around before. It was the first thing I ever bought in SL [see Figure 5-31]. It called itself a red wolf, which is my furry persona, and has been for about 9 years or so, even though the avatar doesn’t really have the right coloration.

When she first became a furry it was in the context of sites other than SL, and she was not initially a red wolf. She describes how she became a red wolf:

I’d been a generic wolf for a little while, then I went through a ... er... winged white tiger phase. And then I went back to generic wolf. But one day, I saw a picture of a red wolf, thought it was interesting, looked up some information, and from that day on, I decided that was me.

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*Figure 5-31. Audrey’s first furry avatar in SL.*

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24 IMVU (Instant Messaging Virtual Universe) (http://www.imvu.com/) is a 3D online virtual chat, avatar creation, and gaming network, which has 2 million members around the world.
Although she is a red wolf, like most other furries, she wears human clothes. She changes her avatar’s clothes frequently:

Although sometimes, if I really like what I’m wearing, I’ll wear practically the same thing for days. Sometimes it depends on where in SL I’m going. Like the other day I was wandering around a cherry-blossom-viewing festival on a Japanese sim. I felt like I should wear something light and springish. I almost never dress how I do irl [in real life]. I prefer to wear things that would be impractical in RL. Like big puffy skirts or Victorian-inspired suits. They look cool. Like art I can wear. I prefer my clothing to look illustrated over photorealistic.

Like some of the bloggers I interviewed, she considers wearing distinctive virtual clothes to be akin to wearing art. Unlike Pixie, who also dresses in a fursuit in real life, Audrey does not own a full fursuit:

I don’t have a full fursuit, although I’d love to try my hand at making one someday. But I have worn ears and a tail at anime cons or Anthrocon (a yearly furry con that’s a short bus ride away) or Halloween. Although I’ve worn ears around randomly, mostly because that particular set just looks like a hair accessory.

She refers to her avatar as “an extension of myself.” But there is a limitation: “Like, she is me, but that doesn’t mean I am her.” Her relationship with her avatar echoes the perceptions of others, such as Violet who also sees her avatar as herself, but who draws a line between real and virtual. In addition to the red wolf avatar, Audrey has other avatars, though it is clear that the red wolf is her central image:

I don’t view them as “me” like I do the wolf. Mostly I get them because I like how they look, even if I don’t wear them as much. Although for some reason, I prefer to get avatars that have a similar color scheme to my wolf.

Similar to Violet and Pixie, her wolf avatar is her virtual body, but other avatars are fun costumes.
She thinks that her mood affects her choice of avatar and this also affects her behavior:

I think I act a little differently in different avatars, but I don’t think it’s any different than how people act differently depending on how they’re dressed. Like casual or formal. It’s not so drastic. Maybe just a little more relaxed as one avatar, or my speech is a little rougher in another. I think it’s a snowball effect. A person’s mood might affect their choice of avatar, which then further affects their behavior.

Talking about her experience of embodiment as her avatar, she said:

Sometimes I get grief from people who are like “Oh this is a laggy place, change avatars.” Some people automatically assume a furry avatar causes lag. It doesn’t, unless I was wearing an outfit full of scripts. My head actually uses one script in one prim. My tail also has one script in a single prim, unlike resized scripted hair, which has a script in every single prim (sorry, bit of a pet peeve of mine). And, of course, there are those who think I’m some sort of pervert based on my avatar. The fandom has some weird stereotypes. People think that furry is a fetish. I guess for some people it might be, but I haven’t personally met anyone like that. Actually I’m not really interested in “SLex” [Second Life sex] at all, aside from being amused by it. All I know is what I see from other people. I don’t like long-distance relationships much, so I’ve never felt the need to look into the more “intimate” side of SL.

Her experience reflects some common experiences of being discriminated against as a furry. Many people think that because furries need numerous prims and scripts for their avatars, they cause lag in SL. And, though this is not correct, people can be hostile toward furry avatars on the basis of it. She also experienced stereotypical ideas about the sexual practices of some furries. Overall, though, she confirmed that she has come to know herself better though her avatar:

Like, I knew about this aspect of my personality. Running around SL in this avatar just lets me give that part of me free rein for a while. It’s really more of a feeling. One thing I do know is that after a day at work having to be nice to

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25 Furry avatars are constructed using prim objects and scripts in order to make movements, such as eye or tail movements.
customers even after they’re not nice to me, being a wolf lets me be grouchy not as nice sometimes when I can’t show it in real life.

Audrey’s avatar embodiment is the identity she constructs for her online persona. Through the red wolf, she expresses a sense of confidence, even though she has experienced discrimination based on it. Her avatar did not transform her identity. Instead, she brought her fantasy identity from other places into her avatar experience. Her avatar is another form of self presented through the virtual body.

**Summary: Creative Outlet for the Self Re/making and Knowledge Re/learning**

I think it is not just a coincidence that all the fantasy-player participants’ avatars have at least some relationships with animals. They are either anthropomorphic animals or human–animal hybrids. Animal figures are among the most important elements of fantasy play. There is a long history of human–animal hybrid fantasy creatures for fantasy players to draw on; for example, centaurs are part human and part horse, in Greek mythology. For most people, I suppose, being a cat or dog, or other animal is much more fun than being a table or stone. However, can we really become animals? These fantasy players may not really want to become their avatars—for example, Violet expressed the point that she does not want to be a Neko in real life. However, through their avatars, their human fixed identity is challenged by their becoming-animal. Becoming-animal is a becoming proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in the attempt to challenge the notion of a stable identity (Braidotti, 2002). Becoming explores identities outside of the usual categories; as Sotirin (2005) stated, “beyond the boundaries separating human being from
animal, man from woman, child from adult, micro from macro, and even perceptible and understandable from imperceptible and incomprehensible” (p. 99). Therefore, fantasy players’ self-exploration is a process of knowledge-making that challenges our knowledge about identity and self.

The “species” of the participant does not matter when it comes to the fantasy avatar experience. Their choice of identity or “species” to inhabit might be different and that is even continually in change, but they all participate in the creation of a version of self that is impossible in the physical world. All the fantasy-player participants reflect that this experience gives them freedom in this regard.

Although there is certainly creativity in the construction of fantasy avatars, a majority of these avatars are based on popular culture or subculture. Mo’s avatars are influenced by anime and her fantasy play. Violet created her avatar based on fantasy stories of her creation or re-creation from pop culture and fiction given that Neko is a sub-culture that originated in Japanese anime. Pixie’s and Audrey’s avatars are influenced and based on the furry fandom sub-culture community. Whether it is from movies, animes, or comics, these fantasies define identity. Yet, the interview participants who chose to be non-human continue to follow some human rules. Clothing is one important thing that they chose to keep. All the participants, even those with tiny avatars, such as Mo, wear clothes. Dressing, as Violet said, is itself self-expression. Mo imagines garments from different cultural and historical periods and realizes them through her avatar. Raphael uses clothes to connect to his real-life identity. Although he explores different representations, he has found that ultimately his clothes are all generally similar.
The outfits he wore during the interview (see Figure 5-11 and 5-12) show that he is consistent in his clothing choices. Pixie also explores dressing in different styles as play. She enjoys wearing things that are unrealistic in real life, because in her view as she has the opportunity to extend her styles in the virtual world, why not do so? Dressing-up for these fantasy players is self-expression, which is similar to how the bloggers view their engagement in SL. But as compared with most blogger participants, they are less bound by their real-life identities and styles. Fantasy players are more adventurous in trying different clothes. Even Raphael, who wears similar-color clothes in his real life, is not confined to realistic real-life style.

With the exception of Mo, all have a base avatar as a virtual body. Much like bloggers’ body shapes, these fantasy players’ baseline avatars, whether Neko or Furry, cat or wolf, are their primary means of representing their virtual bodies. This shows that most people need a visual form in order to grasp identity.

These participants’ reasons for creating fantasy avatars differ, but none of them are to escape their identity and live in the fantasy, even though it seems that Audrey is escaping into her wolf avatar or Raphael is escaping into his male Neko. The notion of escaping does not apply here because they do not reject their “real” identities. Instead, they use their avatars to work with these identities. Audrey’s idea that her avatar is an extension of herself explains that she sees herself as a whole, rather than looking at her avatar as a place to hide. Raphael’s male avatar is not his hiding place. It is his political statement, an open space to which he invites people to converse with him.
None of the fantasy-player participants transform their identities through their avatars, even though it seems as though they all become others in their avatar forms. However, their avatars are not their other identities. The avatars are part of themselves, part of their bodies that perform in the virtual realm. However, this is not to say that they do not gain anything from the experience. Their understanding of identity is extended through their avatars, because they realize that their avatars are also themselves or their extensions. The self cannot be separated, even in virtual space. In other words, their self-making does not produce a separate virtual self, but they all extend themselves into the virtual realm. They remake the self and the body with virtual technology. They each have a mixed-reality body.

In this context, the avatar is much like a mask for masquerading that gives them the temporary privilege of expressing themselves using all the means afforded by visual representation. Raphael’s avatar gives him the chance to state that he is fully male. Pixie’s avatar offers her an opportunity to present herself as furry in the virtual world. Audrey’s avatar allows her to be heard from her wolf body. Avatars are also prostheses that help extend their abilities, such that, Violet can explore another world through her avatar and Mo can realize her fantasy images. Fantasy players’ avatars, despite the undeniable connection to the body, are also a technology for exploration.

