Me and My Avatar: Fashion, the body and the Virtual Self

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Abstract

Virtual worlds are being heralded as the next big thing in education technology. Many educators and institutions are already using virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL) to deliver online seminars, lectures and conferences, exhibitions and even virtual fashion shows. Fashion is big business in Second Life, designers and big businesses like Armani and Lacoste are using these spaces to sell and promote real and virtual garments.

Alongside these technologies it is now possible to create a virtual version of yourself either through 3d scanning software or by manipulating an existing avatar on websites such as My Virtual Model. Virtual worlds offer opportunities for staff and students to get involved in creative collaborative projects and to develop new skills. Adjusting to a virtual world, creating and manipulating an Avatar (virtual representation of oneself) and interacting in these spaces can be quite daunting. Not everybody is comfortable with seeing an accurate 3D representation of their body and some people may reject the notion of a virtual persona completely. Others see the avatar as a way of exploring other aspects of their personality and are happy to play with multiple representations of them selves that are not always humanoid.

The paper will explore the implications of virtual fashion for educators and industry. It will highlight issues that can arise when interacting in a virtual environment where the norms of social interaction and even the laws of physics are not to be taken for granted where someone can change clothes or gender or even become an animal before your eyes. Guidelines for best practice in the use of virtual worlds for fashion education will be given and a vision of the future of virtual fashion will be explored.

Avatars and online personas: an overview

The first online environments were text based and known as Multi User Dungeons. Many of these communities were based around role-play but some of them were self-help groups, educators or just people looking for social interaction. Habitat developed by Lucas Film Games (Think quest) is generally credited as the first online virtual world in 1985.

Since the early eighties a number of graphical virtual worlds have been developed, educational versions including Activeworlds have existed alongside the better known online gaming environments such as World of Warcraft and Everquest. These gaming environments are based around gaining powers, vanquishing enemies and moving up the hierarchy within the world. Other online environments such as Second Life (SL) are not games but spaces that the users create and in which they go about their business, whether this be building castles, selling hats, writing scripts, engaging in virtual sex or running a property or fashion business.

In order to interact with any of these virtual worlds you need a virtual persona better known as an avatar. Your avatar is your on line representation of yourself and can take on a range of characteristics from human to animal or even a rubber duck.

The majority of people do use some form of humanoid avatar and this is where the potential for fashion exists. In virtual worlds you can choose what you look like and not surprisingly in SL a lot of people choose to be younger, slimmer and better looking. The men are muscular and handsome and both genders like to enhance the appearance of their avatar by buying new clothes, accessories, tattoos, skins, body shapes, eyes, hair and gestures.

The default avatar that you get when you enter SL is quite limited; you can change its appearance but only to a certain extent, unless you are good at scripting and designing. This is where the commerce aspect applies. The currency in SL called Linden Dollars. If you buy a premium account or own land you get an allowance or Lindens every month. You can add to this by buying them on the Linden exchange (current exchange rate is L$ 1,000 = $4.06) by working in SL as a store assistant, exotic dancer, etc. or you can design and make things and sell them to other avatars.

Finance in Second Life
Over 40 % of goods sold in SL are fashion related and in October 2007- 7,880,293 Linden dollars changed hands in SL (Second Life Statistics, 2007). Fashion in Second Life is big business with the highest earning designers making in excess of $75,000 dollars a year. (Guest 2007). Alongside these virtual designers some companies have used SL to promote real life products including, Lacoste, Calvin Klein and Reebok.

Many people struggle with the notion of buying things that "don't exist" but to the residents of SL the goods are real and enhance their experience. Someone has taken the time and effort to design a dress or make a new gesture and in SL they retain the intellectual property rights for that design. They can decide whether to sell it, how much for, or whether to give it away.

In SL Fashion falls into several categories most of which are fantastical. Although some of the designs do relate to real world trends there is an abundance of highly sexual, erotic, fetishistic and plain silly designs. If you prefer to have a furry avatar then you can buy clothes for your rabbit, cat or wolf avatar too. Your choice of avatar tells people something about who you are.

> "Avatars, in fact, come to provide access points in the creation of identity and social life. The bodies people use in these spaces provide a means to live digitally – to fully inhabit the world. It is not simply that users exist as just "mind", but instead construct their identities through avatars." (Taylor, 2002 p 40)

Some of the avatars I interviewed in SL said that they were not really that interested in fashion in real life (RL) but enjoyed the shopping experience in SL (Meltlet, Altopia Jewell). Reasons given were not having to queue for fitting rooms, and having a huge amount of choice. Of course clothes and luxury items in SL are much cheaper than they are in RL. My avatar (Lulu Minnelli) has a yacht, a swimming pool and a series of fire breathing pet dragons in colours to suit every occasion.

