

## **Agency and Volition in Make-Believe Worlds forthcoming in *How to Make-Believe* (DeGruyter)**

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Second Life, an online multi-user environment created by Linden Labs in 2003, resists categorization either as “game” that an individual may play, or as “site” where an individual may reside. In 2010, there were 21,300,000 registered accounts, although there is no publically available data on the number of active users.<sup>1</sup> Second Life players, called “Residents”, interact with each other through “avatars”, graphical representations of their online alter-egos. Residents converse, learn languages, form relationships, run businesses, publish magazines, exhibit art, perform live music, engage in scientific collaboration, and participate in religious organizations. The population of Second Life also includes non-player characters (NPCs), avatars that are animated by computer programs rather than by people.

A prominent feature of Second Life, one that makes it particularly philosophically interesting, is the lack of a goal, implicit or explicit, that is stipulated by the game design. In Second Life, you are not given a “quest”. Players do not have to hunt down terrorists, save a princess, unravel a mystery, or build an empire. Rather, they must set their own goals and decide for themselves what is worth pursuing. It only makes sense to talk of “winning” or “losing” Second Life to the extent that it makes sense to make those same kinds of judgments in real life. Success is relativized to particular goals, and those goals are determined by individual players. Common goals include finding a soul mate, learning a skill, creating a community, and striking it rich. (Second Life has its own currency, the Linden dollar used to buy and sell virtual goods and services). This absence of a game-furnished goal makes the virtual environment compelling and immersive for some, and utterly mystifying for others. The game demands of players that they initiate actions and establish what Bernard Williams (1973) called “ground projects”. In short, the game invites players to exercise agency. Some will find this invitation tantalizing, an occasion to transcend corporeal limitations and to live a literal second life. Others will find the invitation absurd, seeing “actions” in the virtual world as without significance.

This investigation into human agency in virtual worlds begins with a short case study of marital infidelity on Second Life. I examine considerations adduced by J. David Velleman in favor of the view that Second Life Residents exercise real agency while animating their virtual bodies. I then argue that important disanalogies between Second Life and real life should give us pause in attributing full-blooded personhood, and therefore full-blooded agency, to Second life Residents. In particular, I argue that Residents are less likely to have *volitions*, desires about the content of their will, in the sense articulated by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt. Ultimately, the degree to which Residents have volitions is a function of the degree to which they care about the lives of their alter-egos. This is a contingent matter

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<sup>1</sup> · "Current user metrics for Second Life". <http://secondlife.com/xmlhttp/secondlife.php> Retrieved 2010-02-19.

that will vary greatly among individual players. However, I argue that structural features of Second Life make it less likely that individuals care about their Second Life avatars in the same way that they care about their real lives. Finally, I point out ways that the analysis of agency in Second Life illuminates aspects of agency in the real world.

## **I. Velleman on Virtual Agency**

A widely discussed *Wall Street Journal* article chronicled the life of Second Life player Ric Hoogestraat, a 53-year-old man with a long ponytail, graying sideburns, a salt-and-pepper handlebar mustache, and a large paunch. His look is described as that of a “cross between a techie and the Grateful Dead fan that he is.” (Alter, 2007) During different periods of his life, Hoogestraat worked as an elementary school teacher, a call center operator, a computer graphics instructor, and a vendor for herbs and essential oils at Renaissance fairs.

But Mr. Hoogestraat also has another persona. For an average of six hours a day, and fourteen hours at a stretch on weekends, he inhabits an “avatar” named “Dutch Hoorenbeek” in Second Life. His life as “Dutch” is rather different from his life as “Ric”:

[Dutch] looks like a younger, physically enhanced version of [Ric]: a biker with a long black ponytail, strong jaw and thick handlebar mustache. In the virtual world, he's a successful entrepreneur with a net worth of about \$1.5 million in the site's currency, the linden, which can be earned or purchased through Second Life's Web site at a rate of about 250 lindens per U.S. dollar. He owns a mall, a private beach club, a dance club and a strip club. He has 25 employees, online persons known as avatars who are operated by other players, including a security guard, a mall concierge, a manager and assistant manager, and the "exotic dancers" at his club. He designs bikinis and lingerie, and sells them through his chain store, Red Headed Lovers.

