

entering the screen

'My whole life, I've wondered what it would be like to be this side of the screen.' [Cecilia] *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Woody Allen, 1985.

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Something new is happening with our screen experiences. All of a sudden, we're not just spectators watching our screens, we're active participants, performers and media makers. We're all tired of just watching. In the digital age, we are entering the screen...



Adam Ramona (Adam Nash) and Mashup Islander (Chris Dodds) standing in front of *Cantata Park* (2007), their interactive 3D audiovisual sculpture in *Second Life*.



In websites like MySpace, Flickr and YouTube we project images of ourselves into the global media realm, where real and fictional identities can be difficult to tell apart. Lonelygirl 15 (an actress portraying a cloistered school student) found her 15 minutes of fame on YouTube before being exposed as a fake. People post pictures on their MySpace websites that may or may not reflect their real world identities. As the famous cartoon of a dog sitting at a computer tells us, 'On the internet nobody knows you're a dog.' This is particularly the case in our new media spaces of games and virtual worlds. In

games like Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* we can become druids or warriors undertaking fantasy quests and battles and in virtual worlds we can be literally anything we want to be (or at least that's the hype). These new interactive screen spaces of the web, games and virtual worlds act as 'portals' allowing us to become a part of the media image rather than just watching it. No longer content to just watch the action, we're creating our own online identities and becoming our own screen heroes acting out our own virtual adventures.

This active and participatory role of audiences is becoming a defining feature of the new media and entertainment landscape and is part of the Internet trend towards Web 2.0 which emphasises the use of the web for user-generated content, social networking and collaboration. With slogans like 'Broadcast Yourself' (YouTube) and 'Your world. Your imagination' (Second Life), users are being urged to be participants, creating, contributing to and interacting with our new media realms.

Life on Screen: Avatar Identities

Despite the hype associated with Web 2.0 and new virtual worlds like *Second Life*, user participation in the virtual media space of the Internet is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1980s, the Internet has been inhabited by a wealth of virtual communities and role-playing games. More than a decade ago in her book *Life on the Screen* (1995) Sherry Turkle described the text-based online role-playing games and virtual environments of MUDs (Multi-User Domains) as identity workshops where users could create and experiment with a range of different online identities. Some users' online personas were closely aligned with their real life identities while others created alter egos or fantasy personas that allowed them to explore identities that were very different from those of their real life selves. As computing power and bandwidth have improved, the Internet has become increasingly media-rich and graphical environments and pictorial representations of users have largely replaced the earlier text-based environments and identities of MUDs.

The term avatar, as a description of users' pictorial screen personas, was first used in the mid-1980s in an online role-playing game called *Habitat* developed by LucasFilms and became widely popularised by Neal Stephenson's 1992 cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*. Building on William Gibson's earlier notion of 'cyberspace' in *Neuromancer* (1984), as a 'consensual hallucination' created by millions of online users, the users in *Snow Crash* teleport into the online world of the Metaverse wearing avatar identities of their choice.

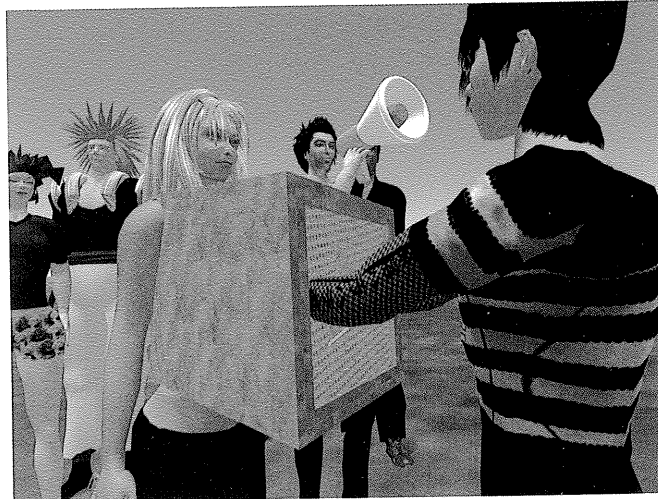
'Your avatar can look any way you want it to up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. Spend five minutes walking down the Street and you will see all of these.'