Avatars are a creative media for both Mo and Violet. Mo uses hers to accomplish her artistic ideas, and Violet uses hers as a muse for her creative stories. Although Audrey did not say that she sees her avatar as her medium, like the bloggers, she mentioned that she enjoys designer’s clothes because they are wearable art. Raphael
expressed the view that avatars are art because there are ideas behind them. No matter how one thinks about avatars as a medium for creation, fantasy players are certainly using them as a creative outlet.

The knowledge-making process is a learning process. Mo learned about her desires in regard to (body) images through realizing her vision. She also learned about gender issues online through her male avatar. Raphael learned about people’s fixed ideas about gender from the attitudes they evinced toward him. Violet, Pixie, and Audrey have all been subject to discrimination because of their avatar choices. Their experiences provide them a chance to reflect on important issues about identity and difference, which has great real-world implications. They are relearning about themselves and others through their avatar bodies.

**Becomings and Mixed-Reality Selves**

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

—Lewis Carroll (1865/1897, p. 60)

These interviews opened my eyes. I did not expect to learn, for example, that Audrey thinks her avatar body is more herself than her physical body, or Raphael has transgendered his avatar. I feel that I am living in an ivory tower and have no bold experience with identity struggles. I thought of sharing some of these stories with Alice. From my communication with Alice, I know that although she is not a fantasy player, she
admires such people. I logged in. She is online as usual. Sometimes, I think maybe she
lives by eating pixel food.

Liliann: I know you are online as always. Don’t you need to eat?

Alice: I just posted a blog entry about my avatar and food. Virtual food is more important
for me. :P

Liliann: I would suspect that you are a computer program instead of a real human.

Alice: I am an avatar and that’s all you know about me.

Liliann: True. Anyway, I am glad you are here to chat with me no matter whether you are
a program or a human. I just finished interviewing people who have non-human
avatars. It was eye-opening. I know you are a human avatar, but you told me that
you adore these non-human avatars. I also heard from some other fashion
bloggers that although they do not want to be non-human, they respect fantasy
players. So, I wonder why you wouldn’t try to be a non-human avatar?

Alice: Well, I do try non-human avatars sometimes, but only if they look cute and
fashionable. I don’t think those non-human avatars I tried, are my body though.
They are more like costume. I am not a bunny or deer in real life. I don’t want to
be others, so I think the human avatar tells more about me. Did you find out why
some people prefer being non-human avatars?

Liliann: From my interviews with these five fantasy players, I think each of them has
their own reasons. Mo experiments with many different avatars to realize her
imaginative ideas. One of the avatars to which she is most attached is a tiny
squirrel. She found that being a tiny frees her from being judged by others. By
becoming-squirrel, she becomes in-between. It is not that she becomes a squirrel because she looks like a squirrel, but it is her becoming-squirrel that her identity and a squirrel identity dissolved into a pool of pixels (or Deleuze says molecules) that makes judging an identity difficult.

Alice: Interesting, are you saying that she is neither herself nor a squirrel? But people would treat her as a tiny squirrel.

Liliann: Well, yes. She cannot be evaluated because she is not what her identity is supposed to be. I agree that people would try to treat her as a tiny squirrel, but people know that she is not a squirrel, so they would not behave as if she were a “real” squirrel. The thing is that if people do not think of her as a real squirrel, she is not a squirrel. So she becomes indefinable. I think that is the power of becoming.

Alice: OK ... I think I need more examples.

Liliann: Another of my participants, Raphael, is a Neko. He enjoys the style of Neko and thinks that being a Neko lets him do what is impossible in real life. Violet, my other participant, is also a Neko avatar, but she identifies with animal and having those ears and tail brings a lot of fun for her. Although a Neko is a hybrid of a cat and a human, and there are some avatars who look more like cats, many Nekos look more like humans. I think this is the case with Raphael and Violet. However, I don’t really think the relative closeness to a human or a cat matters in terms of their becoming-Neko. By becoming-Neko, they are rejected by others from pure human identity. Their human features in their avatars are their becoming-human.
By rejecting being human and trying to become (part of) human again, their identity is always fluid. Being non-human is their beginning of becoming.

Alice: I’d rather think of that as by keeping their look close to human, their avatars reflect the weakness people have when given a chance to choose their own new identity. By weakness, I mean people (including myself) do not have the courage to try different things and be more adventurous.

Liliann: Thank you for that idea of weakness. It is interesting though that all of the five participants I interviewed, even if they have an avatar that is closer to an animal, such as Mo, Pixie, and Audrey, they all wear human clothes. So it is difficult to think about their identity masquerade without considering the importance of clothing in their experience of avatar creation.

Alice: You mentioned masquerade. That is an interesting way to think about avatar creation. Now I am thinking that maybe even my creation of each outfit is like making a masquerade costume for myself.

Liliann: Yes, just as you said, being a non-human avatar is more like wearing a costume for you. The masquerading of these people transforms their identities momentarily.

Alice: But you were talking about becoming. Are they really becoming something else?

Liliann: No, becoming is not about becoming a finished identity. As I said, although it looks like that when they create furry avatars, they become the animals, their becoming-animal can only be understood as opening up a way to think about their identities differently.
Alice: But why would someone choose to become a Neko, rather than something else.

What are the differences between these becomings? Becoming-Neko, becoming-squirrel..., etc. For me, becoming a Neko is their desire. Neko is the final identity.

Liliann: Neko is just a passing vehicle for their becomings. It is not their final destination. Neko gives Raphael a means to achieve what is impossible in real life, and it gives Violet a way to be engaged in the community and creates pleasure. As Violet told me, she doesn’t want to be a Neko in real life. But I think what their avatars do, is show that the supposed real world that would lie behind the flux of becoming is not ... a stable world of being; there “is” nothing other than the flow of becoming. All “beings” are just relatively stable moments in a flow of becoming-life. (Colebrook, 2002, p. 125)

The becoming-Neko is part of the flow in the continuum of real and virtual. So no matter becoming-Neko or becoming-squirrel, they are always already in the becoming.

Alice: So, are you saying that becoming-avatar helps us to see the movement of becoming in our lives.

Liliann: Correct. By the way, except for individual reasons for being a non-human avatar, I also see how community and group identity play out in these people’s avatar choices. Mo has a group of friends who are also tinies, so she feels her squirrel avatar fits in. Violet is quite well-known in the Neko community. She even writes about what Neko is to educate other people and to resolve the misunderstanding
toward Neko. Pixie was already a furry before she joined SL. She belongs to a real-world furry community. Audrey was also already a furry before joining SL. She chooses a non-human persona in other online environments. So I think it is not just what their desire takes them, but also the sense of safety and belonging. Pixie’s and Audrey’s avatar creations affirm and extend their group identities. I thought of this as being like subculture identity. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige (1979) talks about the dress codes of subcultures. These people’s avatars can be seen as the code. By “wearing” these dress codes (avatars), they belong to their communities.

Alice: So how do you know what they have learned in this experience?

Liliann: I think, for example, Mo definitely learned about gender “rules” in cyberspace through her male avatar. Raphael learned about people’s different attitudes toward gender. Violet learned about her creative force through her story telling. Audrey learned about different aspects of her personality. Their learning experiences created knowledge for them that is important to personal growth.

Alice: Do you see how they bring what they learned back to their real lives?

Liliann: I don’t think we should see the virtual world and real life as separate. So in this way, it is not like they learned something in the virtual world and brought that back to real life, but it is their ongoing learning experience. Yet, virtual worlds are widely seen as a space to escape to. Like we go on a vacation and come back with a renewed self. But you are unlikely to think that the things we experienced during our vacation are useless. It might not directly relate to our work, but those
experiences enrich our broader life experience and might even change our beliefs. For example, being immersed in a different culture might help change the ideas we had about that culture or our own culture. I think this is what we need to understand, i.e., the experiences of these participants. They might not have a direct impact on their real lives immediately, but more importantly, they gain experience that could have an impact later.

Alice: I agree with you. Their self-recreation is meaningful, if not just fun. I wish I could be that brave and make a new self, instead of making my avatar follow my real-life body.

Liliann: Well, I think they do not really make new selves or virtual selves. I think in a sense, these fantasy players create mixed-reality selves.

Alice: What do you mean by mixed-reality?

Liliann: The term mixed reality is a concept proposed by German media artist Monika Fleischmann. She and collaborative partner Wolfgang Strauss’s work explores virtual reality and mixed reality that inquires into the relationship between body, mind, and technology. Mixed reality recognizes the importance of the body in virtual-reality technology. It isn’t like some earlier optimists predicted that someday we would be able to download our minds into the virtual world and discard our physical bodies. The concept of mixed reality proposes a relationship in which we live with virtual technologies through our flesh, because, “even in ‘virtual’ environments, the material body remained” (Brians, 2011, p. 125). Obviously, you cannot live fully in the virtual world without using your physical
body touching or triggering the interface. So the potentiality of virtual world
technology is “not the possibility they open for creating ever more immersive
illusory spaces, but rather the expanded scope they accord embodied human
agency” (Hansen, 2006, p. 3).

Alice: Can you explain more about this mixed-reality self?

Liliann: Sure. Although it seems that fantasy players’ virtual bodies are their re-invented
selves, the virtual body cannot live by itself. Their real bodies are as important.
On the one hand, the real body makes the virtual body possible, but on the other
hand, the virtual body extends the real body. It is through this mixed-reality self
that one becomes a learning self.

Alice: Isn’t it the same with bloggers? I think you can say that I am a mixed-reality
person, too.

