

Mimetic Space in Second Life

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The computer game *Second Life* hosts millions of players who adopt roles or personae that interact with the roles or personae of other players in a mimetic digital environment. The *Second Life* digital environment may be used for non-game purposes, such as hosting conferences in which the participants are represented by avatars but who may not be taking on a fictional role associated with their avatar. Game and non-game interactions take place in a simulated 3D space. In this paper I will focus exclusively on the game dimension of *Second Life*, with a view to examining the mimetic significance of the game through the fictional lives of its players, in order to query the existential value of *Second Life*'s interactive mimetic world, analogous to the way we might ask about the extra-aesthetic value of art created by a "single transcendent author."¹ This query will ask whether *Second Life*'s forms of fictional/mimetic interaction suggest novel features of our aesthetic experience, and whether the game might expand the worldviews of its participants and enrich or sharpen their perception of reality the way that visual, literary, and musical artworks and performances are sometimes thought to improve the perceptions or sensibility of their audiences. The conclusions at which I'll aim are that the interactive structure of *Second Life* tends to undermine the kind of benefits that viewers, readers, members of an audience ideally take from their interaction with works of art, and that its use of simulated space tends further to impede these potential benefits from being realised.

The value of mimesis for life

Focussing on *Second Life* through the issue of mimesis and its potential value for the lives of its participants suggests a rich philosophical tradition, going back at least to Aristotle's use of *mimêsis* when he challenged Plato's ethical and metaphysical critique of poetry. Aristotle's use or uses of 'mimêsis' in the *Poetics* suggest that the term is not interchangeable with 'representation,' even though his famous remark that poetry is more philosophical than history as it "tends to express more universal truths" would seem to suggest otherwise. While Aristotle explicitly states that *mimesis* is related to truth, which indicates that it is a form of representation, the kind of relation his discussion of *mimêsis* entails comes closer to the relation of metaphor to truth, a relation which – dead, conventional or relatively tame metaphors aside (e.g. "Old age is the sunset of life") – is too open-ended to count as a form of representation. Instead of insisting on a particular reading of Aristotle, I'll take his discussion of *mimêsis* in the *Poetics* as a starting point and use the English term 'mimesis' to emphasise (a) the transformative function of mimesis, and (b) the view that instances of mimesis, as Donald Davidson says of metaphor, might *suggest* innumerable truths but themselves possess no propositional content.

¹ Rob Gallagher, "Playing With Death," *The New Inquiry*, August 15, 2013.

Understanding mimesis in these senses, as an outcome or activity that transforms rather than represents aspects of reality, and that does not represent for its consumers a fixed propositional content, we can (still) say that *Second Life* mimetic forms resemble those found in many types or genres of art. As such, we might expect that paradigm encounters with the mimetic forms and experience of *Second Life* might encourage the kinds of significant changes in its participants' lives (their sensibility, disposition, way of being in the world) that paradigm encounters with works of art sometimes achieve. Indeed the comparatively greater interactive involvement of *Second Life* participants, and therewith greater creative latitude, could conceivably further enhance the enabling conditions of aesthetic life-enrichment of the game. Yet against this purely hypothetical expectation, the apparent reality of *Second Life* – the preoccupations of its players with signs of wealth, lifestyle and escapist fantasy over the rigors of creative or cognitive exploration – is perhaps not entirely surprising. After all, were real-world creative activities similarly radically democratised, or the same people playing about in *Second Life* were to start writing novels or sharing their critical insights into the aesthetic objects they consume, the situation might be the same. It probably is. We might in any case be tempted to see instances of kitsch and banality in *Second Life* as an issue of the demographics of artistic or critical talent rather than a problem with the game *per se*.

This demographic issue can't easily be set aside, as there might be something about *Second Life* that attracts mainly people who tend to seek forms of diversion and escape from reality. To become clearer about *Second Life*'s mimetic potential, then, let us imagine a *Second Life* society populated by singularly talented and resourceful writers, visual artists, and composers, along with insightful critics if their inclusion helps the thought along. This singular group, let us say, will be cut off from every opportunity to exercise their artistic or critical talents in the actual world, and required to interact with each other exclusively through avatars in a version of *Second Life* that they help shape and in which they are the sole participants.