Stephenson's avatar-inhabited Metaverse described in *Snow Crash* has become something of a blueprint for many of today's online virtual worlds such as *Entropia Universe*, *There*

and *The Sims Online*, however, the most publicised virtual world in recent times is Linden Lab's *Second Life* where users, called residents, are active participants in creating not only their own avatar identities, but also the virtual world around them.

This promise of inhabiting a new 'skin' and creating a fantasy alter ego or second self lies at the heart of the appeal of many popular virtual worlds. While some people, particularly those who have recognisable and marketable real life identities, inhabit avatars that resemble their offline selves (albeit frequently glossier and younger cartoon-like versions of themselves), one of the pleasures of online worlds and games is being able to construct an idealised fantasy identity and the lifestyle to go along with it.

An individual's identification with her avatar identity in virtual worlds or games is very different from the types of spectatorial identification that are possible for film and television viewers. Because of the participatory nature of these new virtual media arenas, users can literally inhabit and become a character in their own right rather than just imaginatively identifying with their on-screen heroes. In our media and celebrity-driven culture, the promise of being visible on the virtual screen is very seductive, particularly when you can be whoever you want to be (or at least look like them). In *Second Life* you can design or buy any identity you want. A perfect face and body – so difficult to attain in real life – are no problem in *Second Life* where they can be designed or bought at will. *Second Life* becomes a mirror that not only reflects identities from the real world but also serves to intensify popular stereotypes of beauty and sexual attractiveness.



Eva and Franco Mattes a.k.a. 01001011010101.ORG, *Reenactment of Valie Export's Tapp und Tastkino 2007*, synthetic Performance in *Second Life*, courtesy of the artists.

Many users experience a strong sense of identification with their online avatars. Angela Thomas, an Education lecturer at the University of Sydney, describes her close identification with her *Second Life* avatar identity Anya Ixchel:

'I am ... completely invested in my avatar – emotionally and financially. I have spent a lot of time and money hunting for the perfect skin, the prettiest eyes, the longest eyelashes, and of course, the glorious fashions. ... My avatar is me and it expresses my personality and identity just as much as my words do. It reflects my inner sense of aesthetics and beauty. It also reflects my fantasies to be my own image of the ideal feminine beauty.'

In her *Second Life* avatar, Thomas has created the self she would like to be, her avatar can be seen as an aspirational self-creation or self-portrait. This idea that the avatar is a form of self-portraiture is explored by the artists Eva and Franco Mattes (a.k.a. 01001011010101.ORG) in their *Second Life* art project and exhibition *Thirteen Most Beautiful Avatars*. This

project from 2006 playfully references Andy Warhol's *Screen Test* series from the 1960s, *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* (1964) and *Thirteen Most Beautiful Women* (1964). The Mattes compiled their exhibition of avatar portraits after spending a year in *Second Life* interacting with its residents and taking their virtual portraits. The exhibition was exhibited in a real world gallery space at the Italian Academy in Columbia University, New York (Nov 30-Dec 19, 2006) and a 3D replica of the exhibition was recreated online in *Second Life's* Ars Virtua Gallery (Nov 15-Dec 29, 2006). The Mattes' current *Second Life* work is the re-enactment of a number of historical performance art pieces such as Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks* (1982), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Valie Export's *Tapp und Tastkino* (1968-71).

While the Mattes' exhibition focuses solely on avatar portraits, Australian-Korean artist Emil Goh explores the discrepancy between the real life identities of users and their aspirational online avatar identities in his *MyCy* (2005-6) series of digital prints which document South Korea's hugely popular online community Cyworld. In Cyworld, community members create and customise their own cute cartoon-like avatars and the miniroom environments which house them. For many young South Koreans who still live at home, the miniroom is their opportunity to create their own ideal fantasy living space through which they can express their tastes, aspirations, personality and group affiliations. The miniroom is as important as the avatar in creating an online Cyworld identity. In *MyCy*, Goh presents a series of paired prints showing the Cyworld avatars in their minirooms and the real life Cyworld users in their real world bedrooms. These prints highlight the divergence between the fantasy self projected in the idealised avatar identity with its aspirational lifestyle and the individual's real life identity and environment.