Liliann: Well, it is true. There are a lot of similarities between bloggers and fantasy
players, in terms of their avatar construction and self-making experiences. Their
means might be somewhat different, but in the end, these are ways they use to
explore themselves. I didn’t mean to generalize. Each person is different, yet in
my use of a Deleuzian concept of becoming to describe beings, I find that they are
all in the process of becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) said,

starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or
the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which
one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness
that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes.

(p. 272)

All of them are just in different places of their becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari explained, “a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination. ... A line of becoming has only a middle” (p. 293). I think the difference between avatar becoming and other becomings is that avatar becomings mix the real body with virtual particles (could be pixels on the computer screen), and this becoming is self-selected. In other words, one can choose what to become.

Alice: OK. This sounds like enough theory for me. :P I am going to think of my next becoming. Talk to you later.
“Who can tell me what an avatar is?” This is the question I often ask to start the exploration of Second Life (SL) in class. Tonight is no exception.

After a few moments of silence, a student raises her hand. “It is the person you have in the computer,” she says, in an uncertain voice.

“Well, yes, close enough,” I reply.

After a short discussion, I learn that some of them have experienced creating a “Mii,” an avatar on the video game console Wii made by Nintendo. But some say they have never created an avatar. Although I tell them that a Facebook profile can be considered an avatar, this concept is hard for them to digest.

I show them how to register for a Second Life account and begin to discuss basic control of the avatar movement after their first logins. Students follow my instructions and the guidelines in the SL welcome area to learn some basic functions, such as walk, chat, sit, and teleport. After the orientation, I show them how to teleport to our meeting space. I ask them to gather in Penn State Isle 2, where we have a small parcel set aside for this class.

However, three students are missing from PSI 2. I think maybe they are having difficulty teleporting, either because they aren’t familiar with the system or the system
failed to perform the function (which is not uncommon). I walk from the front podium to their computers to help them individually. But I find that they are “stuck” in the welcome area; they have not even tried walking through it, but are standing there already editing their avatars’ appearance.

“How do I change her skirt?” asks one student when I walk over to her computer.

“I will show you that in a minute. First, I suggest that you go over and join the others in our meeting space. We will learn how to edit and change your avatar’s appearance in our meeting place,” I reply. Then, I show her how to teleport to Penn State Isle 2.

But I know that she hasn’t paid any attention. She is probably continuing to focus on her avatar’s appearance. The same thing happens with the other two students. I wonder if this is because they already know that their task is to create an avatar so they just got on with trying to do this. Or, is there some other reason?

The next hour is hectic, as I run all over the lab helping individual students with their questions about using the system to change their avatars. When the class ends, I take a deep breath.

It takes me about thirty minutes to get home after class. As usual, the first thing I do when I get in is to turn on my computer to check my email. An email in my Inbox takes me by surprise. It is from one of my students.

“Hi, Can you tell me why my avatar looks like a cloud? What happened?”
The email message is short, but I am pleasantly surprised: the student is still working on her avatar even after class. I know that this problem sometimes happens when a specific component of an avatar cannot be loaded to the computer; indeed, it is a common situation. The email had been sent just a few minutes earlier, so I decide to log into SL to see if the student is still there. It will be faster to answer her question if I can chat with her.

I log in. Before my avatar has properly loaded, I see a cloud floating in our meeting space.

“Hi, Sandi, are you still here?” I type as I address the cloud.

“I can’t see my avatar, what happened?” the cloud responds.

“Well, some of your avatar parts are not loaded. You might want to change to a completely different avatar, so that your avatar will show up.”

“Maybe I can be a cloud. I always dreamt of being able to walk on a cloud when I was a kid. And I liked imagining different things from the shape of the cloud. You want us to create whatever avatar we want to be. Can I submit this cloud image for the assignment?” I think that maybe she is trying to avoid whatever work is involved in restoring, so I turn this request down.

“Well, no, because you did not really ‘create’ this cloud avatar. This is just a system error.”

“OK, that’s fine. I will just work with what I know.”

“But I do hope you can ‘create’ your own cloud avatar.” I did not want to reject her idea of being a cloud.
“But I don’t know how to.”

“Well, that will be more than I can explain in this chat. I can show you on Thursday in class.”

“OK, thank you.”

I say goodbye to her, watching her avatar gradually show up again as she follows the instructions I have given her.

Thursday. Another class of avatar creation. Before giving students time to create their avatars, I show them a few links to avatar images that people have posted on Flickr groups. I then ask them to think critically about what they see.

A student tells me shortly after looking at these images that the avatars are “all too revealing.”

“Yes, that probably shows what people want,” I respond.

“I don’t want a revealing avatar,” she says.

“So, what do you want your avatar to look like?”

“Just normal. Just like me,” she responds in a tone that indicates that of course this is what she wants.

I do not continue this conversation because I am called to help another student.

From the students’ reactions to the Flickr avatar images, I can tell that they have been educated to look at images critically, or they at least know what the expected answers are in a classroom environment. “Lack of diversity” is their common answer
about these images, although the Flickr groups include general avatars, fashionable avatars, non-human avatars, and so forth.

Though some of them observe a lack of diversity among most of the avatars, they also acknowledge that their own avatars are similar, too. One student says, “Because we are all college-age students, and our avatars reflect who we are, so our avatars are similar.”

However, some students think the avatars on Flickr are diverse.

“Every avatar I saw on Flickr is different. I didn’t know it was possible to create avatars like some of these. They show free expression,” one student says.

After this class, they post their avatar images and reflections of their experiences and thoughts on the avatars on their personal blogs. I enjoy viewing their pictures and reading their blog entries for this assignment. While browsing their blogs, though, I realize that I have forgotten to ask Sandi if she still wants to create a cloud avatar. She was quiet in the class, and I was too busy helping others. No, her avatar image looks just like most of others—human and female. (Most of the students in my class are female.)

Scrolling down the page down, I start reading Sandi’s reflection.

“My avatar is supposed to be me. She wears a pair of jeans and has short brown hair, which reflects what I look like. Now the shape of my avatar is slimmer than my real body. Although I know that is not real, I would like to be thinner, if I could, so I keep the slim shape. I thought of being a cloud, but it is difficult to make my avatar look like a cloud. A cloud can change shape. When I saw those images in Flickr, I thought of how
artificial this world is. But our world is artificial too. Maybe becoming a cloud can help reduce these artificial images.”

Her reflection is short, but it shows that she has started to think about different representations.

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I begin my concluding chapter with this story in order to prompt reflections on the implications of this research. What are the strategies I could use to help students think critically? How can students connect the knowledge and experience they acquire from avatar creation to their own fields of art and education? Drawing from the pedagogical moments of the different experiences of avatar creation among my research participants, I suggest that avatar creation itself can be a pedagogy for learning about body image, identity, diversity, and our relationship with virtual technologies.

In the following sections, I summarize the findings and provide answers to my research questions. From the findings, I derive strategies for a pedagogy of avatar creation. Then I identify the limitations and explain the significance of this study, and I provide suggestions for future research. I end with my own reflections on this research journey.
Avatar-Self-Art-Knowledge-Making:

Summary of Findings and Discussion of Research Questions

These technologies have served not to transform bodies in any significant way—at least not yet—but to fundamentally transform the way that bodies are conceived, their sphere of imaginary and lived representation.

—Elizabeth Grosz (2001, p. 52)

In a virtual world, identity building is one of the main strategies of signification, and the avatar is the artist’s very first work.

—Domenico Quaranta (2008, para. 14)

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.

—Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005, p. 162)

Virtual-world technology and avatar creation do not change or replace one’s physical body directly. Virtual bodies, as many participants experienced them, are (part of) themselves. An avatar as an artist’s first work in the virtual world is a testament to the force of this medium. Although not all the participants were aware of this potentiality, many of them saw a connection between art-making and avatar-making. Learning, though, is a private experience (Sameshima, 2007), and learning moments are difficult to mark out. Yet, many participants realized that their experiences re/assembling avatars affected them. Avatar-making can be self-making, art-making, and knowledge-making.

Next, I present my summary and a discussion of my research findings.
How Do Different Avatar-Making Experiences Tell Stories of Identity and Self-Making?

Self-making is performative identity construction—to create a self, identity, or body, whatever term one prefers to conceptualize self. Avatar creation is the construction of a person’s double in cyberspace. However, it is important to understand that self-making through avatar creation can be perceived as creating only a separate self or identity. Although it seems that the virtual version of self is the second self (Kafai et al., 2010; Turkle, 2005), the virtual self could be conceived as part of the mixed-reality self. This mixed-reality self is a subject that is always already in the becoming, always already in-between, and always already an assemblage. It is also an assemblage that contains both the virtual and real, and functions in connection to others (Currier, 2002).

Each participant expresses his or her own story/experience on self-making through his or her avatar. The best way to understand these participants’ experiences is to become immersed in each narrative. I summarize how they create their virtual bodies below. Each newbie participant took a different approach to constructing his/her virtual identity. For instance, Allen desired a better-looking body, but preserved some traces of himself in his avatar; Betty wanted to present herself in a plain way; and Oliver wished to mimic his physical body in the virtual world. Cindy, on the other hand, created a unique body, and Tara constructed her avatar based on her desired body.

Bloggers, although they change the appearance of their avatars frequently, tend to develop a relationship with their virtual selves. Margarita’s avatar is no different from herself; therefore, her avatar re/assembling is her self-making. Stella re/assemble her real-life identity in her avatar, and, likewise, Carlie’s avatar and Brooke’s avatar are
assemblages of their real-life identities and constitute their virtual bodies. Leah uses her avatar as a technology for assembling and expressing her desires.