This version of *Second Life* presumably would show a more impressive array of aesthetic, narrative and cognitive features than the (ever-changing) current game has on display. Yet the virtual *Second-Life* world in which our talented artists and critics found themselves I expect would tend to become a source of artistic frustration *were it to continue to function as a predominantly audiovisual virtual social space*, were the game to keep its basic premise that participants play through their avatars interactively with the avatars of other players in a simulated 3D environment. The competition and stimulus of a virtual community of artists and critics conceivably might encourage the creative process in all sorts of unanticipated ways. It's also likely, however, that the extension of social interaction into the creation of dramatic, narrative, visual, musical, etc. mimesis would interfere with the sustained unity of the individual artist's vision. This concern might not be insuperable, and of course depends on a prejudice in favour of a highly individualist model of artistic creation. Artistic collaboration of different sorts naturally counts against this model, as would the history of agreements in which artist and patron negotiate the aesthetic direction of a commission, or the patron gives instruction how the

commission is to be executed. Unless collaborating artists or artist and patron merge in the defining moments of the creative process, however, perhaps we would merely be obscuring a problem.

Assuming there is a problem, a quick fix might be available if the artist-community version of *Second Life* arranged itself into discrete areas for the purposes of the creative process, so that individuals would be afforded the real time and virtual space to realise their visions without interference from fellow game players, and could then use a more open social space for the purpose of aesthetic consumption. As they might were they persons in the real world, other players' avatars could visit the artist's virtual studio or gallery, concert hall, or stage, or pick up their fellow player's (avatar's) virtual novel.

Such a development may amount to a far-reaching cheat, suspending the social dimension of *Second Life* during those times when our ideal participants are actually doing something interesting in the game, and reconvening the social dimension simply to reveal what just as well might have been revealed as a piece of digital creation outside the game. Another concern is that some digital creations within the game are indistinguishable from non-digital creations outside the game, entirely indistinguishable in the case of a novel, whose semantic content would remain the same whether we read it on *Second Life*'s platform or on paper pages, except for the conceit – which may have interesting narratological implications – that it was supposed to have been written by an avatar. In the case of live drama, which is the strong suit of *Second Life*, we're faced with a greater worry. The text would remain the same in or out of the game but the virtual performance within the game would presumably not be able to compete with a live performance using real actors in actual space instead of avatars, no matter how realistically composed, in simulated 3D space, i.e. on a two-dimensional computer screen.

Our thought experiment is very likely invoking the wrong artistic paradigm. A problem with the community of ideal artists pictured in the thought experiment thus far is that their artistic lives, or the lives of their avatars, are not conceived as operating interactively with the lives of other players' avatars within the social space of the game, which arguably is a distinguishing feature of the *Second Life* concept. Instead of focussing on the creations of “a single transcendent author,” then, we might shift the experiment towards artist-players whose virtuosity relies on spontaneous interactive performance, e.g. improvisational jazz musicians generating live performances, or actors together developing unique scenes or whole open-ended dramas.

Even with this adjustment, we're walking a fine line between conceiving players who play the game as a game, i.e. as an integral part of a virtual activity unique to the game, and players who simply use the *Second Life* platform as a dispensable means to exchange digitalised information that they might just as well exchange outside the game, or who use the platform to come together for performances that they could hold more convincingly through other media or platforms.

Computational representation in *Real Lives*

In a recent piece in *The New Inquiry*, “Playing with Death,” Rob Gallagher dismisses the charge that computer games are a poor substitute for life-enriching art as not particularly relevant. Instead of focussing on “videogames primarily as an *audiovisual, interactive medium* . . . on what games let us see and do,” and then comparing life-cheapening video games with tragic drama, Gallagher proposes that we take more seriously games as a “*computational medium*” that is well “suited to exploring what life is worth in an era of biopower and computerized risk assessment, drones and cloning, artificial intelligence and data mining.”² He inverts the worry that computer games might cheapen life, arguing that instead of “simply cheapening life” many new games “encourage us to rethink the meaning of death,” mainly it seems by coping with the fact that “algorithmic caprice can [readily] spell doom” in some of these games and thus help us learn “to view life probabilistically, from a perspective informed by the sum of all our prior in-game experience.”³