Many of the on-screen avatar identities we see in games and virtual worlds have more in common with cartoons, science fiction and popular culture than they do with the realities of the physical world. On the virtual screen, avatars look more like cartoon characters and Asian anime than realistic human beings and their actions follow the virtual physics of cartoon animation and science fiction special effects rather than the constraints of real world physics. Avatars may dress in the latest Paris Hilton fashion, live in virtual facsimiles of designer houses and drive luxury cars but they also teleport or fly between different locations and can transform their appearance – from male to female, or human to animal – just as easily as they change their clothes. The virtual screen reflects a hyper-real world, an exemplary postmodern fusion of simulations, fantasy and popular culture.

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Art, Performance and Machinima

As well as being laboratories for identity experimentation, games and virtual worlds have also become serious creative zones for artists. The real-time graphics capabilities of these new screen environments make them productive spaces for new forms of art production and performance. In 1997 the pioneering virtual performance group Desktop Theater (Adriene Jenik and Lisa Brenneis) used The Palace, a graphical 2D cartoon-like chat space, as the stage for their virtual version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The key characters were played by smiley faces (the default avatars for guests in The Palace) and the online audience were represented by a variety of cartoon-like avatars. The technological and aesthetic constraints of The Palace environment echoed the play's theme of waiting and

the emotional emptiness and inarticulateness of its characters. The simplistic smiley face avatars with their limited range of colours and expressions and the lag between responses as performers typed in their lines of dialogue created moments of poetic pathos and quirky humour. Another online performance group Avatar Body Collision has also used The Palace for many years, performing using a combination of avatar action and live webcams.



Eva and Franco Mattes a.k.a. 01001011010101.ORG, Lanai Jarrico from *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* series (2006), digital print on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

At this year's *Venice Biennale*, Australian artist Adam

Nash collaborated with the UK-based Igloo in a real-time 3D work using a single-user mod (customised game modification) of the Unreal game engine. The work featured motion captured dancers in a recreation of England's New Forest and was projected on two large screens with surround sound in the New Forest pavilion.

Artists are also using games software (known as game engines) and virtual worlds to create a new form of movie-making called machinima (machine cinema) which uses virtual sets and props with avatars as the key performers. These real time performances (either scripted or improvised) can be captured and recorded by virtual cameras and then used as is or edited to create standalone machinima. Melbourne artist Christopher Dodds has used the *Half-Life 2* game engine to create the machinima *Not a Wall* (2006). Drawing inspiration from René Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), the work offers an ironic commentary on the simulacral nature of images in the virtual terrain. In the machinima Dodds' game avatar

uses a virtual claw hammer to chip out the phrase 'Not a wall' on a virtual wall while coming under fire. When his avatar is killed, he has to come back again and again to complete the job. Adelaide-based Kyal Tripodi (a.k.a. Decomposing Monstre) makes machinima in *Second Life*, including *GriefZilla*, where a giant duck with horns rampages through the streets of *Second Life*, and *Second Life: The Virtual Utopia of the Future*, which playfully documents the consumer paradise of *Second Life* including the weird and wonderful sexual exploits of human and non-human avatars. Also operating in *Second Life*, the performance art group Second Front stages a variety of online performances that range from political activism to Fluxus-styled events.

A significant reason for *Second Life*'s growing popularity is the freedom it gives its users to design and create anything they want and this is what distinguishes *Second Life* from many other virtual worlds and games.³

