I took a walk the other day leisurely down a street past several rows of houses, on my way to meet up with a friend. It was a picturesque day, with clear blue skies and a few dispersed puffy white clouds happily sailing along. Landscaped lawns of different sizes make up most of this neighborhood, with vast yards in between the beautiful mansions adorned with colorful flowerbeds and shady trees. Every now and then I passed by a house with a water fixture on the lawn, usually a fountain featuring a nude boy or the occasional herd of dolphins dancing gracefully in what looked like marble. Then, realizing that I had lost track of the time while enjoying my surroundings, I decided to teleport to my final destination. With a few clicks of the mouse, I landed in Midnight City—a compilation of a gritty urban city, upscale boutiques stocked with everything imaginable, and people from all facets of life.

My friend was easy to spot—she was highlighted on my grid—and I quickly caught up with her a few blocks away. She looked as if she already had a busy day of shopping, with two bags in each hand and a trail of boxes floating behind her. I was glad that I had prepared myself by making a self-promise to not spend a dime today, no matter how tempting it might be. That—paired with the fact that I had no money—was the only way a shopaholic like myself could prevent ending up like her. We decided that
our first destination would be a local coffee shop, where she ordered a latte and I sheepishly asked for a glass of water which, to be frank, I had no idea how to drink.

You might think I am crazy at this point—writing of teleportation, floating shopping bags, and my inability to intake water—but the oddities can be easily explained. I was in a world called Second Life, which is nothing more than a virtual world stored on a few Linden Lab servers. That said, this world of pixels is surprisingly more human than those unfamiliar with the game can imagine. For one, my friend is just like me—a human on a computer interacting in real-time with the world and other residents through an avatar. We can talk to each other through voice chat and instant messaging capabilities. We can even intermingle through body actions with each other and objects around us.

Even more remarkable, the world has a built in economy and residents can measure their own wealth based on the Linden dollar (L$), the currency used throughout with an average exchange rate around 250 L$ per US dollar. Residents can hold jobs, own businesses, purchase land, buy homes, pay rent, open bank accounts, shop for cars, clothes, food, and much more (Economics). This breeds a large population of residents who are obsessed with keeping up appearances and owning the latest and most exclusive goods. Users pour in hundreds of hours and US dollars shopping to fill up their closets, stage their beautiful homes, and ensure that their avatar upkeeps a status of wealth and beauty. Nicholas Yee, an expert at social interaction and self-representation in virtual environments, points out “Why can’t we break away from a consumerist, appearance-oriented culture? What does Second Life say about us, that we trade our consumerist-oriented culture for one that’s even worse?” (qtd. In Boss 1). If we define consumerism to be the believe that happiness is derived from the consumption of material goods, then it is safe to say that a large population of Second Life users have immersed themselves into a culture of
consumerism within the world. This widespread culture of consumerism can be linked to several factors. The relative cheapness of items compared to real world prices and the desire to maintain an elite status promotes consumption within Second Life. Users then derive happiness from this virtual consumption because of the strong psychological connection between user and avatar. For those who highly value materialistic goods, Second Life becomes a world of escape that is intrinsically better than the real world, and in turn, they consciously choose to live in this virtual world as opposed to the real.

Real Good Stuff

Within Second Life, there is no shortage of things to buy and hundreds of thousands of residents are willing to spend their Linden dollars on an eclectic mix of merchandise. Second Life proudly displays this fact on their website, even including a real-time meter tracking the number of US dollars spent in the past 24 hours—a number that is consistently above a million. What is even more intriguing than the amount of money spent on the site is the percentage of users that do spend money. A Second Life account is free and users do not have to pay a penny to experience much of the appeal.

