

Rhizomes » Issue 21 (Winter 2010) » Bonnie Ruberg

## Sex as Game: Playing with the Erotic Body in Virtual Worlds

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[1] The nametag floating over Larry Francesco's head reads "Made in Italy." His stringy brown hair hangs across the shoulders of his leather suit. Around his neck he wears a small, black bowtie. Here in the Dream Girls night club, where he stands on the outskirts of a crowd of half-naked, dancing avatars, Larry looks strangely indecent in his pants and coat: too fully clothed. He is searching, however, for the same thing as any club-goer, "virtual" or "real": sex. His hopes of finding a like-minded beauty to transport to a remote, romantic corner of this 3D online world have inspired him, tonight, to hit the town. In fact, that same desire – for the casual connection of interactive erotic encounters – is what inspired him to sign up for *Second Life* in the first place.

[2] Launched in 2003 by developers Linden Lab, *Second Life* is a massively-multiplayer online world (MMO) which reached, at the height of its popularity, an active population of nearly one million users. [1] Unlike more structured MMOs such as Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life* lacks set objectives for players to follow (for example, it has no system of leveling-up, common in RPG-style MMOs). This brings into question its status as a video game, as the media often erroneously label it. Instead, Linden Lab has constructed a social, creative, open-source world – a place where avatars roam tropical lagoons, browse shopping malls, and lounge by personal pools, all of which have been built by fellow residents. With the help of a detailed self-customization system, users build their own avatars – their bodily representations in the realm of the non-bodily – as they would like to see themselves: curvaceous, muscular, well-endowed, even animal. If they play a game, they play at life.

[3] In a place with so much freedom for self-creation and self-expression, sex abounds. Those who have spent time "in-world" grow accustomed to the cardinal rule: where there are people in *Second Life*, there are people having sex. Such adult encounters take on many forms, from explicit text chat, to telephone-style dirty talk, to interactions acted out by avatars themselves, onscreen. Sexual subcultures also thrive here, and while many *Second Life* residents stick to "vanilla" exchanges, others practice kinks literally impossible offline (e.g. intercourse between whale and horse avatars). These activities haven't been programmed into the game; like almost everything else in this world, they're "emergent," created by users who have been inspired by the freedom of the virtual to play out various identities and fantasies.

[4] Though the preeminence of *Second Life* has recently been eclipsed by the rise of social networks, accounts from those who have "lived" in Linden Lab's micro-universe remain rich resources for thinking about larger issue of online life: sex, games, bodies, play. Experiences like Larry's, considered in depth below, raise questions about erotic encounters that go beyond the physical. In what ways does arousal blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual – itself always a false dichotomy, as Tom Boellstorff points out in his ethnography *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Boellstorff, 19, 27)? Does sex between avatars represent a real, if playful, human connection? Or is it, to paraphrase those popular objections Boellstorff refutes, "just a game"?

[5] Larry's encounter – a true account summarized here from chat transcripts and the testimonies of both participants – does indeed fit Johan Huizinga's canonical criteria for games. However, upon inspection, real-life sex too meets these stipulations, further complicating the divide between on- and offline erotics. The juxtaposition of these two versions of sex as game highlights the social constructs that label one a "waste of time" (a common accusation aimed at worlds like *Second Life* which resonates with Roger Caillois's definition of play as excess) and the other meaningful, "natural." It calls attention to the constructed, game-like qualities of human sexual interactions between real-life bodies – especially those interactions that abandon the goal of reproduction. Considered in this light, online sex not only blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual, it exemplifies the new-media move beyond the utility of the body. It embraces playfulness, non-normativity, and sex as game.

**LARRY GETS LUCKY: A Case Study in Arousal and Questions of the Real**

[6] Beside Larry in the Dream Girls club stands Cheeree Oh. A pale female avatar with curly black hair, she's wearing a vintage floral dress: a more casual, flattering number than Larry's leather suit. Like Larry, Cheeree isn't dancing, shaking her hips to the beat of the techno music like the crowd around her. Her user might be away from the keyboard – or maybe she's a wallflower. Intrigued by her profile, which claims she's only nineteen (eighteen being the minimum age for *Second Life* residents), Larry decides to strike up a conversation. He sends her a private message, a line of text not visible to others: "You are well tonight?" Cheeree smiles by responding with a colon and a close parenthesis, and asks where he is from. In choppy language that reveals him as a non-native speaker of English, Larry explains that he's a 35-year-old finance manager from Naples. "You like?" he asks; he means himself, his broad shoulders, his long hair. Again Cheeree smiles, and Larry makes his move: "You want we go somewhere more romantic?"

[7] Leaving the crowded club behind, Larry uses teleportation (along with flying, one of *Second Life* residents' enviably speedy modes of transport) to move to a secluded medieval garden, then sends Cheeree his location so she can follow. Though technically a public spot, the cloister, with its burbling stone fountain and rows of digital flowers, stands empty except for this newly acquainted pair. Here they can speak "out loud," using public chat instead of private messages, and act out their implicit desires without the audience – combining the textual with the visual, written embodiment with 3D. At first they continue to talk casually ("Do you do this often?"). Meanwhile, Larry guides Cheeree to a set of "pose balls," small spheres pre-loaded with animations that will help these avatars assume more seductive positions, which float above the ground nearby.