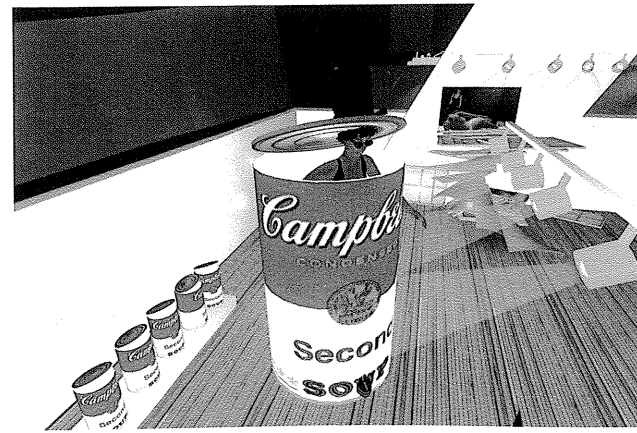
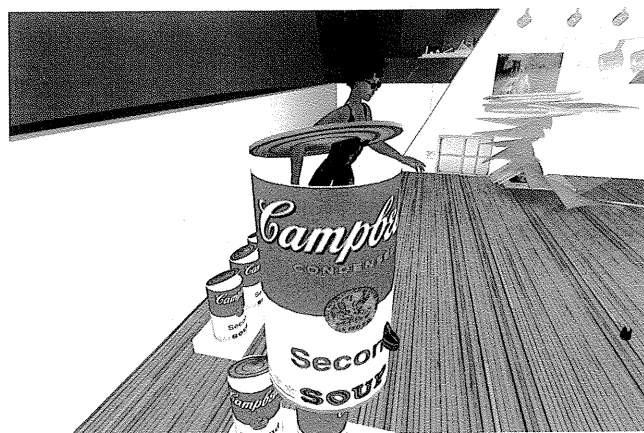
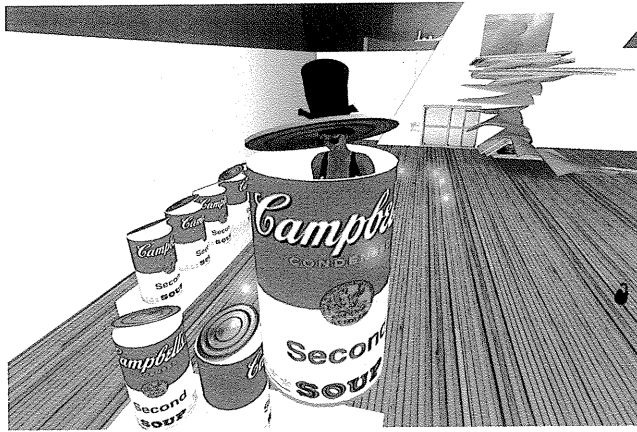
Second Life has quickly developed its own thriving laissez-faire virtual economy where residents create, buy and sell virtual real estate, goods and services. Some *Second Life* residents, such as the virtual property developer Anshe Chung, have become real world millionaires based on their *Second Life* earnings. This has sparked something of a virtual gold rush, reminiscent of the dot.com fervour of the 1990s, with many real life businesses and companies as diverse as Adidas, Toyota, Sun Microsystems, Harvard Library and Reuters being quick to stake out their own virtual real estate in *Second Life*. Although the jury remains out on the success or otherwise of many of these new ventures, getting in early to establish

a *Second Life* presence gives these organisations a certain cachet associated with being a technological trendsetter. Australian companies and educational institutions with a virtual presence in *Second Life* include ABC Island and Telstra's BigPond as well as RMIT's Ormond Island, the USQ's island of Terra Incognita and AFTRS's (Australian Film TV and Radio School) Esperance Island.

Many artists and organisations are moving into *Second Life* to explore its creative possibilities not only to create new work but also to reach new audiences by remediating and representing existing bodies of work. Lynn Hershman, whose work since the 1970s has dealt with the theme of fictional, mediated and technologically-enhanced identities, has created a *Second Life* alter ego Roberta Ware and is working with a team from Stanford Humanities Lab to build an interactive virtual archive of her work called *Life Squared*. Her recent documentary *Strange Culture* about the arrest and trial of Critical Art Ensemble's Steve Kurtz has also been screened in *Second Life*.

Although, as *Second Life* art critic Christy Dena points out, much of the art in *Second Life* merely copies and recreates real world artworks and art galleries, there is also emerging an exciting new breed of interactive artworks made specifically for *Second Life* that take advantage of the world's real time interactive possibilities to create participatory and immersive experiences that involve avatars within the artworks themselves. As Dena puts it: 'In a virtual world, artwork, art space and experienter share the same atoms: pixels

Gazira Babeli, *Second Soup* (2006), interactive installation in *Second Life*.



