3D VIRTUAL WORLD CREATES
NEW GENRE OF CYBER SEX

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ABSTRACT

Sex is one of the biggest industries in the virtual world of Second Life—ranging from shops selling beds embedded with animation scripts to professional escort services. While virtual sex is not a new concept, the usage of avatars in a 3D immersive environment creates a level of interactivity unprecedented in former forms of cyber sex. In these virtual worlds, cyber sex includes dialogue as well as visual stimulation, and is unique in that the user is able to actively participate in the content development of both visual and textual elements of role-playing.

KEYWORDS

Cyber sex, Second Life, virtual relationships, role-playing, virtual worlds, virtual sex, user-generated content

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has fostered a culture that enables people to engage in sexual activities by using the computer as a medium. Past studies—mainly conducted by psychologists and sociologists—have examined cyber sex as a phenomenon that replaced written text and phone sex (Young, 2001). Cyber sex was defined as messages exchanged in live chat rooms and email correspondence (Dryer, 2007).

The recent development of virtual worlds, however, adds a whole new tier to cyber relationships. I am using the term "virtual worlds" to specifically refer to cyber environments that are three-dimensional, such as World of Warcraft or Second Life. The architecture of these 3D worlds enables users to engage in immersive role-playing, which involves text, visual, and, in many cases, audio. By acting out sexual relationships with their avatar—a three dimensional animated figure—users of these virtual worlds can engage in intimate, graphic play that is very different from the existing concept of cyber sex, which is heavily based in text.

This paper is based on an independent 18-month study conducted within Second Life as a journalist. This study included observation of commercial areas such as shops, night clubs, and escort services, and separate interviews with 10 individuals who already had experience with sex in Second Life. Due to the relatively small number of Second Life users, I cannot compare the impact of sex in Second Life on society with that of other forms of cyber sex, but am pointing out that virtual worlds have created a new form of cyber sex that not only has sociological and psychological impact on its users, but also plays a large part in the economy and real estate market of virtual worlds.

2. PROLOGUE

His wife was asleep when Janus, a 37-year old Web company executive, logged into Second Life at 1 a.m. Waiting for him online was Miso, the avatar—or cyber character—of a 27-year old woman working in the fashion industry.

A chat log saved by M reveals a two-hour meeting at a public nude beach starting out with a back massage and leading to multiple intercourse. The transcript shows that the couple had sex in the bedroom of a public beach house, and then two threesomes, where they were joined by random men passing by.

"Being in the Internet industry, I've heard of people blurring the line [between online and offline] and I used to laugh at them. This totally blew me away. I had no idea it would feel this real," Janus said.

2.1 About Second Life

Second Life is a 3D web service where the host company, Linden Lab, gives you an empty piece of land to do whatever you want on it. Second Life users create everything that exists in that virtual world—from shopping malls and dance clubs to esquire service hotels and investment banks. Major corporations such as Sony Entertainment and Reebok use Second Life to promote their products; Cisco uses the system for in-house communication. Hundreds of schools such as Harvard University and Tufts University use the platform to conduct online interactive education; museums host virtual galleries, and religious and activist groups hold campaigns.

Anyone can create an avatar and roam around Second Life for free, but money can buy perks. One can customize one's avatar in greater detail through clothes, poses, skins, and other accessories that can be bought at user-created stores. A monthly fee (ranging from $6 to $10) enables one to own land, giving one the opportunity of running a business or building a private house. Although many individual users in Second Life spend money for pure leisure, there are also serious business people, such as Ailin Graef, a Second Life real estate developer whose virtual assets equal more than $1 million in real life (Hof, 2006).

Among the diverse operations that flourish in Second Life, sex has become one of the biggest industries. Animation designers, sex toy makers, and sexy clothing designers contribute to a multi-million Linden dollar business. People can buy this virtual currency, or cyber money, with real money that trades on an exchange rate that fluctuates depending on supply and demand. Vice versa, money earned in Second Life can also be converted into real-life currency.

2.2 Sex in Second Life

Sex in Second Life is conducted by clicking on certain objects that are pre-programmed, or "built," by other Second Life users. For instance, a bed, couch, or bathtub, will contain an animated script that the user can click on to activate his or her avatar. The user can then choose one or a series of animations. Some objects are programmed for self-satisfaction, such as masturbation or pole dancing, while others require two avatars to get the animation going. During the animation, the user can click on his or her avatar to change positions and choose which avatar gets to initiate the role-playing. At the same, the user can also engage in text or voice chatting.

Figure 1. Sex-related items for sale in a Second Life
boutique. Left, an office desk and chair scripted with sex
animations. Right, sexy lingerie.

Since these animations are developed by Second Life users based on an open-source code, the quality and quantity of the animations have greatly increased in the past couple years. The types of sexual acts that are portrayed within Second Life are just as diverse as they are in real life—ranging from cuddling to hard-core. Competition also brings down prices, forcing programmers (script writers) to improve on their products.

2.3 How does it Work?

A user can choose to purchase an object that contains these animated scripts or go to a location in Second Life that has these objects. Some public areas, such as night clubs or beaches, contain many objects that can

be used by anyone for free. For more privacy, players can rent out elaborate villas that come with sex animation-embedded beds.