Figure 1. Lulu Minnelli by the Author

Cheng et al (2002) found that status is just as important in virtual worlds as it is in real life having something unique or being in possession of information about special places within virtual worlds gave avatars a higher social status; the virtual equivalent of owning the latest Marc Jacobs handbag.

Relationships with Avatars

People have different relationships with their avatars, some see them merely as a vehicle for engaging in an online world whereas others feel as though their avatar is an extension of themselves and they have a strong emotional connection to what is essentially a set of code.

When you look at people and the avatars they create there tend to be definite trends, those who create as realistic a representation of themselves as possible (warts and all) these are in the minority, those who create an idealised version of themselves (a lot of avatars), those who engage in gender bending (quite a few), those who engage in total fantasy and create an avatar that is completely unrelated to their physical appearance (e.g. Sketchcat Blackflag, Meltlet and Wolfire) and those who decide not to be human and represent themselves as either an animal, a robot or an inanimate object. It is not very common for people to produce an exact photographic representation of themselves even in the worlds where this is possible. (Cheng et al, 2002).

Figure 2 Wolffirefur Wesburn & Meltlet Kohonen by the Author

Although it is possible to easily swap avatars and indeed to have different avatars for different purposes, most of the people I have met have a key avatar that is the one they engage with for most of the time. This (along with the sign over your head in SL) enables others to recognise

you. Research has found that people who invest more in their avatars and have a "persistent identity" (Cheng et al, 2002, p96) are less likely to engage in anti social behaviour, their identity makes them accountable for their actions, just as it would in real life. However, there are those who maintain multiple identities for different and sometimes quite pragmatic reasons. Berry Beattie does not want to offend people by not talking to them when he is busy building so he keeps a second private avatar for this purpose. Twilight Market has a male and female avatar so he can model clothes for both sexes in the store where he works. Frankie Rockett on the other hand has two avatars – one leather clad dark angel and the other an elderly man with a limp and a fez. The two avatars he notes get quite different responses from other residents. The old man seems to evoke sympathy and respect and other avatars often offer him gifts.

Figure 3. Frankie Rockett- from his SL profile

People can and do construct multiple online personas and identities and can decide whether or not to remain anonymous. This can have the effect of making some participants feel more confident (Macleod 2005). However, in an educational environment this may not be desirable as in order to assess" the reliability of information and the trustworthiness of a confidant, identity is essential. And care of one's own identity, one's reputation, is fundamental to the formation of community." (Donath, 1998)

Some people go online to meet people, some people go online to escape from their real lives others use them as an extension of their real lives to teach or run a business. The latter usually, but not always, seem to have less dramatic avatars that are closer to their real appearance and persona. Some have given a lot of thought to their identity (Jannie Posthorn, Frankie Rockett) for others it is just something convenient that does not look too off putting. (Ripple Savard, Berry Beattie).

Avatars of course do not just wander around virtual worlds in isolation. They meet and interact with other people and for many users of virtual worlds it is this social aspect that is the most appealing part. After all what is the point of spending all those Linden dollars on your avatar if no one is going to see it?


Figure 4. Berry Beattie from his SL profile

Figure 5. Jannie Posthorn from her SL profile

Immersion, presence and socialising

People feel incredibly immersed in these environments and have been known to spend as long as 80 hours per week in them. (Guest 2007). Some people earn their entire living through them., others use them as a way to connect with others that would not be possible because of their physical location or in some cases because of physical or other disabilities. Jannie Posthorn is retired and is in Second Life for two to three hours at a time, her computer she says "is never off" it is her way of socialising now that she no longer works.

Part of the attraction is the ability to escape from the everyday and the mundane and to live out one's fantasies. However, there is a serious side to these environments as many educators are discovering. Providing students with a creative space in which to interact can make the learning

process more authentic and engaging. The worlds also provide the opportunity to simulate situations that would be too expensive, too dangerous or too risky in real life. The medical profession and the armed forces in particular have used simulations for a long time. There is a place in SL where you can go to experience what it is like to be schizophrenic and suffer hallucinations, you can visit Ancient Rome or sit inside a human cell on Second Nature Island.
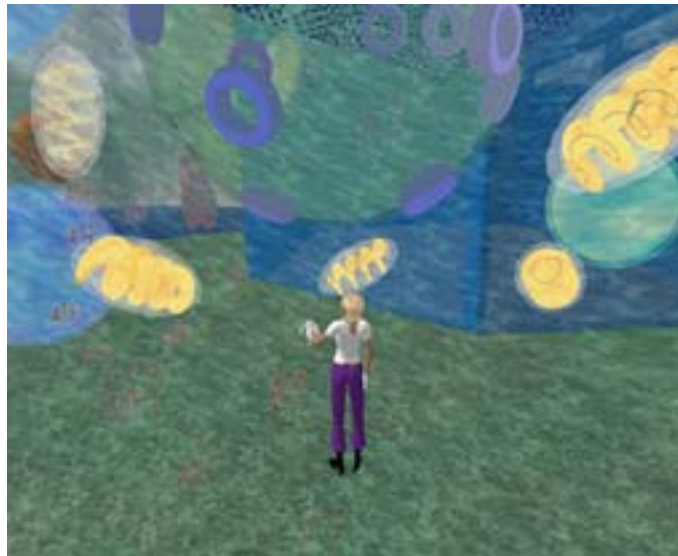
Figure 6. Lulu inside a human cell