Fantasy players use their virtual existence for personal benefit; their virtual identities are their prostheses. Mo’s avatar is her canvas on which her creativity can be materialized. Raphael’s avatar is an apparatus whereby he presents and experiences himself as fully male. Violet’s avatar is a vehicle for new experiences. Pixie’s and Audrey’s avatars are parts of their bodies that are difficult to render in real life.

The SL technology influences the avatar choices of newbies. Newbies project and reflect on their own body images and desires in creating their avatars. Bloggers assemble clothing and body parts, such as skin and hair, to construct their avatars. Fantasy players materialize their imaginations through their avatar construction. Different participants and different groups of participants represent identity in distinct ways. Newbies tend to re-create their own physical bodies or attempt to create avatars that perfect idealized images of their own bodies. Bloggers represent their identities though the self-expression afforded by making clothing choices. Fantasy players represent their identities through accessing and projecting inner desires and the characteristics of the sub-cultures to which they wish to belong.

The experience of avatar construction for newbies reveals the extent to which identity relies on appearance. Avatar construction makes visible the bond between body and identity. For bloggers and fantasy players, parts of one’s identity are fulfilled by creating an avatar that cannot be realized in the physical world. Bloggers, though, show
that identity is instantiated in the continual changing and reassembling of body and clothing, whereas fantasy players construct identity through masquerade.

The participants’ self-making took place through real identity, clothing, desire, emotion, and virtual body. Some participants—Carlie and Brooke, for example—reflected that they constructed their avatars based on their real selves because they considered it important to be real. The newbies and many of the participants in the other groups all stayed with their real-life gender in order to make the connection between their real and virtual selves. Oliver re-created his physical appearance through his avatar. Allen’s avatar is also similar to himself, “only better” (according to Allen). Stella transferred her real-life identity to virtual space through her avatar’s real look. Carlie’s avatar represented her real body shape. Brook thought that she was being herself, her “real” self. Mo projected her body image onto her avatar. And, Pixie re-created herself (her furry self) in the virtual space. These connections with real selves illustrate that avatar construction is not a separate identity, but rather a mixed reality.

Most participants also valued the role of clothes in their self-making. Betty and Oliver both used clothes to represent themselves. Margarita connected with others through her fashion styles. Stella’s and Carlie’s fashion practices changed their real-life fashion choices. Violet and Mo also used clothes to express themselves and construct ideal or fictional characters. Clearly, clothes play an important role in online identity construction.

The participants also made their avatar selves based on their desires. Cindy projected her desire to be unique onto her avatar creation. Tara envisioned her avatar as
an idealized version of herself. Leah assembled her avatar as a way to fulfill her latent ambitions to be a stylist. Mo’s desire led her to create many different avatars.

Through making emotional connections with their avatars, some participants created virtual selves that were relatively close to their own physical bodies. Raphael reflected that he was attached to his avatar, and Violet noted that her avatar connected her to her own emotions.

The virtual body is the online identity. It is what makes the virtual self. Violet, Pixie, and Audrey all indicated that their avatars—whether Neko, furry cat, or furry wolf—were themselves, and that although they also have other avatars, those others are more like their costumes. The blogger participants also tended to agree that the shape of their avatars made them recognizable; thus, each blogger connected her identity to her avatar’s shape.

Self-making also establishes a relationship between the virtual body and the physical body. The relationship between one’s avatar and one’s self is complex. Avatars are seen as extensions of the self by some blogger and fantasy player participants. But they are also seen as external objects (e.g., dolls or pets) by the newbies and by some of the blogger participants. The relationships and connections between the participants and their avatars were formed through the time they spent creating, re-creating, and communicating with and through these forms. Newbies started to reflect on and relate themselves to their avatars, but given the limited time they had spent on their avatars, they had not developed fully fledged relationships with their avatars. However, Allen commented that his avatar did bear a resemblance to him and that he viewed it as a sort of
offspring. Cindy put it more strongly than Allen, though: referring to her avatar as her “baby,” she expressed the desire to care for it. Mo had different degrees of connection with her different avatars. Margarita, Violet, and Pixie all thought of their avatars as if not themselves, then as versions or representations of themselves. These relationships suggest the different and similar ways in which people in both the participant pool and in SL more generally connect with their avatars.

Self-making through avatar re/assembling helped many to make critical and creative decisions about themselves and to engage in activities that they could not easily pursue in their real lives. For example, Leah’s self-making gave her the tools to discover new things about herself. Raphael’s avatar gave him a chance to express himself as fully male and to be recognized as such. Pixie and Audrey were both able to construct their furry personas through their avatars. Allen observed that he thought of avatar construction as an ongoing project that can be used to understand an individual’s characteristics. Some of the participants used their avatar self-making as a way to transgress identity. For example, Mo’s avatar was her mask and political statement. Through avatar-making, these participants could be in a continuous process of self-making.

In What Ways is Creating an Avatar Art-Making?

An important aspect of the 3D virtual world is creativity. In fact, the virtual world has become a popular 3D medium in which to create and display art. As noted in Chapter 2, many artists are using avatars as a medium for creating their artwork. An even greater
number of artists are using the virtual world to create immersive, interactive, and/or mixed-reality new media art. And, too, many artists, museums, and galleries use the virtual environment to display real-world artwork or collections. In addition, many people, whether or not they are artists, have created photographs in the virtual environment.

Many of the research participants considered creating their avatars as partaking in the production of artwork from a modernist perspective.⁴ In this regard, Allen compared his avatar-making experience with his experience of editing images, whereas Raphael likened his process to that of sculpting. In Stella’s view, the process of creating her avatar was similar to her process in creating her photography artwork. Carlie also recognized this as her photography art form. Mo used her avatar to realize her artistic imagination.

Besides this direct comparison to the process of art creation, some participants used their avatars and the virtual environment to write stories. Violet, for example, constructed her avatar so that it furnished inspiration and illustrations for her stories. Furthermore, many of the bloggers also constructed narratives for their avatar pictures. These participants may or may not be like contemporary artists who use their avatars to reflect issues of identity and virtual body. However, there is no doubt that their avatars offer them a creative outlet. For the participant, avatar construction is art-making, much like creating (self) portraits, and their avatar-making provides opportunities for self-expression and commentary on their becomings.

Avatar creation becomes art-making that gain insights about the self by pushing the boundaries of identity in acts of creative communication with the medium of the

⁴ See Chapter 2 for the discussion.
avatar. When avatar creation comprises intentional creativity and a critique of existing identity, avatar-making becomes powerful art-making like that advocated and practiced by many contemporary artists. But more importantly, from the examples of the artists’ work, it is the insight into subjectivity that this medium can provide that makes it unique.

**How Do these Experiences Create Knowledge and Become Pedagogical?**

Knowledge-making moments in participants’ avatar embodiment experiences are learning experiences and pedagogical moments that produce a learning self (Ellsworth, 2005). Knowledge-making experiences relate to knowledge of self, knowledge of others, knowledge of the environment, knowledge of learning, and knowledge of transgression.

Avatar creation provides opportunities to reflect on and understand the self. Many participants are self-conscious about their decisions. Participants’ choices make a part or parts of their self-identity visible. For example, Oliver wanted an avatar that would resemble him, Brooke intended to create a plus-size Black avatar, and Pixie deliberately created her avatar as her “fursona.” These avatars provided each creator with an opportunity to work with these aspects of their identity, which is similar to Turkle’s (1995, 2011) idea of an “identity workshop.” Through reflection, they became aware of their own thinking about body images and identity. Audrey, for instance, learned more about her personality through embodying her avatar, and Tara reflected on her own body image after creating her avatar.

Many of the learning experiences relating to how stereotypes affect interactions between people took place when the research participants were embodied in their avatars.
and interacted in these forms. Participants learned about the different ways people are treated because of appearance, whether body size, race, gender, or species. As in the real world, visual appearance was very important to the construction of identity and as a signal prompting recognition. Virtual worlds and avatars amplify the issue by singling out specific aspects of appearance and personhood, such as race. This situation provides a learning opportunity for understanding some aspects of social inequality related to difference and identity.

Some participants were able to detect the limitations of technology through the process of creating their avatars. Brooke and Betty, for example, thought the technology was biased against larger people, as it tended to make the larger avatars look out of proportion and it was difficult to get clothes to fit in the correct way. Raphael observed that because of the way the technology is designed, people tend to follow the design. These observations suggest that the technology is neither natural nor neutral; that is, the technology actually shaped the participants’ choices. Avatar creation offers this insight and opportunity for critical thinking about the technology.

The production of an avatar provides participants with a chance to freely explore concepts such as identity, relationships with others, and the environment. Some reflect that such freedom creates opportunities for learning about the self in the making. Carlie, for instance, acknowledged that the process of creating her avatar had actually changed her in some way.

Moreover, a pedagogical moment may also occur when people challenge and transgress existing rules for the purpose of creating their own political agency. Be it
Brooke’s activism or Mo’s political statement about body size or the use of a male avatar to transgress gender, these experiences create knowledge about transformation that challenges socially and historically constructed assumptions about the body and identity.

Avatar creation can be a learning experience when reflection happens. These knowledge-making and pedagogical moments are all based on participants’ reflections about their avatar creation or embodiment. However, this is not to say that all avatar creations are critical or reflective. On the contrary, some participants accepted the socio-culturally conventional ways of thinking to represent their avatars entirely in accord with such. For students to become critical of their own avatar creations, art educators will almost certainly find it necessary to facilitate pedagogical processes for critical thinking.