Ric Hoogestraat's parallel existence has proven rather distressing for his long suffering (real) wife, Sue Hoogestraat, who pays household bills, cooks, does laundry, takes care of their three dogs, and empties ashtrays around the house. Even worse from her perspective is the fact that in Second Life Ric is *married* to a tall, wiry redhead named Tenaj Jackalope, an avatar played by a 38-year-old Canadian woman whom he has never met in person. According to the article, “Dutch” and “Tenaj” share a remarkable degree of intimacy and trust; Ric and Sue, not so much. The case raises a number of fascinating psychological, sociological, and ethical questions. There is also a very practical question to be answered: Is Mr. Hoogestraat cheating on his wife? The answer to this question depends on whether we understand Mr. Hoogestraat to have really *done* anything, that is, we need to know whether or not he was exercising *agency*.

In a paper entitled “Bodies, Selves” (2008), J. David Velleman describes the manner in which “virtual agency” is exercised in multi-user role-playing games. Velleman notes that a player of Second Life will typically attribute to herself the various actions that his Second Life avatar performs in the virtual world. She will say things such as *I wielded the knife* or *I was late for class* or *I got married to Cindy last year*. Velleman argues that we have good reason to take these avowals literally. He maintains that although the player's actions in the virtual world are merely fictional, the player is really performing them.

Velleman contends that when an individual engages in virtual play, that individual (really) has a (fictional) body. Although the body is fictional, the player's relation to the body is real in the respects that are most significant for physical actions. The avatar is directly controlled by the individual's intentions, which are motivated by the individual's beliefs and desires. This makes animating an avatar on *Second Life* both strange and familiar, since "even if you never play video games, you already have an avatar by default; your default is your body." (Velleman 2008, 415)

Velleman's characterization of virtual agency is in sharp contrast to the way that we ordinarily interpret the action of actors in theater and film, or the action of children in the context of pretend games. When an actor reports *After I got off the subway I stabbed Tony Soprano* or *I commit suicide in Act V* it would be very odd to interpret what he says as literally true. Similarly, in pretend games, it would be very odd to interpret literally a child's utterance of *I killed the pirate*. So why should matters be different for virtual play? Velleman articulates two central disanalogies between the phenomenology of make-believe in pretend games and acting, and the phenomenology of virtual play. Unlike the imaginary world of children's fantasies, the virtual world of *Second Life* is both *determinate* and *recalcitrant*.<sup>2</sup>

Velleman points out that virtual worlds, in contrast to worlds of pretend play, have a high degree of determinateness in relation to the knowledge of the participants.<sup>3</sup> In games or pretend play, players are on an equal footing with authors of fiction: the facts of the fictional world are limited to the contents of their fictionalizing. By contrast, in a virtual world, each player must explore the world in order to learn what it is like. Moreover, since their beliefs about the virtual world are constantly being reality-tested, there is always the chance that they might be getting things wrong.

A related feature of the virtual play typical of games like *Second Life* is that players cannot make stipulative additions to the virtual truths in the game.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the virtual world manifests a kind of *recalcitrance* that is characteristic of real life. This recalcitrance is part of what explains the players' intense psychological engagement for extended durations. They must deploy strategic reasoning and struggle to achieve their goals, just as they do in real life. Although a child playing pretend pirates may imagine that his hypothesis turns out to be false, it will only turn out false if he so decides. As a result, participants in games of make-believe cannot be frustrated or disappointed in a way that it is possible for inhabitants of *Second Life*.