It is hard to understand the sense of presence in a virtual world unless you have actually engaged with one over a period of time. You develop friendships and invest time in creating and developing your environment and your avatar. Interestingly people act in virtual worlds in a similar fashion to the real world. They turn toward each other when they speak, they maintain personal space and they feel genuine emotions. Users in virtual worlds tend to follow the conventions of the real world (Schroeder, 2002). They form social groups and develop implicit and explicit norms as social groups do in real life. In order to be accepted into a group newcomers ('newbies') have to accept these norms (Becker & Mark, 2002, p 23). It has also been found that it is not necessary to be part of the same social grouping in real life in order to participate in a social group in a virtual world, participants do not need to "refer to the same life-world and shared beliefs". (Becker & Mark, 2002,p26). From an educational perspective these technologies could be very beneficial in enabling students from different cultures and social backgrounds to integrate and collaborate and also for educators from around the globe to meet and exchange ideas.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 7. JISC conference in Second Life – educators networking

Opportunities for education

Fashion education can also benefit from these worlds. Many students would love to have their own catwalk show. In real life this would be financially out of their reach but in SL it can be achieved with just a few Linden dollars. Fashion shows are already a regular feature of SL; planning and producing a virtual fashion show would help students to develop real life skills such as marketing and project management. Students could set up virtual stores, engage in visual merchandising, promotions and range planning. Fashion photography students could set up virtual shoots using virtual models and real life stylists. SL already has several life style and fashion magazines that can be found in world or downloaded from websites there are also opportunities for film making in world (machinima). Fashion journalists could develop news reports and fashion blogs; there are already several blogs about virtual fashion reporting on the good the bad and the ugly in SL like Swirly Cyclone's Fashion Victim Blog.

If we are going to capitalise on these technologies in fashion education then we need to enter these worlds, engage with their residents and learn how to harness the technologies to offer students the innovative learning experience that they are coming to expect. It is probably not the current generation of students but those who will be coming into higher education in the next five years who will be the most demanding. They have grown up with virtual technologies such as The Sims and Club Penguin. They already have avatars and are used to buying things for them and using them as a way of creative expression.

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Many educators are using virtual worlds to replicate real world practice, they build replicas of seminar rooms and lecture halls, they build art galleries and hang images on the walls, but this is not maximising on the potential of the technology. Why build a classroom when there is no need for walls or a roof? Why have a lecture when you can engage students in a collaborative creative experience?

As with any learning environment it is necessary to have rules and codes of conduct and to ensure that users are aware of them. Beyond these limitations anything is possible, in virtual worlds we are not bound by the restrictions of our real bodies or our physical environment

Opportunities for the Industry

Some companies have made early ventures into virtual worlds in an attempt to promote or sell their real life products, with mixed success. Just opening a store in SL and filling it with clothes does not work as American Apparel discovered having recently closed its doors after opening in a blaze of publicity last year. (American Apparel, 2007)
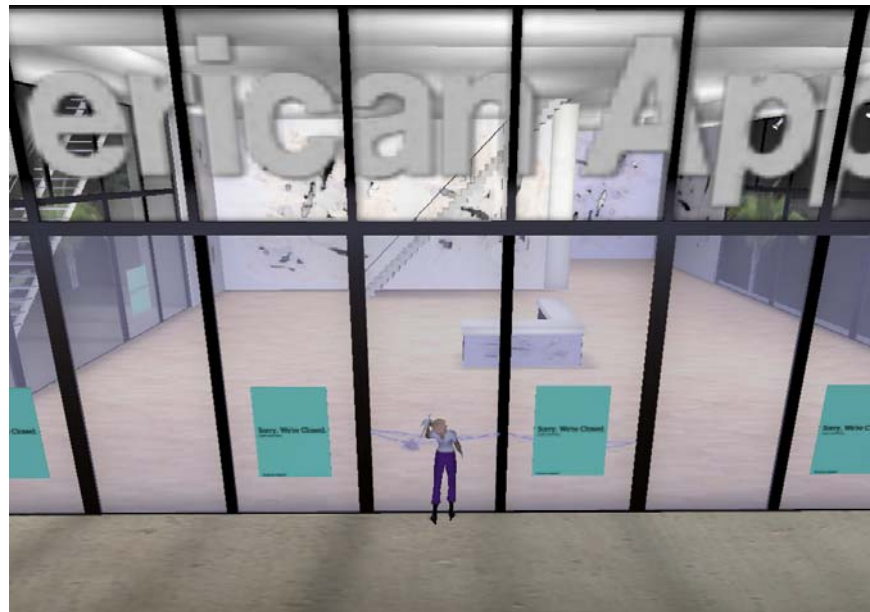
Figure 8. Closed American Apparel Store – by the Author

