

## MEDIA REVIEW: Autism and Second Life – An Introduction

The multi-user, online virtual reality environment of Second Life provides interesting possibilities for users with disabilities to exist in a parallel virtual universe, a simulacrum of bold colours, phantasmagoric dreamscapes and three-dimensional virtualized replicas of real world locales. "Autie World" is a cluster of *sims*, or three-dimensional virtual environments that offer promising opportunities of empowerment and support for persons with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), as well as advocates, activists, and parents or friends of persons with developmental disabilities. The disability community in Second Life also gives visibility, a voice and an alternative means of communication to individuals and groups who are potentially socially isolated and stigmatized in the physical world due to autism or other disabilities. However, Second Life is equally rife with many contradictions and limitations that belie the assumption and coverage of the general media that this virtual world is a progressive, virtualized utopia with endless benefits for people with disabilities. This review will consider the intersection of autism with Second Life as it relates to user experience; it will also reflect on selected virtual meeting grounds that have something to offer autistic users and those who seek to practice advocacy on behalf of those individuals. I will explore the nature of Second Life for first-time users, both autistic and non-autistic, through two virtual sites related to autism: the Autistic Liberation Front (ALF), which is open to all Second Life residents, and through Professor Jason Nolan, who has invited my avatar to his private "autie" site in Second Life (officially owned by Ryerson University).

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### 1. Second Life: Basic Operation of Graphical User Interface

Second Life is an online, multi-user, three-dimensional, virtual environment and Web 2.0 browser software that has been operational on the Internet since 2003, founded by the San Francisco company, *Linden Lab*. Second Life is not a game like other online gaming universes; it is first and foremost an open-ended, social environment where users congregate and interact with other users in a three-dimensional virtual space in real time, using an avatar. Second Life is also a "sandbox" where users can freely create and build objects using Second Life's menu-based scripts and software tools.

For autistic users, virtual environments such as Second Life can be beneficial; "interaction through avatars, rather than face to face, provides a sense of anonymity and reduces the stress and sense of risk that can occur during direct interaction with another person...By reducing the level of threat in communication, and by bringing people who may be widely

dispersed together, CVE's function as an assistive technology to improve communication and reduce isolation and the sense of social exclusion for people with autism" (Smith, Swanson, Holverstott, & Duncan, 2007, p. 398).

Second Life's environments and *sims* are mostly generated by registered users worldwide who also become known as residents of Second Life (except for the virtual islands and water which are created by *Linden Lab*). A user begins by downloading the software free of charge, opening an account and creating an avatar whose movements they can fully maneuver by computer keyboard and/or joystick; the user controls the avatar in walking, running, flying and "teleportation" to various locations in-world where online text chat or voice chat serves as a method of communication with other avatars/users. Users can modify and customize their avatars, or purchase "skins" which are avatar physiognomies of various characteristics, racial/ethnic backgrounds or other facial and physical features. They can also design their own avatars, choosing anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic representations with the help of Second Life's built-in software tools. Users can also sculpt and build 3-D architectural models able to serve as virtual meeting places, grounds and virtual communities for themselves and/or other users. As Nolan states, computational media, in this case, virtual environments, "can share the object (knowledge objects) they create" (Nolan interview, 2009). In addition, Second Life's market economy and exchangeable Linden dollar allows residents to purchase virtual real estate and other virtual goods for ownership.

The potential for life-like emotional expressions in Second Life is extremely limited, which has implications for autistic users; the user can either choose from an available array of emotional cues/gestures for their avatar which are cartoon-like animated scripts (such as a wink, a shrug, or a chuckle), available for prompt using your keyboard or software menu, or they can obtain similar animated scripts from various sources in Second Life. Ultimately, at this point in time in Second Life, autistic users are not burdened with the requirement to read complex emotional cues in other avatars.

## 2. Virtual Reality (VR) Environments, Virtual Bodies and Autism: Considerations

Entering Second Life, one can teleport their avatar to multiple virtual locations that are either focused on support for autistic users and autism advocacy, or inclusive of users and advocates of all forms of disability. GimpGirl Community, Wheelies Nightclub, Brigadoon, Autistic Liberation Front, Autism Awareness Center, and Naughty Auties can be searched via Second Life's search engine with direct links (teleportation) to those virtual locations. Brigadoon and Naughty Auties are *sims* where one must request permission to join in order to visit. There are also other privately owned "autie" *sims* that are accessible by invitation only.