**Avatar Creation as Pedagogy**

Pedagogy’s job is to declare knowledge already made to be merely half-living—unable to sustain life. Pedagogy’s job is to tear learning selves away from curriculum’s static objects of mourning, out of their loyalties to knowledges that are inert, noncontemporaneous, and already configured.

—Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005, pp. 164–165)

Although my research findings indicate that some of the participants did partake in learning and knowledge-making, the knowledge created belonged exclusively to each individual as it was based on individuated bodily experience—the knowledge was of, by, about, and given to each individual body. Lusted (1986) argued that not only is knowledge produced through research and disseminated via lectures, it is obtained in the “consciousness” between learners and other bodies. “Pedagogy addresses the ‘how’
questions involved not only in the transmission or reproduction of knowledge but also in its production” (p. 3). The focus of pedagogy is that of helping students to create knowledge through their own bodies. Therefore, to translate these research findings, I suggest avatar pedagogy as an element of art education. This involves using avatar creation as a means to provoke critical discussions about body image, identity, and technology. Process indicates continuing evolving approaches, techniques, and ways of learning, and the processes associated with avatar pedagogy are drawn from experiences produced by participants’ avatar creation and artists’ avatar art-making projects. I categorize these processes as follows: reflexive process, exploration process, mirror process, embodied process, reassembling process, desiring process, transgression process, simulation process, and avatar art-making process. These processes presented below are in no particular order and their relationships are rhizomatic. Figure 6-1 shows their rhizomatic interconnections in which each pedagogical process is part of other processes within a complex de-centered living system symbolized in my drawing of the inside of a jellyfish. A jellyfish does not have a brain, heart, or central nervous system. No one process is at its center, no one process dictates the others, and none is more important than any other. Further, the tentacles of a jellyfish (Figure 6-2) represent the potential to connect with other processes that are outside the findings of my study to be discovered in future research.
Figure 6-1. Rhizomatic relationships of pedagogical processes.
Figure 6-2. Jellyfish metaphor of pedagogical processes.
Pedagogical Processes

Reflexive process. Reflexive, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“Reflexive,” 2009) in its first meaning means “[c]apable of turning, deflecting, or bending (something) back.” In its second meaning, the word means “[o]f a mental action, process, etc.: turned or directed back upon the mind itself; involving intelligent self-awareness or self-examination; introspective.” A further meaning is “[c]apable of, inclined to, or characterized by reflection or serious thought.” Psychologist and sociologist George Herbert Mead defines reflexiveness as “the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself” (Mead, 1967, p. 134). Therefore, the reflexive is a loop process in which a person can be re/transformed through experience. It starts with reflection, which throws into relief the knowledge learned via the experience. For example, when reflecting on her avatar creation, Tara started to think about her own body and questioned the limits of her own self-approval. Through reflection, people revisit and rethink their experiences. Reflexivity occurs when these experiences and thoughts come back to shape a person’s thinking. This process also works to help students recognize and evaluate their learning experiences when they are working through other processes as described next.

Exploration process. An opportunity to explore and imagine the possibilities of transformation is one of the most important things avatars bring to these participants. Avatar construction is a method of self-expression and a way to obtain knowledge of self and others. Yet, it also provides a sense of freedom and an ability to do what cannot be done or what is difficult to achieve in real life. The exploration process concerns trying
things that are new and impossible in real life. Raphael uses his avatar to envision and enjoy an experience in which he is free from judgments based on gender stereotypes. Envisioning and imagining are the drivers of transformation (Gigliotti, 1999; M. Greene, 1995). Vision is not a fixed thing. It is a desire for something that is better in some ways at least than the current situation. Art-making is a way to “release imagination [and] open new perspectives, [and] to identify alternatives” (M. Greene, 1995, p. 18). The exploration process is one of imaginative art-making in that it affords possibilities for metamorphosis.

**Mirror process.** Like mirroring one’s own body, the process of re-creating a body image makes the invisible visible. Furthermore, this re-creation can make a powerful political statement. Oliver created his avatar based on his physical body. Carlie and Brooke also mirrored parts of their physical bodies onto their avatars. Brooke’s mirroring body image put her identity and body at the center of the discussion; this was powerful because identities and body images like hers are not commonly seen in the virtual world. The mirror process, thus, concerns how a person can offer his/her own body as a political statement and a center of discourse. For art education, the mirror process can be linked to creating an avatar self-portrait. Using an avatar as a medium enables students to embody themselves in a self-image, which not only serves as a technology for understanding the self, but also allows students to experience their body images in a self-reflexive way. That is, it allows them to see their own body images in themselves.

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2 Its effect is similar to that of performance pedagogy, “mimesis-mimicry”—a political strategy in which one’s mimesis of a patriarchal representation subverts the system and turns the “gaze” (or socially imposed idea of identity representation) back. See Garoian (1999) for a further discussion.
**Embodied process.** The emotional connection between a person and his/her avatar means that people can embody affects through avatars. One’s avatar embodiment could provoke emotion, and, as argued by Milton (2002), “emotions are fundamental to the process of learning” (p. 148). These emotional connections are also what make learning through avatar performance effective. Avatar embodiment can also produce empathy, “the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation” (“Empathy,” 1989).³ In other words, when a person can feel or sense things through his/her avatar, s/he can understand the experience better, whether it involves being treated differently or being accepted within a community, such as with Pixie and Audrey’s experiences. Therefore, the embodied process concerns the user’s emotional connection with his/her own avatar. To establish this connection, it is necessary for a person spend time as the avatar. By using the virtual body and interacting with others through it, a person can forge connections between the avatar and him/herself.

**Reassembling process.** The reassembling process entails choices, connections, and creativity. Through different combinations of body parts and items, one is able to express and communicate himself or herself though a virtual body. All the blogger participants and some of the fantasy player participants (such as Violet) were able to identify their choice of clothes and ways of reassembling their avatars as a means of creative self-expression, whereby they disrupted the thinking of others (e.g., Margarita) or focused on presenting innovations (e.g., Leah). In terms of the reassembling process, I

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suggest choosing from a variety of different body parts and clothing items, and thinking about the meanings of different combinations critically. For example, what does it mean to combine a Native American-Indian headdress with a European gown? The process of reassembling an avatar is akin to that of making a collage artwork. The collage art form enables people to connect and create different meanings from all previous meanings through new juxtapositions (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Reassembling an avatar provides connecting points at which cultural meanings and personal experiences are exchanged and thus multiply.

**Desiring process.** Creating avatars based on the idea of fulfilling desire is the central task of the desiring process. Desire is productivity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Creating an avatar based on desire in this regard can induce creativity. For example, Mo used her avatars in order to realize her creativity. Through her desire to become a series of different images, she continued in the becoming. The desiring process is not just about creating a desirable avatar image, but it is in the process of assembling and reassembling desires that the assemblage (the avatar and the body\(^4\)) functions, because an assemblage cannot exist without the desire to create it (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Through creating her avatar, Leah fulfilled her desire to become a stylist; her avatar was part of an assemblage that was constituted by her desires, and thus her assemblage was in the becoming. The desiring process transforms desire into something closer to realization: potential. Potential, according to Massumi (2002), is different from possible. Because possibility can be predicted, it does not necessarily enact qualitative change.

“Unprescribed” (p. 9), potentiality does not “preexist its emergence” (p. 226); therefore, \(^4\) See Chapter 1, for a discussion of assemblage.
potentiality is “not a calculable co-presence of already-possibilities” (p. 226). It is also important to note that the desiring process might be similar to the exploration process. Indeed, both of these processes focus on creating bodies in the virtual space that are impossible (or at least difficult to actualize) in the physical world. However, desire furthers exploration in that it involves the body’s emotions (for a discussion of affect, see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

**Transgression process.** The transgression process concerns avatars that transgress identities. Although the fantasy-player participants may not directly transform their identities, through the mixed-reality relationship with their avatars, they transform conventional ideas about the body and embodiment. For instance, Pixie’s avatar is her embodiment in a different form of her body (furry), such that her avatar transgresses the human identity in which she feels trapped. Transgressive avatar-making involves being creative in terms of visual representation, and as hooks (1994, 1996) stated, transgression is the beginning of transformation.

**Simulation process.** The simulation process inheres in simulated learning experiences. For example, Raphael’s two avatars mean that he has the means to experience people’s different attitudes toward males and females. In a sense, he simulated these different human interactions in the virtual world through his avatar constructions. Prensky (2007) argued that “simulation helps us understand complex issues [and] simulation is real-world experience” (para. 8–9). Specifically, simulation exists in and is important to our everyday lives (e.g., “desktop” and “trash can” in the computer screen5). Avatars are simulations of our bodies in the virtual environment. The simulated bodies

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5 For further discussion of simulated culture, see Turkle (1995).
“provoke questions about how reality is experienced and understood” (Toffoletti, 2007, p. 31). If simulations are already realities in our culture, then avatars are part of that reality. This means that experiences gained through simulated bodies are also real experiences. It is likewise important to know that the simulation process and the mirror process differ in that simulating is not necessarily based on a real body, but mirroring is based on a real body outside of the screen.

**Avatar art-making process.** The processes described in the previous section are not the only processes that can help students learn through avatar creation. Art-making through avatars can further engage students in thinking about identity and the body. Based on different artists’ work, as discussed in Chapter 2, avatars are an effective medium through which to create art that raises issues about body image, identity, and associated issues. Avatar-making is an embodied experience of art-making when students can create machinima or performance art projects to reflect on different issues using their avatars.