Unlike a pretend game of pirates where a child can simply stipulate, "I found the treasure! It was in the ship's hull!" and thereby make it true in the fiction, in virtual games like *Second Life* the player must actually search for and discover the treasure. The treasure may very well be difficult to find, and there is an open possibility that the player, despite his best efforts, will not find it. A player's hypothesis that the treasure is located in, say, the ship's hull, may turn out to be false. Velleman argues that this aspect of virtual play accounts for its

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<sup>2</sup> Velleman understands his account of virtual play as a challenge to Kendall Walton's account of fiction and make-believe. In this paper I do not comment on whether the putative distinctiveness of virtual play provides reason to think that Walton's view cannot accommodate virtual play. For an answer in the negative, see Robson & Meskin (2012).

<sup>3</sup> See Velleman (2008, 408).

<sup>4</sup> See Velleman (2007, 407).

distinctive phenomenology: “players who send their avatars into unknown regions of the virtual world are genuinely curious about what they will find; they do not attribute a fictional curiosity to their avatars to account for their fictional explorations.” (Velleman, 2008, 412)

Replying to Velleman, Robson and Meskin (2012) advert to Kendall Walton’s classic example to point out that children who play a game of make-believe game where stumps count for bears “may be genuinely curious as to what is true in this fictional world; there are so many places where stumps could (genuinely) be uncovered after all and as such so many places where we could (fictionally) stumble upon a hidden bear.” Robson and Meskin are correct that it is possible to genuinely strive for knowledge and that it is possible to get things wrong in standard games of make-believe, and that Velleman overstates the disanalogy between Second Life and prop-based games of pretence. A child who is playing a game in which “tree stumps” stand for “bears” may be in error about a number of things that are true in the fiction. For example, he may fail to notice that there is a bear “hiding” on the other side of the creek, and his lack of knowledge may have adverse consequences in the game.

Be that as it may, Velleman is right that such games are *in general* much more fluid and amenable to stipulative change than are virtual worlds. A child may simply decide that the bear across the creek is a “friendly bear”, or that the skinny tree stumps across the way do not stand in for bears after all; rather, they stand in for deer. (New rule: thick stumps for bears, skinny stumps for deer). With a few quick and easy stipulative revisions, the imagined world can become markedly less recalcitrant. Granted, in games requiring interpersonal cooperation this fluidity will depend partly on the amenability of one’s playmates. And one’s playmates may not be amenable. Again, the difference between virtual play and games of make-believe is not as cut and dried as Velleman makes it out to be. But I think that Velleman is right to point out that virtual worlds like Second Life tend to be noticeably more determinate and recalcitrant than children’s games of make-believe, and this is part of what explains the psychological engagement they produce.

But Robson and Meskin also point out that paradigms of canonical fictions can be just as recalcitrant, determinate, and thereby just as emotionally gripping as games like Second Life. Again, they are right about this. However, Second Life is nonetheless distinctive in that it combines the recalcitrance and determinateness of a, say, realistic novel with the participatory aspects of games of make-believe.

Finally, Robson and Meskin think that Walton’s account of fiction-directed “quasi-emotions” is just as applicable to the virtual case as it is to canonical fictions:

One of us has, today alone, encountered giant spiders, killer robots and murderous ogres in virtual environments but has no need for the extensive post-traumatic counselling that encountering any of these things in the real world would likely necessitate. Indeed all of Walton’s arguments that our fear in watching the green slime approaching is not genuine (our desire to repeat such experiences, the fact we don’t get up and leave the cinema, our continued belief that the object of our fear does not exist etc.) seem readily applicable, with slight adaptations, in the virtual monster case. (12)

Robson and Meskin are probably right about virtual monsters, but I think that cases like that of Ric Hoogestraat should give us pause. Were Tenaj to abandon or publically humiliate Hoorenbeek in Second Life, it seems unlikely that Hoogestraat would be keen to repeat the experience. Velleman notes that people in virtual relationships “describe themselves as being in love, not as authoring a fictional romance.” He avers that, “They do not experience themselves as artists inventing characters; they experience themselves *as* the characters, behaving *in* character, under the impetus of their thoughts and feelings.”<sup>5</sup>

Robson and Meskin counter that the widely reported accounts of love on Second Life are in fact relationships between real people, not between fictional entities, or as Velleman suggests, between chimerical creatures, compounded of fictional bodies and real minds. Robson and Meskin appeal to Walton’s view that one can genuinely perform certain acts by pretending to perform others (for example, one may genuinely express affection by pretending to blow a kiss). They contend that a person may (genuinely) profess love for another person by pretending to have their avatar profess love for the other person’s avatar. They draw the analogy of two (real) people communicating their love to each other via sock puppets.