The Autistic Liberation Front (ALF) is a *sim* where several virtual museums house various exhibits and virtual art focusing awareness on autism issues and history. Upon entering the site, the visitor is given a notecard that specifies, "The Autistic Liberation Front, as it exists in Second Life, is a space for autistics...and our neurotypical allies to organize, educate, and advocate for ourselves. The organizers of the ALF, Second Life version, are affiliated with the website [Autistics.org](http://Autistics.org)" (ALF notecard).

This space also has virtual trees and grassy knolls mixed with concrete walkways, interactive installations, sculptures and benches, including a prominent display of a rainbow symbolizing the autism spectrum. At the entrance of the virtual museum a banner states, "Autism: From Darkness to Light, a look at past and present misconceptions about autism, and at what current research and autistic persons themselves reveal about it" (ALF banner). Walking inside the museum, one is struck by various posters, installation pieces and other displays that discuss autism issues, prejudices, stereotypes and history. There is also a bulletin board stating meetings and discussions that take place at a specific time. Posters state: "autism, as a particular way of categorizing human personalities is a social construct." There are interactive installation pieces such as the "Rifton Chair," where your avatar can choose to sit in the chair, explaining, "often used to restrain young autistic children in

1 CVE's have been defined as "multi-user, collaborative virtual environments" (quoted in Pruski & Knops, 2005, p. 443).

classrooms, sometimes for eight hours a day” (ALF display). There is also a room with advertisements for virtual T-shirts and other virtual paraphernalia. The virtual T-shirt that sells for 10 Linden Dollars (equivalent of \$0.04 U.S.) carries the slogan, “I am not a puzzle, I am a person” (ALF advertisement). There is also an exhibit that explores bullying yet fails to launch its interactive options. A virtual elevator takes your avatar to several different floors that house other galleries of advocacy and online information, including a virtual library.

On the third floor, there are various boards and posters that supply information about the Internet’s blogosphere of activism related to autism. One particular board poses the question “Does the Neurodiversity Movement believe that autism is not a disability?” (ALF board). The answer is not displayed but is left for visitors to reflect upon.

In terms of advocacy and activism on behalf of persons with developmental disabilities, Second Life and disability/autism-oriented *sims* such as the Autistic Liberation Front can become a complimentary method and presence of online engagement in addition to other forms of cyber-activism in new media practices and technologies, such as blogs, online communities and social networking sites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) ALF, Autism Awareness Center and other autism-themed Second Life *sims* can be thought-provoking for non-disabled visitors, while simultaneously creating a space, sense of belonging, and community for those with developmental disabilities. These *sims* also provide parents and advocates with opportunities to tap into organized support services offered (such as virtual meetings and support groups).

“Media advocacy is a tactic for community groups to communicate their own story in their own words to promote social change. It is a hybrid tool combining advocacy approaches with the strategic and innovative use of media” (Wallack, 2005, p. 420). In the case of Second Life, the representation and dissemination of the autistic experience is achieved through the ability to co-exist in a multisensory virtual space that is either an extension or reconstitution of our selves, our bodies and minds, our social identities and subjectivities. Turkle poetically states that, “a relationship with a comput-

er can influence people’s conceptions of themselves, their jobs, their relationships with other people, and with their ways of thinking about social processes. It can be the basis for new aesthetic values, new rituals, new philosophy, new cultural forms” (Turkle, 1984, p. 156).

Aside from the challenges of learning to use the software for both non-disabled and disabled users, the autistic user’s online virtual identity is anonymous; hiding certain real-world manifestations of their disability or freely expressing them via their Second Life avatar becomes a personal choice dictated by real-world experiences and motives. Avatar research points to multiple views on the subject: “subjectivities and bodies online...are potentially very different from bodies offline. At issue here is a desire...to transcend the body and to be released from its earthly limitations” (Goggin & Newell, 2003, p. 111). The opposing view claims that similarity to real world social identity and physiognomy is favoured by new media users; “the fact that people prefer a choice of avatar that is aligned with their own gender and type (human) suggests that they might also tend to choose avatars with other characteristics that are similar to their own” (Nowak & Rauh, 2005, p. 172). By “bringing the notion of identity as fluid and performative to life” (Gamson, 2003, p. 258), new media practices and technologies challenge “the connection between outward expressions of identity and the physical body which (in the real world) makes those expressions” (Gauntlett, 2000, paragraph 53); thus, the option of avatar creation affords freedom to experiment with online identity representation and gives users the tools for what Gauntlett calls “identity play” (paragraph 50).