Long term residents in SL have their favourite virtual designers and (as already stated are not always interested in buying real clothes. The virtual designers who are successful have several stores and pay assistants to interact with visitors. However, avatars may be tempted to buy limited edition designer goods and as more people enter and become used to virtual worlds they

may become more comfortable with buying real goods as they already do on the Internet. This could have a massive impact on the way people purchase their clothes and accessories. For example companies such as H&M (H& M, 2007) are already engaging with their customer through the SIMS (a virtual game). This game allows users to dress their avatars in the latest H& M clothing, to design the retail environments in which to sell them and to create fashion shows.

The Beijing Cyber Recreation District project has already recognised the value of virtual worlds to industry and are investing in massive virtual world technologies that will dwarf Second Life. They see this as an opportunity to sell directly to the western consumer without the need for the middleman. These virtual worlds (nine are planned) can accommodate 150m avatars, of which, 7m could be online at the same time (Keegan, 2007). Once people become as familiar with the 3d web as they are with the World Wide Web countries like China and Korea will be well placed to take advantage of this new technology. Europe and the US will need to move quickly to maintain their market share.

Issues

There is a learning curve to be overcome on entering a virtual world. You have to learn to control your avatar and you have to become familiar with the spoken and unspoken social norms of the community. For a 'newbie' this can be quite daunting. There are social norms that cross over from the real world into the virtual world. For example, avatars will turn to face each other when speaking and will maintain the appropriate distance. (Yee et al, 2006)

There are people in virtual worlds just as there are in the real world that are intent on making trouble. These are known as griefers. They attack other avatars, disrupt events and generally cause a nuisance. Although they cannot physically harm you they can upset people and be very annoying. Having one's own island can resolve these issues within the teaching environment as avatars that are not group members can be locked out.

Other issues arise around what is an acceptable identity in a teaching environment? Should students (and staff for that matter) be free to turn up in any guise that they like or should there be agreed conventions about nudity for example that are discussed prior to the activity?

The technology at present still has limitations. In Second Life a "sim" or island can only accommodate around 40 avatars at once so large events have to be spread over multiple locations.

There are of course people who do not see the value of virtual worlds and do not wish to engage with them although it is predicted that over 80% of Internet users will have an avatar in the next four years (Keegan 2007,2).

Virtual worlds also need a good broadband connection and graphics card if they are going to function properly, this leads to issues of accessibility and equality which will need to be addressed if they are to be embedded into the curriculum.

Best Practice

Old pedagogies presented in new environments do not necessarily work, the power of virtual environments is not in their ability to deliver content, after all this can be done via a lot of other media, but to deliver an experience. These experiences need to engage the students, enable them to exercise their creativity and be authentic. There are many other areas of education that have succeeded in this using virtual worlds for simulations, role-plays, team building exercises, group projects and sociological studies.

The experience of other educators who contribute to the Second Life Educators List and the research literature suggest that the following are useful guidelines for bringing your students into virtual worlds.

- Ensure that they have an introduction on how to use the technology and a safe environment in which to practice using their avatars
- Agree rules of the community and codes of conduct before engaging in an activity.
- Ensure that the activities are authentic and make use of the extended abilities of the virtual world rather than just replicating the real world
- Students may feel more comfortable if there are some identifiable elements or metaphors within the environment. (Sanders et al, 2005)
- Welcome note cards and information for visitors
- Clear directions on how to navigate the space

- Linking to outside information – do not need to replicate 2d content that exists elsewhere (Collins, 2007)
- Teleport links between key areas on the site
- A sandbox where staff and students can experiment
- Allow students and staff to personalise the space
- Make it a social space as well as an educational one

There is no doubt that fashion will continue to be one of the drivers for education, creation and participation in virtual worlds. We need to harness the unique aspects of these environments to further develop our pedagogic practice and provide exciting, engaging, immersive learning experiences for our students, and have some fun with our avatars and identities whilst we are doing it.

To engage in virtual worlds is a natural extension of web technology and I believe it will eventually replace the flat 2D Internet that we have become so familiar with. Will it enhance teaching and learning? I believe so. It won't be the technology per se that will be the catalyst but the way that people choose to use it. Will it change the fashion industry? Highly likely, people will become used to trying on virtual garments to being able to design or customise an outfit for their avatar and then order a real version for themselves, presuming of course there is the remotest bit of physical resemblance between the two.

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