Gallagher seems to regard the educational video game *Real Lives 2010* as the platform most promisingly equipped to build on “prior in-game experience” and encourage users to “rethink the meaning of death,” i.e. probabilistically. The *Real-Lives* site offers this slightly more modest assessment of the game’s purpose:

Real Lives 2010 is a truly unique, content rich and empathy-building real world, real life simulation that challenges your life skills (not your hand-eye coordination) as you make difficult, high-stakes choices that lead to your success, or failure.⁴

The platform provides a statistically well-informed, though otherwise quite impoverished, simulated social context, exposure to which, as the promotional blurb suggests, is intended to instill empathy and impart crucial “high-stakes” existential skills. Users are randomly assigned simulated lives as though they had just emerged from behind John Rawls’ veil of ignorance to discover the basic features of their social existence: class, ethnicity, nationality, level of wealthy, natural endowments, and so on, features that presumably acquire their significance and degree of influence from specific cultural traditions. The assigned life, to be engaged for approximately an hour, represents an algorithmically generated composite of statistical facts, as opposed to a biographically rich character, or a character situated in a dramatically, narratively, or thematically rich fictional context.

I expect that a simulated human composite of socio-economic, geographical and other statistical data would leave even the most empathetic soul a little underwhelmed. Gallagher’s suggestion that playing the game may help us “rethink the meaning of death” brings to mind Aristotle’s proposition, quoted earlier, that the *mimetically arranged* universal truths of poetry are more philosophically serious than *history* in the sense of a chronological ordering of facts, or historical data. Pondering large sets of data might prompt insights into the meaning of death, just as

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ <http://www.educationalsimulations.com/products.html>

pondering a metaphor might. But it's worth noting that the several games Gallagher cites to advance his cause still have recourse to something like characters – simulated selves – and don't dispense entirely with the basic elements of narrative structure.

The problem with video games centred on stark, statistically generated simulated selves (characters) or computationally driven or radically open-ended user driven narrative structures is that they are liable to produce neither a well-sustained structure of propositional thought – what ideally we expect of an essay or treatise – nor the kind of complex aesthetic structure liable to *suggest* a rich indeterminate semantic and thematic content – what we might expect of certain genres of literary and non-literary art.

Varieties of interactivity

Gallagher may be right to shift our attention from “videogames primarily as an *audiovisual, interactive medium*” toward a focus on their computational facility. But the kind of interactivity functionally required by video games would seem to be primarily responsible for their meaning deficit in comparison to fiction and art. This thought suggests a paradox. After all, complex sources of meaning tend to require high levels of interactivity. A brief shopping list is radically less interactive than Milton's *Paradise Lost*; and yet Milton's text would seem to present a wider array of meanings, or, to stress the interactivity of reading, to encourage the recovery and creation of a more or less endless array of meanings. So, does functional interactivity entail greater richness and scope of meaning or less?

The question as it applies to the videogame-art comparison is equivocal owing to a divergence in the mimetic function of games and art. Many works of art are simultaneously highly prescriptive – structurally and at the level of particulars – and yet require ongoing, assiduous, insightful and imaginative interpretation to recover their mimetic content, i.e. they're interactive not in respect of design but reception. Video games that are interactive at the level of design tend to be prescriptive within a comparably far simpler set of aesthetic-semantic parameters, and these parameters provide not so much for interpretive choice as either response-stimulus choice or, in the case of cognitively more demanding games, choice that is more calculative and finite than expansive. For example, a *Real Lives* player who has been assigned to live for an hour the life of a simulated Bangladeshi farmer may choose to marry or not marry and her choice will lead her game self along a computationally fixed trajectory that displays few grounds for interpretive elaboration or for interpreting the existential significance of marriage *within the context of the game*. By contrast an audience member of, say, *Antigone* or *Oedipus the King* is given no choice at all whether the central character will marry, but while the dramatic trajectory Oedipus or Antigone follows is as fixed as that of the statistical composite of a Bangladeshi farmer, its mimetic function within the context positively encourages an ongoing expansion of its meaning. The reason might be as simple as this: Sophocles was in a position to shape into a thematically complex unity the mimetic forms of his drama with his compositional choices, whereas the need to provide the player game-turning choices undermines the *Real Lives* game designers' ability to

provide a similar structural unity for their game and *a fortiori* a similarly complex structural unity.