Figure 2. A screenshot of a male and female avatar
having sex in Second Life

Iridium is one Second Life-based business that owns more than two dozen of these villas, charging by the day or the week. The villas are locked and have security features so that only designated people can access the grounds. Users can choose from a number of different house styles, such as a log cabin nestled in snowy forests, or a medieval castle decked out with roaring fireplaces and steaming marble bathtubs. In these houses, bathtubs, carpets, sofas, beds, showers, and other objects that can potentially be linked to sex will contain different sex animations.

3. RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON CYBER SEX

Like existing studies on cyber sex—which do not include those in 3D virtual worlds—many of the sexual relationships in Second Life stemmed from problems in real life.

With Janus and Miso, for example, it was because they did not have normal offline relationships. Miso, still single, said that she had not had a boyfriend for three years and was too busy with her career to get involved in something serious. Janus, married of ten years, said that he did not remember the last time he had sex with his wife.

Both insisted that their relationship wasn't intentional. "We didn't jump into sex. It came gradually, like any real relationship. J was my first. I suppose you could say I was a cyber virgin," Miso said.

Not all cases, however, fell into this category.

Jazmina, a 31-year old woman who owns a business in Second Life, had a virtual affair with another avatar. Although the affair remained entirely online, it nevertheless jeopardized her marriage.

"My hubby was extremely upset when he found out. It didn't matter that the affair was only cyber. It happens just like real life—you work and play with people and sparks start," Jazmina said. She said she felt more remorse because her husband had always been very supportive of her Second Life activities. "My business was paying the bills, and he was very proud of me before he discovered the affair bit. It took us counseling to straighten things out," she said.

Then of course, there are some who consider cyber sex as a game. Thoem, a homemaker in her mid 40s, has a male avatar in Second Life. For more than a year, she had a female cyber partner with whom she exchanged eternity rings for an official Second Life partnership, but broke up that love at the expense of 25 Linden dollars to start a new one—with a male partner. The two are part of a large gay community within Second Life and have a master-servant relationship in which Thoem plays a slender, muscled avatar with black bangs and a hairless chest.

In several chat sessions held in Second Life, Thoem explained that she doesn't know her cyber partner's real-life gender, nor does she care. She is not thinking of disrupting up her real-life family, which includes a 15-year old daughter. At least she can be sure she is not "playing" with her own daughter; minors are only allowed on the Teen Grid—a platform that does not allow any R-rated activities.

"It's an adult version of playing make-believe," she said.

Tabatha, a 28-year old living in Massachusetts, says she is experiencing the pros of a virtual relationship that has lasted for almost two years. Tabatha's concept of dating, however, does not extend to the real world.

So far, the two have only exchanged photographs through e-mail, telephone calls, and of course, meeting in Second Life. She says that they are planning to meet in real life soon and that until now it was all about getting to know each other intimately.

"We live far apart, but our personalities clicked and we decided that continuing an online relationship would be more economical," she said. "And you get to know a person for who they truly are. People tend to feel more comfortable and open when they are behind the computer screen, so they are more relaxed and just being themselves."

4. OFFLINE IMPACT

Second Life is not the only 3D world to be harboring romantic relationships (Scott, 2007), but it is one of the most explicit. Although romantic relationships can take place in online games (Terdiman, 2006), Second Life allows users to engage their cyber characters in actual sex. Watching pornography online is a one-way visual communication while e-mail is two-way communication that is not visual. The combination of interactivity and visual stimulation in Second Life takes cyber sex to a new level.

One Second Life user described sex as jumping into a porn video: "Watching the animation is very much like watching porn, except you are the actual character in the porn. It's a very strange concept for people who have never done it, but the endless possibilities in the virtual world can be an interesting alternative. Of course, you can't compare real sex to virtual sex. You can't even masturbate because you're using your hands to type or click on the mouse. It can be a bit frustrating. Especially when your computer shuts down."

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the multitude of studies conducted of the impact of cyber sex, those studies do not yet include cyber sex in virtual worlds. There is a need, however, for such studies because users claim that sex in Second Life is nothing like online chatting. It would also be interesting to see how voice plays into virtual relationships. Of the people I interviewed, all of the people whose virtual sex led to real life sex had voice conversations with the other person prior to the offline meeting. Regardless of the level of self-representation, perhaps visual and textual elements play a significantly minor role compared to voice. Also, Second Life allows users to visualize their avatars into any form; a user could choose to be human, animal, or machine. With serious communities that focus on role-playing as non-human avatars, Second Life could also be a place to study the behaviors of such people with different sexual orientations.

From a technical perspective, cyber sex in Second Life can also be a good example of how open source architecture fuels creativity. Users have taken the basic program offered by Linden Lab and shown great developments in avatar movement, sound incorporation, and avatar animation that requires a fine level of synchronization.

Although Second Life is not mainstream, the number of hours users spend on Second Life is rapidly increasing. Recently, Linden Lab, the facilitator of Second Life, reported that user hours were up 61% in 2008 compared to the previous year (Peckham, 2008) which gives us reason to begin observing and discussing how cyber sex is becoming more interactive and immersive.

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