However, almost 35% of users who logged in during the month of September 2007 spent some amount of Linden dollars. In fact, over 7,500,000 transactions took place in September, meaning a population of 300,000 residents made on average 25 purchases in the month (Economic Statistics). This number is small in comparison to the average number of purchases per month for a person in the real world, since we probably make multiple daily purchases of food, clothes, gas, and other necessities.
But when we consider that an avatar doesn’t need any of this to survive or function within *Second Life*, the indulgence of the user is quite an interesting phenomenon. Shira Boss of *The New York Times* recently investigated the importance of consumerism in the virtual world, writing “Nobody can go hungry, there is no actual need for warmer clothes or shelter, and there is much to do without buying Lindens”. Adding to this, she writes, “When people are given the opportunity to create a fantasy world, they can and do defy the laws of gravity (you can fly in *Second Life*), but not of economics or human nature...[Players] don’t need to change clothes, fix their hair, or buy and furnish a home, but many do. They don’t need to have drinks in their hands at the virtual bar, but they buy cocktails anyway, just to look right, to feel comfortable” (1).

Residents are exposed throughout their experiences with *Second Life* to enticements and temptations, with shops and vendors lining the streets of seemingly every island on the grid. There is no shortage of name brands and knockoffs available—and the best selling items tend to be replicas of real world objects. Said eloquently by *TIME Magazine* writer Joel Stein, “Apparently, people want to cram their second lives full of the same stuff they have in their first” (1). For those unfamiliar with *Second Life*, the selection of goods available is both overwhelming and odd. Along with the basic physical goods—clothes, cars, food, and others—residents can buy such things as body actions and enhancements to their physical appearances. What is even more striking is how users of *Second Life* buy in bulk. One such user is quoted as owning 31,540 items after a year and a half on the site, including 250 pairs of shoes (Boss 3). With all of these items available, usually priced at low US dollars, it’s easy to see why users become entranced by and addicted to the consumerist culture of *Second Life*. 

Inside the American Apparel virtual store. Here, residents can purchase a plethora of American Apparel gear, all for a fraction of the real world prices.
For many residents, *Second Life* simply would not be as entertaining or appealing without its thousands of shopping malls, street vendors, homes and properties for sale, car dealerships, and more. The ability to shop and buy is the primary reason that a large group of users continue to enjoy the virtual world. One such user who spends most of her *Second Life* time indulging in shopping sprees is the friend I met up with at Midnight City. Her name is Ayca, both in the real world and in *Second Life*. I met Ayca during my first week as a *Second Life* user while roaming Avatar Island, usually the first destination on the grid for new users. I found Ayca at a booth where users could submit a photo and have their avatar transformed to look strikingly similar to the photo—for a fee of course.

Ayca was a striking character, with long black hair, piercing blue eyes, and a body that replicated a Barbie doll. But what really made her stand out from the newly created avatars roaming around me was her outfit. Her short jean mini skirt, white midriff-baring top, and sparkling platform shoes were much more unique than the standard purple tee and blue jeans that I, and all the other female avatars, adorned. I spoke with Ayca for a while that day, asking her simple questions about how to get around, popular places to visit, and of course her (and my) favorite subject—shopping. What struck me most about my conversation with Ayca was the amount of time she spent on *Second Life* and the percentage of that time that she spent shopping: “Im prolly on like 3 times a week for hours...i mainly shop when im on cuz I luv the little boutiques [and] all the designers...its like a disease, Im obsessed haha” (Shan).

Ayca doesn’t own a closet in which to pack her hundreds of articles of clothing. She keeps spending the Linden dollars she has saved up for a house on clothes and shoes, the same problem she seems to face in the real world. Nonetheless, her ever-growing virtual wardrobe is stored in her profile, and she easily changes outfits with a few clicks of the mouse. She has spent so much in the world that
she can no longer keep track or how much she owns or her reasoning for purchasing such a large wardrobe, writing “I dunno how much I own now. I cant stop buying more clothes its horrible, but I just get so tempted everytime I go shop...I mean i kno I dont need it but I want it...its just like when I shop normally [in the real world] i always think that” (Shan). It is easy to understand Ayca’s pain, because it’s a very common occurrence that most of us have probably experienced in our own lives. But knowing that Ayca is tempted not by physical goods that she can touch and wear, but by a graphical representation made for her pixilated avatar, makes the experience less relatable to most. Still, Ayca is part of a large population of residents who spend most of their time in the world concerned with their virtual homes, clothes, appearance, and status.