[8] Together they lie down in the grass. Larry's pose ball animates his movements such that he gently strokes Cheeree's face. "You like?" he asks for a second time. Cutting to the chase, he chooses a new ball position, which positions him on top of Cheeree, where, still wearing his suit and bowtie, he begins thrusting his hips into hers. Though Cheeree expresses excitement through chat, the user who created her pose ball has forgotten facial animation, leaving her expressionless as Larry rubs himself against her, his pixilated feet slipping across the ground. Both users have begun typing written signs of pleasure: "mmms," "oohs," and "oh yeahs." In front of their keyboards, they articulate not their own reactions (they've only been going at it a few minutes) so much as the projected enjoyment of their digital bodily representatives.

[9] Soon Larry climbs off Cheeree, stands beside her. Towering over her in the grass, he asks, "You want see my penis?" Like comely figures and fashionable shoes, genitalia doesn't come with the avatar package as provided by Linden Lab. Larry's penis too has been built by a fellow resident, and likely sold for the equivalent of a few U.S. dollars. Cheeree winks her consent, and he begins stripping off his *Second Life* clothing article by article – first his leather coat, then his leather pants, right down to his black silk thong, which matches his bowtie. The thong won't come off. Instead, Larry's erect penis, a shade too pale for his tan Italian body, seems to slip through the front of his already barely-there underwear. Just like in real-life sex, sex in virtual worlds has its awkward moments, its laughable blunders that either break or make the mood.

[10] Larry doesn't seem phased. Still standing tall, he asks yet again, "You like?" By now, Cheeree has also taken off her clothes. Her hips are wide, her waist narrow; a new pose ball spreads her legs apart. Larry lies back on top of her and begins once more to thrust into her. Despite the fast pace of the encounter and the simplicity of text communications, both users – and avatars – seem to be enjoying themselves. The moment has turned romantic. Behind the walls of the garden, the sun, controlled by the ebb and flow of Linden time, is setting. Larry's moans are coming more frequently now. Breaking, for the first time, the fourth wall between online and offline realities, he asks of Cheeree's user, "You touch yourself?" He follows this, referring to his real-life body, with "I touch my penis?" A textual silence follows from Larry's end of the screen. Leaving his non-virtual orgasm implicit, he merely asks, "I stop now okay?"

[11] Cheeree stands up and redresses, selecting her clothing from her virtual inventory. After a terse farewell, Larry is already headed out of the garden, hobbling with the tilt of a limp, as if in post-coital exhaustion. In actuality, he walks like all *Second Life* avatars, in that choppy, stilted gait caused by the world's heavy lag. Alone beside the burbling fountain, amongst the digital flowers, Cheeree catches her last glimpse of her one-time partner as he teleports elsewhere (perhaps back to Dream Girls for another go?), still wearing nothing but his malfunctioning black thong.

[12] In addition to voyeuristic pleasure, the above account offers readers a chance to consider the way embodiment operates in *Second Life*. For those who haven't experienced interactions of this type first-hand, it gives a window into sexual expression in virtual worlds in general; though only one sample, Larry's encounter shares much in common with online sex in its many forms. Through the descriptions of avatars – their dress, their anatomy, and their actions – the account illustrates how users perform the virtual body through visuals and text. This performance, emphasizes T. L. Taylor in *Play Between Worlds*, relates closely to the performance of identity. "Just as corporeal bodies are integral to our personal and social lives," she writes, "avatars are central to our experience in digital environments" (Taylor, 95, 117). This holds especially true for the performance of the erotic body, which mediates Larry and Cheeree's connection more so than if they had remained speaking – or even dancing the night away – at Dream Girls.

[13] In drawing connections between Larry's user (like his Italian nationality) and his online form (an avatar "made

in Italy"), the account also underscores blurred boundaries between the real and the virtual. Boellstorff emphasizes this ambiguity, inherent in online life, when he gives the following description of daily *Second Life* activities, in which he emphasizes again and again the inextricable presence of the "real":

Two "real"-life sisters living hundreds of miles apart meet every day to play games together or shop for new shoes for their avatars. The person making the shoes has quit his "real"-life job because he is making over five thousand U.S. dollars a month from the sale of virtual clothing... Not far away a newsstand provides copies of a virtual newspaper with ten reporters on staff; it includes advertisements for a "real"-world car company, a virtual university offering classes, a fishing tournament..." (Boellstorff, 8).

For Taylor, this blurring of real and virtual is intensified, in non-game worlds, by the users' vast array of options for designing personas that may or may not correspond to their real-life likenesses (Taylor, 95, 96). Such open-ended self-creation represents only one way in which users' bodily presence in a non-physical media challenges the binaries of the natural versus the constructed.