**The Limitations of Avatar Pedagogy**

Although I suggest these processes as defining avatar pedagogy based on my research findings, it is important to note that my research participants may represent only a fraction of avatar construction possibilities. Given the limited parameters of this study, further research is needed. Each process does not dictate only one kind of learning

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6 Philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994) goes further to argue that simulation is more real than real and “a real without origin or reality” (p. 1) is, in his term “hyperreal.” In other words, simulation creates reality.
experience. No matter which process is used, therefore, it is important that students can reflect critically on their choices and experiences. Teachers can choose processes according to teaching goals or themes in a course of study. For example, a teacher who wishes to discuss body images with students may productively focus on mirror or desire processes. I describe the limitations of avatar pedagogy next:

1. *Not practicable in many educational institutions.* Although virtual worlds have become popular in higher education in the past few years, it is still impractical for many K–12 teachers to use them in their teaching due to limited school equipment, curriculum constraints, insufficient knowledge on the part of teachers, and other factors. Many K–12 educational projects in virtual worlds take place through after-school clubs or are offered by non-profit organizations such as Global Kids. The development of experimental virtual world technology still has a long way to go in order to be more easily accessible for educational purposes. This also suggests that SL is only one example of a virtual world; it is not the only location in which to practice avatar pedagogy. Thus, educators should not confine themselves to specific virtual world technology.

2. *Potential dangers involved in open online learning environments.* An open online virtual world is a real-world learning environment. Many of the related dangers are, in fact, similar to those in any online environment, and the real world encountered in any authentic learning approach in K–12 education. For some educators, this is not desirable because of the potential for situations that they are unable to control, such as

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7 There are also obstacles to using virtual worlds in higher education environments that are slowing down the adoption of the technology. For example, SL has technological limitations and a steep learning curve. It also makes high demands on computer equipment.
students encountering griefers\textsuperscript{8} who harass them and disturb their efforts to learn. Educators need to inform students about the potentially harmful situations of an open virtual environment like Second Life. They also need to come up with and implement guidelines that are communicated to the students in order to negotiate the most common potential problems.

3. The limitations of representation. Many of the relevant processes rely heavily on the importance of visual representation to identity. But the experiences of participants, such as Cindy (newbie), who could not create an avatar that fulfilled her vision, and Carlie (experienced participant) who was unable to find a skin close to that of her real-life identity, make the limitations of technology and representation evident. More importantly, identity is not just about representation. Embodying and performing an identity is also central to learning about identity. Therefore, a combination of the processes mentioned above with avatar art-making, which students perform through avatars, could fill the gap. In addition, Olkowski (1999) argued, based on Deleuze’s philosophy, that if we are to go beyond a mere critique of representation,\textsuperscript{9} the representational model that operates identity categories must be “ruined.” In keeping with the idea of ruining representation, avatar re/assembling should be seen as process of becoming such that individuals cannot be bounded in a specific representation of identity, but are always in the becoming. Moreover, the predicted technological advances could provide more realistic avatars that resemble people’s expressions and movement (see

\textsuperscript{8} A griefer is a player or user in an online gaming or virtual environment who causes problems for others.

\textsuperscript{9} Olkowski (1999) stated that “it hardly seems fruitful to continue down the path of general statements about objectified looking or about which social contexts women or minorities are or are not allowed to participate in. Such representations do no more than register a complaint against the norms of language, images, and social and political structures” (p. 2).
Thus, an important question is generated: When technology emphasizes the importance of representation, can educators utilize such technology to break the boundaries created by representation? I think such a breakthrough would require more creative processes to be developed by educators.

**Limitations of the Research and Suggestions for Future Research**

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a great deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you walk,” said the Cat.
“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”
——Lewis Carroll (1865/1897, pp. 89-90)

There are two constraints in my study. The first involves the participants. I grouped the participants into three different levels based on what I thought would be distinctively different kinds of experiences. As expected, the newbies’ experiences did differ significantly from those of the bloggers and fantasy players. However, the latter two groups evinced some important similarities. Therefore, the study is constrained by what may not be a particularly salient way of pre-defining the participant groups. However, it should also be noted that no attempt to offer a taxonomy of participants will produce groups whose members have experiences that are sealed off from each other. Considerations of the experiences of avatar creation according to different kinds of groups would be a useful future direction.

My research design necessitated that I meet the newbies in person and also meant that the newbie participants I interviewed were not necessarily virtual-world users by
nature. In other words, they would probably not have joined SL had it not been for this study. One possible reason they participated was because they received compensation. Another possible reason was that they had heard about SL, but did not have the time, skills, or motivation to try it by themselves, so they took the opportunity to learn about SL by participating in the study. Three of them said that they found Second Life to be interesting, but that they were unlikely to continue with it because they thought it might be addictive and they could not spare the time for it. For future studies, finding newbie participants who have already joined the virtual world might provide different insights.

Many content creators develop different avatars, which they then offer for sale. Investigating the experience of avatar creation by content creators is another direction to explore in assessing the impact of the market economy on the images produced and worn.

This study did not offer a consideration of role-players, who see the virtual world as a game and play specific characters within the rules of the selected narrative. Therefore, future research could study this group of participants in order to understand their avatar experiences.

The second constraint is the assumption that avatar construction constitutes identity construction. Although drawing from much research about the connections between avatar and identity, this study does not consider other possibilities. Could avatar construction be about something other than identity construction for some participants? What are some of the other possibilities?

Last but not least, the pedagogy and processes I have suggested need further development. Additional collaborative action research on avatar pedagogy could provide
a range of suggestions for teaching avatar creation to different age groups and to people with different levels of experience, with a focus on specific communities and social issues.

What Can This Research Do?

An avatar can be an interaction between body, identity, and technology. This exploratory study provides insights into experiences of avatar creation in order to understand how people construct identities online. As virtual worlds are becoming more accepted by educators, understanding experiences of avatar creation can help us to better understand the impact of these new technologies on identity formation and transformation. This study provides possible answers to questions about different ways of self-making through a virtual environment. Although these may by no means represent all the possible ways of exploring avatar creation, this study provides insights and potentialities.

This research offers a foundation for developing pedagogical processes with which to address issues about the body, identity, and technology that are relevant in the era of digital technologies. Although the research site Second Life may not be available to all K–12 school students, many virtual worlds are available to these age groups. The technologies used vary between the different virtual worlds; however, the concept of the avatar as a representation of identity remains the same. Located at the center of

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10 Many educators are also using OpenSim (http://opensimulator.org), a virtual-world technology that is similar to Second Life, for educational purposes. As educators can set up their own virtual worlds with OpenSim technology, they can have full control of who uses it such that students of all ages can be afforded the opportunity to participate in the virtual environment.
questioning about the body and body image, identity and self-making, and art-making and knowledge-making through digital technology, this study is important to art educators and, therefore, to the field of art education. What I found and translated into pedagogical processes will be useful to teachers interested in creative avatar and virtual-world art-making, knowledge-making, and self-making.

Reflections on My Research Journey

“I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”

—Lewis Carroll (1865/1897, p. 19)

My research started at the very first moment that my avatar came into being, and there is no end to this journey. Online digital technologies serve to make the inquiry about avatars more important. However, there is still a need to bring this study to an end. Although this is the end of the study, I hope that it can also become the beginning of another study. As noted, new questions have arisen from my investigations about ideas for future research.

During my research process, I struggled with several challenges. First, it took me a while to find five participants for the newbie group. Although I recruited participants by posting information on bulletin boards and in newsletters, I received only a few responses; and with further contact, some people would not participate. This led me to think about the possibility that many people are not interested in the virtual world and perhaps even have negative views of it. Of course, I cannot rule out the possibility that
the key requirement of the research (asking to meet in person and spending some time learning to create an avatar) might have been difficult for many people with busy daily schedules. The second challenge I faced was that I could not separate my role as a researcher from my role as a participant. It was often the case that I did not know whether my session in SL should count as research or as personal time. Because I am an ongoing participant of the virtual world, it seems that there is no end date for the field trip. I have adopted an approach in which I note things of interest to this study, whether for personal enjoyment (such as logging in to buy a new pair of jeans) or specifically for observing the virtual world for a designated period of time (for instance, going to Fantasy Fair to watch events and avatars). This journey has been fruitful for me. I reflected on my own choices and have come to be more appreciative of the creative aspect of this technology. On the other hand, I also struggle with justifying my research. Is the virtual world really relevant in education? Is the virtual world just a fantasy reflecting human desires? Having learned from the participants’ unique experiences, I have concluded that virtual worlds are important sites for self-making and that educators should not ignore these sites’ potential for learning.

Using my avatar as an exploratory and experimental methodological device, I am able to participate in the virtual world and observe its culture. Without this device, I would feel that a glass layer separated me from the participants. I will not put my avatar on the shelf because this particular study is over. Instead, through the insights provided by the research participants, my avatar is full of energy and ideas, ready to take on more adventures.
Epilogue: Last Entry

When I was ready to log out of Second Life in order to prepare for my evening class, a notecard from Alice popped up.

Alice had invited her friends to participate in the photoshoot for her blog.

“What?!” I suddenly felt a sense of my heart becoming heavy. I could not believe that Alice was going to stop blogging. She had not mentioned this decision in our chat of just the day before. I had thought that she would be blogging forever. I IM’ed her immediately.

Liliann: You are going to stop blogging?