*Real Cheap Money*

While residents seem to buy merchandise impulsively and excessively, the habit does not come without a price. In fact, spending Linden dollars is essentially spending US dollars, since the two are interchangeable both ways through LindenX, the currency exchange center (Siklos). The low value of Linden dollars makes it possible for residents to purchase almost anything they desire. As one user puts it, “It’s so easy to buy something, you don’t realize how much you’re spending” (qtd. In Boss 3).

Take for example a Rolex watch—priced at 300L$ for a platinum version and 350L$ for a gold version (Todd). If we apply the average exchange rate of about 250 Linden dollars per US dollar, a resident can purchase a Rolex for a mere $1.40. For the user who has always desired a Rolex but has never been able to shell out the $1000 or more for a real-world version, it is nearly impossible to pass up this opportunity. And with most outfits costing around two US dollars, cars no more than nine, and beachfront properties starting at $20, users who have always dreamed of a posh lifestyle are able to
indulge for a much lower price. Ayca sums it up well, saying “[in this world] evrythings sooooo cheap! i can buy anything and pay nothing...its like a free shopping spree!” (Shan).

But the ingenious economy of Second Life ensures that this is not true—nothing that is desired is free. In fact, the appeal for most users sucked into the consumerist culture is that their ownership of certain items—a fancy car, a home in an exclusive area, or the latest fashions—are a reflection of their status because it sets them apart from the masses. “Second Life is about getting the better clothes and the bigger build and the reputation as a better builder,” said Julian Dibbell, author of “Play Money,” which chronicles his year of trying to make a living by trading virtual goods in online games. “The basic activity is still the keeping up with the Joneses, or getting ahead of the Joneses, rat race game” (qtd. in Boss 2). This rat race is made possible by the fact that items are not free in Second Life. If anyone could own anything with no financial burden, then the appeal of ownership drops dramatically. That being said, merchandise in Second Life is much more affordable than their real world counterparts.

The founders of Second Life have been able to come up with a perfect formula for goods—cheap enough to be irresistible but expensive enough to remain desired. Mark Wallace, a popular Second Life blogger, writes “People buy these huge McMansions in Second Life that are just as ugly as any McMansions in real life, because to them that is what’s status-y. It’s not as easy as we think to let our imaginations run wild, in Second Life or in real life” (qtd. in Boss 2). For those users who wish they could afford an aristocratic lifestyle and elite status in the real world project these desires into the virtual world, and end up living their dream lifestyle through an avatar.
But no matter how cheap or expensive an item in Second Life is, a user is still paying for pixels on their screen and a status for their avatar. For those of us unconnected to Second Life and other virtual communities, this is a hard phenomenon to understand. Recently many scholars have begun studying the psychological connection between a user and his or her avatar, and studies show that this close connection can explain users’ behaviors towards their avatar. Most research has been done on players in MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) that are different than Second Life. These games, such as the popular World of Warcraft, involve goals and strategies such as defeating another party by gaining skills and weapons. Second Life users are given no such goal upon entering the world. However, much of the research from this field can be applied to players of Second Life, because the two groups share fundamental similarities. Each player defines himself through a self-determined avatar, and each works to provide his avatar with items or skills that will enhance the avatar’s status.

Research has found that there is an intense connection between a player and his avatar, suggesting that to the user, an avatar is a representation of the player inside the world. In World of Warcraft, it has been shown that “When his cybermorph (the figures we use to represent ourselves in cyberspace) files or falls, the sensation of flying and falling is very real for the game player. This is identification beyond mere projection; the game player is the cybermorph” (Dewdney 236).