(representing code). There is no distinction between paint, canvas, flesh and light.⁴ This means that avatars can literally become part of the virtual artwork or be transformed by touching it.

Second Life artist Gazira Babeli describes herself as a 'code performer' and she makes use of the elastic virtual physics of the digital terrain to create interactive artworks that set off a series of playful and unpredictable animations. Visiting Babeli's retrospective exhibition *Collateral Damage* in the in-world Exhibit A gallery on Odyssey Island is a bit like entering an Alice in Wonderland world, simultaneously magical and uncanny. Sitting in a chair in the exhibition, my avatar was possessed by one of Babeli's voodoo-like 'performance codes' and began to spontaneously make strange arm and hand gestures. Another work triggered an even more disturbing transformation as my avatar body was grotesquely distorted and deformed. Touching *Second Soup* (2006), a series of Warhol-inspired Campbells soup cans, sets off an animation loop that traps your avatar within the soup can ('You love pop art but pop art hates you!' the work tells you). Another work, *Come Together* (2007) enables audience avatars to morph and merge into a collective living sculpture.

A number of Australian artists and art organisations are actively exploring the opportunities offered by *Second Life*. Melbourne-based artists Christopher Dodds and Adam Nash (both already mentioned) have recently moved into *Second Life* making interactive art works, both individually and in collaboration. Their 2007 work *Cantata Park* is a real-time 3D audiovisual sculptural homage to William Burrough's cut-ups, where avatars create their own customised cut-up narrative by walking through the work and triggering different words. High up in the sky above his land in *Second Life*, Dodds' avatar Mashup Islander took me inside a new piece he is working on called *Teichopsia* which is made up of two interconnecting rotating wireframe spheres that create mesmerising moiré effects as they rotate. Adam Nash (Adam Ramona) has built a series of magical interactive 3D audiovisual installations in the Sky Gallery on his island of Marni in *Second Life*. In *Eudemonia Stellata*, described by the artist as an interactive ambient musical instrument, your avatar stands in a giant red lotus blossom and touching the lotus petals triggers a series of lush musical tones. Nash's other works also evoke ethereal and otherworldly soundscapes including the playful *Anahata*, *the Mute Swan* where your avatar can jump up and down like they're in a jumping castle, and the immersive otherworldly *Pure Absence*.

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As part of this year's 2007 d/Art programme in July, Sydney-based d/Lux Media Arts initiated a series of world first virtual art tours in *Second Life*. Called *The d/Lux Pony Club* these tours involved participants travelling and teleporting on virtual ponies to different art venues in *Second Life* arriving at each new location in an explosion of sparkles. This year's d/Art programme also featured screenings of *Second Life* machinima including two by Kyal Tripodi. A number of new Australian initiatives are also in development. Melbourne-based Pierre Proske has been commissioned by US networked arts group Turbulence to create a new work called *Caterwaul*, a wailing wall that links a real life wall with a virtual wall hosted by Ars Virtua Gallery in *Second Life*. Christopher Dodds and Adam Nash are in the early stages of planning a virtual art incubator and gallery complex within *Second Life* called the Australian Centre of Virtual Art where Australian artists can develop, exhibit and archive new works. d/Lux Media Arts are planning a mentorship for an Australian artist in *Second Life* and the Australia Council's Inter-Arts Office has called for applicants for a virtual residency in *Second Life* for a collaborative team of artists (successful applicants to be announced in September 2007). With these new initiatives, the Australian presence in *Second Life* is set to grow. ☞

Websites

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1 Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, ROC, London, 1992 pp. 33-34.

2 Angela Thomas [aka Anya Ixchel] 'Online Identity: Some Thoughts,' *Slate Magazine: Second Life Arts Total Entertainment*, 21 Aug 2006. Available: <http://www.slatenight.com>

3 Linden Labs has also recently made *Second Life's* source code available under the GNU General Public License.

4 Christy Dena [aka Lythe Witte], 'The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, Part Two' in *SLATE: Second Life Arts & Total Entertainment Magazine*, Issue 2, Sept 2006. Available: <http://www.slatenight.com>

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