I suspect that this model of love on Second Life, although strange, does not capture the *deep* strangeness of Second Life romantic relationships. The qualities that one chooses to present in the guise of a Second Life avatar can often be *very* far from person one really is; indeed, that is often the point. As a result, the “person” one falls in love with may not exist at all outside of the game. Moreover, one may have markedly different preferences with regard to romantic partners in real life than the person one falls in love *as*.

One may object on behalf of Robson and Meskin that meticulously curated self-presentations and even outright falsifications are not uncommon in many real relationships, especially in the age of online dating between strangers. Moreover, it is not uncommon for people to report falling in love with a fantasy or idealization, or for people to report being self-deceived about what they “really want”. However, the capacity for, and more importantly, the pervasiveness and acceptability of, outright fictionalizing about the self in Second Life makes it odd to characterize Second Life romance as romance between two (real) people. Janet did not fall in love with a balding, overweight, unemployed, married man. Rather, Tenaj fell for an unattached, virile, risk-taking and dynamic entrepreneur. As Velleman points out, in virtual worlds the actual players are usually not known to one another, and there is no way to look behind the avatar to the person who animates it (Velleman dubs this feature “opacity”).<sup>6</sup> As a result, to fall in love on Second Life is neither to author a fictional romance nor is it to fall in love with a real person.

The capacity for frictionless and endlessly repeatable self-invention is an aspect of a fundamental disanalogy between agency in the real world and agency in virtual world that I explore in the rest of the paper. This disanalogy does not rule out the metaphysical possibility of real agency in virtual worlds; rather, it explains why structural aspects of virtual worlds like Second Life cut against the enabling conditions of agency.

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<sup>5</sup> Velleman (2008, 412).

<sup>6</sup> Velleman (2008, 410). Robson and Meskin point out that Velleman exaggerates the degree of opacity in Second Life (2012, 17-18).

## §2 Virtual Agents as Wantons

In his classic paper “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” published 1971, Harry Frankfurt contends that the essential mark of personhood is to be found not in the capacity for reason but in the structure of the will. It is in virtue of the structure of will that a person is “a type of entity for whom the freedom of its will may be a problem.” (Frankfurt, 1971, 14) In Frankfurt’s terminology, persons have both first-order and second-order desires. First-order desires are directed toward bringing about some state of affairs through action. Second-order desires are desires about what motives and desires to have. These kinds of desires require a capacity for reflective self-evaluation that only persons have:

Besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. Many animals appear to have the capacity for what I shall call “first-order desires” or “desires of the first order,” which are simply desires to do or not to do one thing or another. No animal other than man, however, appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires. (Frankfurt 1971, 12)

Any given agent will have a great number of first-order desires that compete for supremacy. Frankfurt defines an agent’s *will* as the first-order desire that actually motivates her to act; it is the *effective* desire. A person has a *volition* when she wants a certain desire to be her will. Volitions are a proper subset of second-order desires. To illustrate the case of a second-order desire that is not a volition, Frankfurt offers the example of doctor who, for the sake of getting a better understanding of what it feels like to be an addict, desires to desire a drug. The doctor here merely wants to feel the pull of the desire without being motivated by it, without that desire becoming his will. Volitions, on the other hand, are desires that are directed toward an agent’s will.