Interestingly enough, this behavior has actually been identified far before Second Life and World of Warcraft were created. Edward Castronova, associate professor of telecommunications at Indiana University and expert in the economic and social impact of multiplayer online video games, has been studying virtual worlds since they were first created in 1991. One precursor to Second Life, named Norrath, was created in 1999 and featured a sizable community of avatars. Castronova found that “The avatar represents the user in the fantasy 3D world, and avatars apparently come to occupy a special place in the hearts of their creators. The typical user devotes hundreds of hours (and hundreds of
dollars, in some cases) to develop the avatar. The process of developing avatar capital seems to invoke exactly the same risk and reward structures in the brain that are invoked by personal development in real life” (*Virtual Worlds* 16).

It seems that the user feels the same success as their avatar, and thus suggests that in the case of consumerism within *Second Life*—when the avatar to possess something of value in essence the user possesses it. In conversations I had with residents, this seemed pretty apparent. When I first met Ayca, she was visiting Avatar Island to pick up a new face for herself—one that looks more similar to the real Ayca. When asked why she wanted a change, Ayca replied “i like this face but i wanna look at it and kno it is me...i wanna see me in this world” (Shan). Although avatars didn’t always physically represent the user, most people when asked said that they indeed saw themselves in their avatars.

*Second Life* becomes a dream world for those who link owning material goods with happiness, but cannot afford to indulge in the real world. While the common popular perception is that users become “addicted” to virtual worlds, Castranova and other researchers have come to support the idea that users actually make a conscious choice to spend time in virtual worlds. He writes:

A survey conducted by Nicholas Yee [in 2001 on the virtual world *Everquest*] indicates that the typical user spends about 22 hours per week in the game... In Yee's study, many people used the term 'addiction' to describe their own behavior...[However, if we] see their behavior as rational choice, we must conclude that VWs (Virtual Worlds) offer something that is perhaps a bit more than a mere entertainment to which the players have become addicted. Rather, they offer an alternative reality, a different country in which one can live most of one's life if one so chooses. And it so happens that life in a VW is extremely attractive to many people” (*Virtual Worlds* 11).

After studying a multitude of virtual worlds for many years and witnessing this behavior throughout, Castranova published a book exploring the psychology of game players, including those of *Second Life*. 
He writes, “For the first time, humanity has not one but many worlds in which to live. We are no longer stuck with the Game of Life as we received it from our ancestors. We can make a new one, almost however we like... A competition has arisen between Earth and the virtual worlds, and for many, Earth is the lesser option” (Synthetic Worlds 142). It is not unbelievable that people would choose a world in which all of their desires and wants were purchasable for a few US dollars. For many, the posh lifestyle and indulgence provides an escape into a world where their status as part of the elite class is secured—something they can only dream about in the real world.

Real Goodbyes

I left Ayca that day after chatting a bit outside the coffee house. The plan was to stroll through Midnight City and stop at a few boutiques, but since Ayca had already spent the past two hours shopping and I had no desire—or more accurately no money—to shop, we decided to call it a day. I watched her fly off, with her colorful collection of bags and boxes trailing her every move, and signed off. When I tried to sign back in a few days later, I realized that my computer had deleted my stored password. After several attempts to recover the password from my memory, I clicked the “forgot your password?” button. The self-generated email sent me to a link asking me to verify my identity. Unfortunately, the two security questions I received—please enter your last transaction amount in Linden dollars and please enter your avatar’s in-world residence—were useless to me. Snowie Strom, my avatar, had never completed a monetary transaction and was quite homeless. I closed my laptop, knowing full well that I would probably never call the given support line or bother trying to revive my forsaken avatar. However, even though Second Life had lost one more member, they were gaining thousands more every day. The virtual community, packed with its islands of shops, mansions, and trendy residents is in no danger of disappearing. This world is here to stay because its basic appeal of consumerism is has an everlasting hold on human nature.
Works Cited


Untitled Photo of Coffee Shop. Out of Bounds Software. 20 Oct 2007