Visual/3D self-styling in *Second Life*

Second Life's unstructured format and the few demands it makes on the player may offer a way out of this practical dilemma. In a sense the game is not so much a game as a platform on which participants role play however they wish, and more or less design their own game activities or simulated lives. Unlike *Real Lives* and nearly all other video games – and unlike dramas, short stories or novels, for that matter – *Second Life* thus provides its participants a virtually unrestricted creative freedom. But a cursory look at the visual environment and goings on of the game's avatars nonetheless shows a surprisingly limited range of mimetic expression. Players present themselves through avatars that typically resemble beautified and stylised versions of their real selves, and pursue simulated lives in which their creative efforts are focussed on displaying visually the style of their avatar identity while interacting – often in extravagant or exotic locals – with other players through their similarly stylised avatars.

This singular focus on visually oriented self-styling, which is a core mimetic value of the game, is a function of *Second Life*'s categorical reliance on 3D simulation, and the high degree of interactivity of players. Despite the unrestricted freedom of participants, the interactivity among players that engage each other in 3D space as simulated visual objects seems to discourage players from developing their avatars beyond the visual dimension of their simulated existence. As a consequence, to extend an earlier point, the cognitive dimension of *Second Life* mimesis is singularly impoverished.

In this discussion I'm assuming the Aristotelian view that mimesis has a cognitive dimension, a capacity to suggest truths or illuminate reality. *Second Life* participants might of course start issuing screeds or treatise or exchanging propositions, using the site for blogging or hosting net conferences. But that would be beside the point of the mimetic significance of *Second Life*, and the point of the game if the point is to enter an imaginary second life. Mimesis in *Second Life* in any case might not be so cognitively impoverished were the platform to encourage players to begin to develop more thoroughly mimetic secondary selves, on grounds more conducive to cognitive expansion and play. For instance were *Second Life* to provide an austere audiovisual platform in which players were required to drop their lush-looking, lifestyle-conscious avatars in favour of fictional selves attached to the word as the primary medium of exchange and engagement, the significance of encounters between these selves would rely on voice instead of visual appearance, and so more on the sources of voice – worldviews or outlooks – and objects of expression natural to voice – ideas, points of view, rhetorical and poetic expression. Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse suggests an analogy. Like a novel in which the author resists foreclosing on or reconciling the logic of competing points of view among characters, the interactivity of *Second Life* would provide *the structural basis* for elaborating, open-endedly, a

multiplicity of voices and a dialogic interplay of their points of view and rhetorical and poetic forms over and above the intent of the particular authors of those voices (i.e. players).

Second Life's founder Philip Rosedale has predicted – his diction suggests somewhat apprehensively –that:

the real world, as it becomes more malleable . . . and we ourselves become more re-definable in our bodies and our lives, we probably will tend to look like, or to become like and behave like, people do, at least to a certain extent, inside *Second Life*.⁵

Malleability of the real world aside, Rosedale has hardly stuck his neck out. But his prediction suggests an inadvertent critique of the *Second Life* phenomenon. So far as I can tell, teleporting and flying aside, people “inside *Second Life*” already behave pretty much as people do outside *Second Life*, owing I suspect to the allure of their creativity dampening 3D environment, which will presumably become more alluring as the game’s visual graphics improve. The revision of *Second Life* suggested above, shifting radically to the word as the primary source of mimetic activity, prescribes a structural change that would direct players toward forms of mimesis that are more liable to disrupt and reflexively expand their horizons than the current forms of 3D fantasy the game currently hosts, which seem to be designed to eliminate cognitive-aesthetic content from *Second Life* and leave the players’ worldview and sense of life more or less untouched.

⁵ Philip Rosedale “Virtual Worlds and Second Life,” 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LFqX6YNY0>

Works Cited

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