For Frankfurt a “wanton” is someone who is indifferent to her will. A wanton has first-order desires, but no second-order volitions. The class of wantons includes nonhuman animals as well as very young children. These beings may have desires and the capacity to act on them, but they do not have the capacity to care about their will. Adult human beings can act more or less wantonly to extent that they have or lack volitions of the second order. A wanton may have a highly developed capacity to deliberate about *how* to do what she wants to do; she may be excellent at engaging in instrumental reasoning. However, she does not broach the question of what her will is to be.<sup>7</sup>

Wantonness comes in degrees. Even individuals who are characteristically thoughtful and reflective will at times forget themselves.<sup>8</sup> And even those who are habitually heedless and

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<sup>7</sup> See Frankfurt (1971, 17)

<sup>8</sup> The tendency to forget oneself at times need not always rule out agency. Indeed, such self-forgetting may be indicative of a wholeheartedness and spontaneity that is constitutive of agency *par excellence*. See Velleman (2007) and D’Cruz (2011). However, it is the systematic and pervasive absence of reflection on motives ultimately undermines agency.

unmindful will sometimes be displeased or disgusted with their own desires. The degree to which one is a wanton is proportional to the extent that one lacks volitions, desires about which desires will constitute one's will.

I contend that we have good reason to understand the Residents of Second Life as markedly more wanton in Frankfurt's sense, because structural features of Second Life diminish the pressure to form volitions. As a result, although we may understand them as agents in a "thin" sense, we should hesitate to attribute "full-blooded" agency, the agency of persons, to them.

To begin, consider the following structural features of Second Life (SL) that are disanalogous to that of real life (RL). Some of these features may seem too obvious to mention, but attending to them carefully is essential to understanding the structure of the will of SL Residents, and therefore the nature of their personhood and agency.

- (1) In SL, you *escape your past*. (Typically, no one in SL knows you from RL).
- (2) In SL, you *escape your future*. (You can always log off when things get sticky without the irrevocable implications of a RL suicide).
- (3) If your body or your persona in SL no longer pleases you, you can abandon your SL avatar and *animate a new avatar*.
- (4) If you "die" in SL, you still have your real life to live. If you die in real life, you can no longer animate your SL avatar.
- (5) While you inhabit SL, you also inhabit RL. But not vice-versa.
- (6) The consequences of your actions are mitigated by the fact that 1-5 are true for other Residents of SL as well.
- (7) The reasonable expectations of other players are modulated by a mutual understanding of 1-6.

Velleman is right that the characteristics of recalcitrance and determinateness significantly increase the psychological immersiveness of games like Second Life. But as immersive as Second Life can be, the above-mentioned structural features simultaneously render life in Second Life relatively "low stakes". The felt imperative to endorse or to disavow the desires that one has as a Second Life Resident is markedly less urgent than the analogous felt imperative in real life. The felt need to "identify" with one's desires is greatly diminished when the consequences of one's actions are so much less weighty.

In real life, the question, "What does this desire say about me?" can be both troubling and urgent. Individuals will often be concerned with the states of affairs they desire even if they are unlikely to bring them about, especially if those desires are in conflict with deeply held values. (Consider the pedophile consumed with self-hatred. He may hate not only the thought of *acting* on his desires, but also the desires themselves.) In Second Life, the question, "What does this desire say about me?" can easily be deflected to, "What does this desire say about the alter-ego I am creating through this enactment?" Players of Second Life can without difficulty move between the perspective of an agent who is performing an

action to that of an author who is creating a character. Such a shift in perspective from agent to author will alter the applicable norms of responsibility. In general, there is nothing morally troubling about creating of fiction with an evil character; being an agent of evil, or even having desires that one conceives of as evil, is a different matter altogether.<sup>9</sup>

None of this is to insinuate that actions in Second Life never have real consequences. One can, for instance, break another person's heart on Second Life. Moreover, it is sometimes the case that the actions of Second Life players are expressive of desires that players have in their real lives. But such desires can easily be written off by players of the game as mere "desire-like imaginings". The connection between "desire" and "desire-like imagining" is highly complex and uncertain even for theoreticians<sup>10</sup>, and therefore fertile ground for obfuscation on the part of ordinary players. This obfuscation may at times be strategic, a subtle way of evading troubling questions about the ultimate source in one's psyche of one's fiction-bound conations.