CT Niven<sup>2</sup> is the avatar of Professor Jason Nolan who teaches in the School of Early Childhood Education, Ryerson University. Nolan also has Asperger’s syndrome. Nolan was instrumental in helping the GimpGirl Community set up their virtual site in Second Life and also regularly mentors with that organization. Visiting his *sim* in Second Life, Nolan welcomes my avatar with the following description via online text chat: “this is my autie site. no people. just me moving stuff around” (Nolan interview, 2009). Nolan has a non-anthropomorphic avatar

2 Second Life moniker.

in *Second Life*, a configuration of golden-yellow geometric shapes that embodies his self-perception of otherness and social non-conformism in the real world. He states, “you notice that I can’t even stand having (a) human shaped avatar.” Nolan explains that his avatar is “supposed to be one of J.G. Ballard’s sonic sculptures from his novel *Vermilion Sands* (1988). I like it cause [sic] it looks like me” (Nolan interview).

In *Second Life*, Nolan “(likes) to do things that make me feel more comfortable” (Nolan interview); thus, the freedom to sculpt one’s own virtual body in *Second Life* affords autistic users the ability to creatively “invent and workshop (their) identity” (Nolan interview) and circumvent the burden of the social construction of their autistic social identity. As Nolan states, “my avatar is something people think is strange or novel, but it is just what I look like to myself without worrying about what I’m supposed (to) look like” (Nolan interview). Therefore, *Second Life* and *CVE*’s are conducive to creating a safe and comfortable environment where autistic individuals can practice and learn social skills that can be transferred to the physical world, without the stress and anxiety that accompanies real world interactions (Nolan interview; Strickland, 1997, p. 82).

### 3. *Second Life*: Challenges and Implications for Autistic and Non-Autistic Users

It is equally important to note that there are many drawbacks and limitations with the *Second Life* software and user experience. The practical use and ease of operation of *Second Life* can be challenging; even as my avatar enters the Autistic Liberation Front at multiple times during the day and week, there are no other visitors (avatars) visible in this space. *Second Life*’s regions and *sims* are contingent on region popularity, visitor frequency, time of day and other variables. Regions such as ALF are often barren, empty spaces; users must locate pertinent objects on their own, and if inexperienced, they may feel overwhelmed and frustrated in this virtual environment.

The potential for avatar manipulation in virtual environments also depends on the user’s

software and computer literacy. Mastering the *Second Life* software may be difficult and time-consuming for some users and requires the desire, patience and practice, irrespective of disability, to adapt to this environment and learn the software tools and interface.

Furthermore, *Second Life* is not a utopian community where stereotypes, stigma and prejudice are non-existent, but rather an environment that continually struggles with the expression of those issues despite the common assumption that users turn to *Second Life* as a means of escape.

(*Second Life*)-like environments, never challenge their assumptions and the inherent hidden curriculum and pedagogy of the space...we don’t challenge people here to think differently...but to ‘relocalize’ themselves from the real to the virtual. (*Second Life*) allows us to bring our stereotypes along with us so we tend to recreate real world experiences...classrooms, bodies, lake front property. (Nolan interview)

Other disadvantages for autistic users also include “easy sensory overload...but you can control it and play with it” (Nolan interview). Cyber-bullying can be another problem, however, it is also controllable because one is able to block offensive users or eject them from your own space should their avatar intrude (Nolan interview.) Ganene Ruggles<sup>3</sup> is another user with Asperger’s Syndrome who runs her own *Second Life* business creating “furries” (feral avatars such as foxes and wolves) and other avatar accessories. Ganene’s experiences of *Second Life* include cyber-bullying, which she characterizes as “attacks” (Ruggles interview, 2009). Cyber-bullying can be threatening in that it can create alienating experiences for users, akin to verbal/emotional bullying in real life. It is often difficult to make friends and meet others in *Second Life* where social cues are just as important as in real life (Nolan interview).

*Second Life* is an online digital culture like any other cultural form or entity. It represents a new way to reconsider one’s personal identity, to challenge ideas about neurological and physical difference, and to develop social and even political networks. The struggle for first-

3 *Second Life* moniker.

time users to create social networks in Second Life can be frustrating and may take some time. Being labeled a “newbie” in Second Life is very common for first-time users, irrespective of their background and/or disability; transcending those labels requires acquisition of Second Life-specific social, cultural and technical skills. For autistic and non-autistic users, these implications will impact and influence their journey and exploration of online virtual environments such as Second Life. But the journey is one worth taking. Second Life, like other parts of our expanding virtual world, offer unique and possibility transformative possibilities for how to be part of a very human community.

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