*I waited in frozen time. Maybe a minute or two. Finally, I received her IM.*
Alice: Yes, I stated that in my notecard. Sorry that I didn’t tell you in a more personal way.

Liliann: Why? I enjoyed your blog very much.

Alice: Thank you. Everything comes to an end. I want to thank you for sharing your research with me. I have learned a lot from you too. Sometimes, I am not sure why I spend so much time creating different looks. Although I liked it, I didn’t know what it meant to me. It wasn’t until you started sharing your research findings that I realized I was not alone. This virtual part of me has become important to my well-being. I can never imagine being without my avatar. It is part of me for sure.

Liliann: What has made you decide not to blog anymore? Are you going to leave SL as well?

I was anxious to receive an answer from her.

Alice: No, I will not leave SL, but maybe I will log off for a while. Although this process has taught me a lot, it cost me time as well. Living in the virtual world is great, but I also need to take care of my physical body. After all, without my body, my avatar cannot come to life. It is to find the balance.

Liliann: Yes, I know that is important. We will still be friends, right?

Alice: Of course, I am looking forward to seeing your dissertation. Good Luck!

Later that night, I attended Alice’s photoshoot. I had been to her photo studio a few times before when she had asked me to give her some suggestions about her outfits
or showed me her new purchases. The studio is a large white cube, just like a blank canvas where she can draw anything. When I arrived, there were about ten other avatars. They were her friends. I recognized only one of the avatars—one of the bloggers whom I had interviewed for this study. She did not seem to remember me, perhaps because I had only talked to her once. I did not say anything to her or to anyone—not even to Alice. Alice was arranging and assigning everyone to different pose balls\textsuperscript{11} on the stage. Some others came. I stood in the back row. The pose ball animated my virtual body as if I were a puppet. My left hand was on my waist and my right arm straight down. I realized that the animation did not control my avatar’s facial expressions, so I used my own facial expression control tool and to put a smile on my face. The place started to lag. This was hardly surprising, as by now about 25 avatars had gathered, many of whom were wearing clothes with many detailed sculpties.\textsuperscript{12} Everyone was trying to be as fabulous as possible. After waiting for a while, Alice joined us and stood in the center front making a cute v hand gesture near her right eye. However, I did not hear any of the camera clicks that are usual when pictures are taken in SL. But Alice announced that the shoot was over and that everyone could start moving again. What an interesting virtual photoshooting experience, I thought. I had never taken a picture with so many avatars at the same time. Alice thanked everyone and told us to expect the blog post tomorrow morning. Then she logged off.

\textsuperscript{11} A pose ball is a ball-shaped object containing animation that can make a specific posture or movement.
\textsuperscript{12} A sculpty is a prim object in SL. They are created through 3D modeling programs outside of the SL program and then being imported to SL.
I opened my browser the next day, eager to see the picture. I had not looked at her closely the previous night. In harajuku style, she was wearing lots of cute accessories with a pink mini skirt and huge leg warmers. She laughed, using the same facial expressions as I had. I could not disengage my gaze from these two laughing faces belonging to Alice and my avatar. Alice had posted this note under the picture:

Dear readers,

Thank you for supporting my blog. This is my last blog entry. I am going to focus on other things I have to do. I can only do one thing at a time. After all, I only have one body. I hope you can understand. The process has been rewarding. I enjoy and am really thankful for your compliments. Now I want to share a poem with you as my last gift.

It is you. It is you.

My avatar, my body, my heart.

I dress you, I comb you, like my child.

You have magic. I have seen it.

You give me courage and hope.

When I gaze through your eyes, I see my reflection.

You make me smile, you make me sad.

It is you that I am in love with.

I will miss you. Just like I miss my old friend.
But someday, we will meet again.

You will tell me all your adventures, and I will share all my changes.

No matter how long it takes.

But love will remain the same between us.

My avatar, my body, my heart.

Love you all,

Alice

I sat in front of my computer screen, wanting to hug Alice. I already missed her.
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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

:-) or :)
internet expression: smile

:P
Internet expression: sticking your tongue out, often means joking

Chat Log
Text recording of an online chat in Second Life

In-world
Within the virtual world of Second Life

LOL
Internet acronym: laugh out loud

Machinima
Film technique that uses a real-time 3D computer engine to create a movie (video games and virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are popular sites for machinima movie production)

Neko
Fantasy hybrid creature consisting of a human and a cat (Second Life has a significant Neko sub-culture)

Photoshop(ping)
Image-editing program, so popular that the term “photoshopping” is used to mean editing images in general

Prim
Short for primitive, a 3D object unit in Second Life

Real Life (RL)
Physical world, in contrast to virtual worlds, especially Second Life
Second Life (SL)
Virtual world created by Linden Lab and launched in 2003 and the research site of this study

Sim
Simulation, used in Second Life to refer to a simulated place, usually an island or several islands

Techno-Body
A body changed, enhanced, or replaced by technology

Virtual World
Simulated online computer environment that allows people to communicate and interact with each other

XD
Internet expression: laughing face with eyes closed, often means hilarious

^^
Internet expression: smile with eyes closed
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT STATEMENT

Recruitment Statement (for newbie participants):

Dear Penn State Students, Staff, and Faculty:

Have you heard about Second Life®? It is a virtual world in which you can create your avatar(s) and participate in many activities through your avatar—including social, arts, education, and entertainment events, and more? Do you know that you can create many different avatar looks, construct different identities, and be who/whatever you want to be? Second Life® states in its Web site that the only limitation is your imagination. If you have not had an opportunity to try it, now you can participate in this study to experience creating your own avatar. You will be given a $10 Target store gift card for completing the study. To participate in this study, you need to be 18 years of age or older and have never used the Second Life® program before.

The study will ask you to create an avatar in Second Life®. Instructions about using the program will be given in person. It might take about 15 minutes to learn the program. Your screen action of avatar creation will be observed and recorded only for interview and research purposes. The time for creating an avatar might range from 30 minutes to one or two hours. There is no time limitation for you to create your avatar. An interview will take place a week after you create your first avatar to understand your
experience and what you have learned from the process. The interview might take about one hour.

Please contact Christine Liao: cll212@psu.edu if you are interested in participating in the study.

Christine Liao is a Ph.D. candidate in Art Education at The Pennsylvania State University. This research is part of Christine Liao’s doctoral dissertation research at Penn State.
Recruitment Statement (for fashion blogger and fantasy player participants):

Dear XXX,

I am a Ph.D. student in Art Education from Penn State University. I am doing a study on avatar creating experience. Your blog (or posts) of your Second Life® avatar creation (or your avatar creation) is the interest of the study. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In the study, I will interview you to ask questions about your experience related to your avatar creation and performance. The interview will take about an hour in Second Life® via either instant message or voice chat (your choice). You will be given L$ 2000 (equivalent to about $8, although the exchange rate varies every day) two weeks after completing the interview. The interview is been conducted solely for research purposes. Your name and information will not be available to others. If you are interested in participating, I will send you an implied consent via email or note card in Second Life®. Please let me know if you are willing to participate. Your participation will contribute to the understanding of avatar creating experience and will further benefit education. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Christine Liao

Contact information: cll212@psu.edu or send instant message or note card to Liliann Ling in Second Life®
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Avatar Re/assembling as Critical Learning Experience

Principal Investigator: Christine Liao, Ph.D. student
207 Arts Cottage
University Park, PA 16802
814-441-9368; cll212@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd
210 Arts Cottage
University Park, PA 16802
814-863-7312; ktk2@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to understand your experience of avatar creating and understand what you have learned from this process.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to go to http://secondlife.com, create a free account, and chose an avatar to start with. Then you will be asked to use the Second Life® program and login with your account name to change your avatar appearance. The instruction of how to use the Second Life® program and change your avatar appearance will be provided in person after you login. You can ask technical questions about how to use the program during the process. Your screen activity of changing avatar appearance will be recorded for interview and research purposes. Christine Liao will be observing your actions, decisions, and reactions while you create your avatar. There is no time limitation for your avatar creation. Create an avatar that you are satisfied with and will likely use for participating in activities in Second Life® in the future. A week after the creation of your avatar, you will be asked for an interview. The screen recording of your avatar creation will be played first to remind what you have done. The interview process will be audio recorded. If necessary, you will be asked for another follow-up interview to clarify your responses.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research. When you change your avatar appearance, your avatar might look naked. You will be asked to change your avatar appearance in my private space in *Second Life®,* so no other avatars will see you. Some of the interview questions might be personal and might cause discomfort, and if so you do not need to respond.

**Benefits:** You might learn more about yourself, body images, and identities from participating in this study. The study will provide understanding of the experience of avatar creation. These experiences are important for educators who are interested in using virtual environments, especially *Second Life®,* in their teaching because they will have greater understanding of what people learn from avatar creation. Educators can create pedagogy and strategies to better use avatars in education.

4. **Duration/Time:** There is no time limitation for your avatar creation. The time might range from 30 minutes to hours. The interview will take place a week after you created your avatar. It might take 30 minutes to an hour or longer depending on your answers to the interview questions. If necessary, you will be contacted for a follow-up interview to clarify statements in the initial interview.

5. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured in the researcher’s personal computer. Penn State’s Office for Research Protections, the Social Science Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. You will be given a pseudonym in the final report. No other people will know your name and identity. The screen recording and your avatar pictures might be used in future publication; however, they will not be linked to your real identity. The audio recording of interview will not be labeled and linked to your real identity. The screen recording and audio recording of interview will be stored in a personal computer, where no other people, other than Christine Liao will have access to it. The recordings will be kept indefinitely. Your avatar creation belongs to you. This study and I will not have access to your avatar account in *Second Life®.* Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

6. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Christine Liao at (814) 441-9368 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. All
questions about research procedures can only be answered by the principal investigator.