Because of structural features (6) and (7) listed above, it is not hard for players to think that fellow players cannot or will not be injured by one's actions in the virtual world. This may sometimes be an all too convenient rationalization. (Imagine how Ric Hoogestraat might feel to discover that "Tenaj" is carrying on a covert affair with another Second Life Resident). Nonetheless, the perspective of "it's only a fiction" is readily available. The extent to which taking up this perspective is justified will in part depend upon the extent to which the game inhabitants with whom one is interacting are emotionally invested in their virtual lives. But it is the availability of this perspective rather than its justification that distinguishes Second Life from real life, and which ultimately diminishes the sense of agency in Second Life.<sup>11</sup>

While this structural feature casts doubt on Second Life as a locus of real agency, it simultaneously cast light on the explanation for why Second Life is often conceived as a locus of emancipation. In Second Life, individuals are able to "try on" identities without fear of judgment or recrimination. The anthropologist Tom Boellstroff describes some of complex relations between Second Life sexuality and real world desire:

Since sexual orientation was not typically seen to be embodied online (or offline) in the way that gender, race, age, and disability were, the sexual orientation of Residents was often unclear. For some, Second Life provided a virtual closet where they could live out same-gender desires that they were unwilling or unable to enact in the actual world. For instance, I encountered many cases of bisexual men and women who were heterosexually married, had chosen to be monogamous with their opposite gender spouse in the actual world, but with their spouse's blessing pursued same gender sex and even relationships on Second Life. For others, Second Life could serve as a

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<sup>9</sup> It is not important for my argument whether or not desires themselves are an appropriate object of moral assessment. All that matters for my argument is that agents often *feel* them to be so.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Currie (2002) and Nichols (2004).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, there are instances when individuals will take up something analogous to this perspective in real life. Such a state, if enduring and pervasive, is indicative of as a disorder of psychological dissociation, manifested either as depersonalization (a sense of unreality in one's self), or derealization (a sense of unreality in one's surroundings). See Simeon (2004).



venue to grow comfortable with gay and lesbian identity before coming out in the actual world. (Boellstroff 2008,165)

When an individual's desires and values conflict, the incongruous desires often occasion guilt, shame, and self-loathing. Typically, the individual seeks to extinguish them, or at least prefers that they wither away. In some instances, however, the opportunity to explore and to experiment with desires that one does not presently endorse leads one to view the objects of those desires as *desire-worthy*, or at least no longer inconsistent with one's values.

In ordinary life, there is a strong pressure to achieve congruence between felt motivation and reflective valuation. At times this pressure can be stifling. But on the whole we want the things that we desire to overlap with the things that we judge to be desire-worthy: we want to be wholehearted. Such pressure is key to personhood and to agency. The structural features of Second Life that relieve this pressure account both for its appeal, and for the fact that Second Life Residents are usually neither persons nor agents.

The singularity of real life, the fact that there is no "take-two", makes urgent the imperative to desire and to pursue what is by our lights valuable. Second Life lacks in this urgency. In real life we are sometimes given second *chances*, opportunities to make amends for past sins, solecisms, and indiscretions. However, we are never given the opportunity literally to erase the past and start over, free of regret, remorse, reckoning, or of suppression and its consequences. It is this feature of life that raises the stakes: meaningful failure to realize value is a condition of the possibility of meaningful agency.

As mentioned early, the considerations adduced in this essay do not constitute an argument against the metaphysical possibility of virtual agency. Indeed, in rare cases, individuals will become so engrossed in Second Life that they care more about what happens in the virtual world than what happens in real life. In such cases, the prospect of Second Life suicide may feel like a real existential threat, and betrayals may reach across metaphysical boundaries of virtual and real. Such may have been the case with Hoogestraat/Hoorenbeek. If it were, then we would be wise not to ignore the question of whether he was also unfaithful to Tenaj, his wife in Second Life.

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