7. **Payment for participation:** You will receive a $10 Target store gift card two weeks after the interview is completed. You will be contacted via email and given the gift card in person.

8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

I give permission for my recordings to be archived for use in the following ways: replaying before interview, analyzing for research purpose, still images of avatar creation to be shown in conference presentations and possible publications.

_____________________________________________  _____________________
Participant Signature      Date

_____________________________________________  _____________________
Person Obtaining Consent     Date
APPENDIX D

IMPLIED INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Implied Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Avatar Re/assembling as Critical Learning Experience

Principal Investigator: Christine Liao, Ph.D. student
207 Arts Cottage
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 441-9368; cll212@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd
210 Arts Cottage
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-7312; ktk2@psu.edu

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to understand your experience of avatar creating and understand what you have learned from this process.

2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked for an interview in Second Life® either via instant message chat or voice chat function. The interview process will be recorded (saved texts or recorded voice) for data analysis purpose. If necessary, you will be contacted again for a follow-up interview to clarify your responses. Your avatar images and/or blog/Web site writing will also be collected for research analysis purposes.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research. Some of the questions might be personal and might cause discomfort, and if so you do not need to respond.

4. **Benefits:** You might learn more about you self, body images, and identities after this study. The study will provide understanding of the experience of avatar creation. These experiences are important for educators who are interested in using virtual environments, specially Second Life, in their teaching. Because they will have greater
understanding of what people learn from avatar creation. Educators can create pedagogy and strategies to better use avatars in education.

5. **Duration:** It will take about an hour for the interview, however, time might vary depending on your answers.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The survey does not ask for any information that would identify to whom the responses belong. Penn State’s Office for Research Protections, the Social Science Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared because your name is in no way linked to your responses. The audio recording (if interview is via voice) will be stored in Christine Liao’s personal computer indefinitely. Only Christine Liao will have access to the recordings. Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Christine Liao at (814) 441-9368 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. All questions about research procedures can only be answered by the principal investigator.

8. **Payment for participation:** You will receive L$2000 Linden dollars two weeks after the interview is completed. L$2000 is equivalent to about $8, but the exchange rate varies every day. The payment will be sent directly to your avatar account in Second Life®.

9. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.
I give permission for my recordings to be archived for use in the following way: research data analysis.

Agreeing of the interview implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to take part in the research.

Please print off this form to keep for your records.
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Interview Protocol

The interviews will be conducted at 401 Patterson computer lab for the first group of people and in Second Life® for the second and third group of people. Those who consent to an interview will meet with the principal investigator for an hour length interview. The interview will ask open-ended questions about their experiences of creating an avatar and from their responses other questions will emerge to seek deeper understanding of their experience of creating avatars. A second interview will be conducted to clarify their responses if needed. The interviews will be audio recorded or chat logged for transcription and analysis purpose.

Process:

(1). The principal investigator will open the interview developing a rapport with the interviewee. There will be a brief self-introduction, an overview of the research study, and an explanation of the interviewee's role in the study.

(2). There will be a discussion about the confidentiality of the interview process, its duration of time, and the use of a tape recorder/chat log. The interviewee will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym at this point.

(3). Once the interviewee understands what is being asked of them and is comfortable with the process the principal investigator will begin the interview.

(4). Open-ended questions will be asked of the interviewee concerning the experience of creating an avatar. These are semi-structured interviews therefore some questions will emerge throughout the interview process. The principal investigator could ask some clarifying questions to confirm what has been stated.

(5). At the end of the interview the interviewee will be asked if he or she would like to add anything else that interviewee feels is important or has not come up in the interview.

(6). The principal investigator will end the interview process thanking the interviewee for his or her time.

Interview Questions:
Below are the interview questions to each group of participants. The wording of some questions might change depending on different participants’ experience. Some questions will emerge throughout the interview process. Follow-up questions centering on the interview questions but asking for further explanation and information might be asked.

(1). Newbies:

1. What do you know about Second Life and avatar before this study? What do you know about them after creating your avatar? Is there anything you learned unexpected?
2. Please describe your avatar and tell your overall experience of creating an avatar.
3. Describe the decision you made to change the avatar. What do you think is most important to change when you began to create your avatar? Where (which body part) did you start your modification? Why?
4. Are there specific personal reasons that drive your decision to create this avatar?
5. Why do you chose to stay the same gender (or opposite gender or to be another species)?
6. When you create this avatar, do you try to create it somewhat like your physical appearance or do you try to create an avatar that is not like you at all? Do you think this avatar reflects you in same way or not at all?
7. What would your ideal avatar look like?
8. What do you think about your avatar creation? Are you satisfied with this avatar? Or are you limited by the technical skill and the functions on the software you can use? What are the difficulties of creating this avatar and/or your ideal avatar?
9. What did you learn from creating an avatar?
10. Describe this experience. Does this experience make you feel good or bad about yourself? Why?
11. Do you have any emotional connection to this avatar after creating your avatar? Why or why not?
12. What was in your mind during the process of creating your avatar? (Did a specific body image or look come to mind?)
13. What did you think or what was in your mind when watching you avatar creation process again? Did anything come up that you did not think of while creating it?

(2). Bloggers:

1. What motivated you to create a blog or post your avatar photos online? What makes you start doing so? Why?
2. Please describe your avatar.
3. Do you create your own avatar? Clothes, shape, skin...etc. Or do you buy these from other people/stores? Do you create your own outfit? Do you change your body shape?
4. How do you learn to create your avatar?
5. How often do you usually change your avatar?
6. Is there any avatar (or avatar appearance) that stands out in your memory? Or is special to you? Your favorite? Why?
7. What would your ideal avatar look like?
8. What are things that make you change your avatar? What inspires you to create your avatar or change your avatar appearance?
9. What do you think your avatar is fashionable in SL? Do you think you are a fashionable person in RL?
10. What do you think about most people’s avatar? (Conventional pretty, sexy, stereotypical…etc.) Do you think your avatar is different from most people’s avatar? Why and how?
11. Have you ever wanted to create a very special avatar? (Different from most people’s)
12. What are the emotional connections to your avatar creation, if any?
13. What is your avatar’s relationship to you?
14. What do you think is the meaning of your avatar in relation to others?
15. Can you think of a special experience with an avatar you have created?
16. Can you tell a special story about your avatar creation? Why do you think this experience stands out?
17. Have you ever created and used an avatar that is different from your real gender (or other) identity? Why or why not?
18. Does your avatar represent any of your real life identity?
19. What do you feel about being able to change your avatar (virtual body)?
20. Have the avatar you created (or the process of creating it) ever brought you something that you never thought of? (in the process of using it or creating it)
21. What did you learn from this experience of creating avatars and blogging about your avatars?
22. Have you ever had a moment that your feel embodied with your avatar? Describe the moment.
23. Can you see your desire or imagination realized through avatar creation? How?
24. Do you think you have control over your avatar creation? Or are there any limitations?
25. Do you perform differently when using different avatars? What are the differences? What do you think makes the difference?
26. What do you think when creating your avatar? (Do you think about your own identity, body image, etc.)
27. What do you think the thing you are doing (posting avatar pictures in a blog) means to you? What do you learn from this process?

(3). Fantasy Players:

1. Please describe your avatar.
2. What is the purpose of creating this avatar? Why do you create your avatar this way?
3. Do you create your own avatar, including clothes, shape, skin, etc., or do you buy them?
4. Do you think there is any limitation of avatar creation in Second Life?
5. What was in your mind when creating this avatar?
6. What do you think about most people’s avatar?
7. What do you think about this avatar in relation to others?
8. What are your experiences with this avatar? Please tell me a story about an experience with this avatar? Do you create stories as this avatar, or with this avatar, or for this avatar?
9. What have you learned from creating and performing with this avatar?
10. Do you know yourself better after creating this avatar?
11. Do you have other avatars? When and why do you use this avatar?
12. What is your feeling when using this avatar?
13. Do you feel emotional attached to this avatar?
14. How do you perform this avatar? Do you give specific identity to your avatar? Or do you perform no differently than as your real identity?
15. What are others’ reactions to your avatar? Do people talk to you more often when you use this avatar?
16. In what ways have impacted others through the performance of this avatar?
17. What are the links of this avatar and your identity or physical appearance, is there is any? Why or why not do you choose to link or not link yourself to your avatar?
18. What is the meaning of avatar creation to you?
VITA

CHRISTINE L. LIAO

EDUCATION

Ph.D. in Art Education
(Minor in Science, Technology, and Society) The Pennsylvania State University, 2011

M.A. in Art Education National Hsinchu Teachers College, Hsinchu City, Taiwan, 2003

B.Ed. in Art Education National Hsinchu Teachers College, Hsinchu City, Taiwan, 1999

SELECTED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

Instructor, Penn State University, University Park, PA
Visual Culture and Educational Technologies 2008 - 2010, Spring 2011

Teaching Assistant, Penn State University, University Park, PA
Introduction to the Visual Arts 2006 - 2007
Visual Culture and Educational Technologies 2007 - 2008, Fall 2010, Fall 2011
Diversity, Pedagogy, and Visual Culture 2007 - 2008, Fall 2011
Capstone Course in Art Education 2007 - 2008
Introduction to Visual Studies (Online) 2010 - 2011


SELECTED PUBLICATIONS


SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