[14] Ultimately, this account reveals the power of arousal – beyond the simply bodily – to further transgress these boundaries. At the same time Larry and Cheeree's users act out the sexual excitement of their avatars (they utter their "ooh"s and "ohs" in character), their real-life bodies also become implicated, aroused. Jullian Dibbell, in writing about his experiences having "tiny sex" in the text-based virtual world LambdaMOO in the 1990's, describes the intensity with which he found himself engaged, simultaneously, with his on- and offline selves. "My eyes riveted on the screen, my fingers tense on the keyboard, my body caught up in a rhythm," he writes, he spent hours both describing the actions of his avatar and experiencing the responses of his flesh (Dibbell, 262). Another LambdaMOO resident calls this blurring of boundaries "white hot... like melting into the screen" (143). Dibbell concludes from the breakdown of binaries he uncovered first hand that even in the physical world bodies entangled in pleasure are never purely physical – a conclusion returned to below. Instead, they are self-representations, constructs (217).

[15] These readings, on the one hand, imply that *Second Life* sex has far broader implications than a mere game, in the pejorative sense. However, it is true that the mechanical and at times cold nature of the encounter does bring to mind games in a more formal sense, with their mechanics and rule sets. As opposed to dismissing the notion of sex as game then, exploring this accusation through a similarly analytical lens may reveal not a reductionist take on online life so much as an enriched take on the ludic quality of the erotic. Though scholars like Boellstorff strongly oppose labeling *Second Life* itself a game, Linden Lab's world could easily contain games – and does: chess boards, matching games, fashion contests. Perhaps cyber sex is one of these games, an activity that conforms to these models: played by rules, or done just for fun, maybe even with a winner and a loser.

### IS SEX IN 'SECOND LIFE' A GAME? Applying Huizinga to Online Erotics

[16] In order to determine whether the above instance of *Second Life* sex "counts" as a game, what becomes necessary is a template: an agreed-upon meta rule set against which Larry's encounter can be compared. Huizinga, in his foundational text on games and culture, *Homo Ludens* (1938), lays out approximately seven criteria for what he considers play. Later scholars, beginning with Caillois in 1961, stress the difference between games and play – the former marked by structure, the latter by free-form expression. Huizinga however does not make this distinction. The present essay too, which uses the criteria from *Homo Ludens* as a type of litmus test, at times conflates the two terms. It does this, however, with the understanding that any activity that passes Huizinga's seven rules most likely belongs in the "game" category, but by extension incorporates elements of "play."

[17] What follows is a run-down of Huizinga's criteria, abridged and streamlined from the original, applied to the above account of sex in *Second Life*. [2] In addition its canonical status, *Homo Ludens* also serves this task well because its author considered as a game, if not sex itself, then that which leads up to it: courtship. The process of getting a lover between the sheets, writes Huizinga, is "made enticing" by "the dynamic elements of play such as the deliberate creation of obstacles, adornment, surprise, pretense, tension, etc., all [of which] belong to the process of flirting and wooing" (Huizinga, 43). The word "foreplay" comes to mind, with its implications of both sex and game. Though Larry's encounter with Cheeree involved little wooing, the application of Huizinga's ideas below shows that the game model still fits even when the sexual play at hand is of a much more explicit nature.

[18] **1. Participation in a game must be "voluntary."** For an act to be considered play, says Huizinga, it can't fulfill any "absolute need." Instead of being something people *have* to do, such as a job, it should be something people *want* to do (which overlooks, of course, the idea of that pleasure itself might be an "absolute need"). Larry and Cheeree, accordingly, engage in their erotic encounter voluntarily. No need, only a recreational want, forces them strip off their virtual clothes. By contrast, sex workers who make virtual worlds like *Second Life* their businesses – earning real-world money in exchange for cyber services – would be said to be doing a "job" when they curl up in the grass with strangers wearing Italian leather suits.

[19] **2. A game must not produce anything "useful."** A weighted word, "useful" here has Marxian overtones, meaning more "of use value" or monetary value than "constructive," or "positive." In contrast to work, "play is

superfluous," says Huizinga, "an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it." The game must be played as an end unto itself (a rule which overlooks, for example, behaviors like gambling). Indeed, while real-life, heterosexual intercourse might produce children, this online encounter, in which no physical bodies actually touch, creates nothing except enjoyment. Though one might say that the textual transcript of the event, generated like collaborative erotica between Larry and Cheeree, represents its own form of production...

[20] **3. A game must stand outside "ordinary" time and place.** Huizinga calls play the act of "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own." This interlude in daily reality has a distinct beginning and end, and takes place within a clearly delineated "playground" or magic circle. In *Second Life*, some would claim, sex is itself the ordinary. Yet the above account reveals that elements of the magic circle persist in individual encounters. Though they flirt at the club, Larry and Cheeree change locations when they are ready to have sex, moving from a crowded spot to a more secluded one. Their time together has a clear start (the moment they teleport to the garden) and stop (the moment Larry walks away). And, of course, the virtual world itself represents a second layer of playground, a magic circle for the game of identity.

[21] **4. A game must be repeatable.** By nature, writes Huizinga, the ludic goes hand in hand with the drive to repeat. "Whether it be 'child's play' or a game of chess," the playful can be taken up time and again. This repetition is mirrored not only in the movement of Larry's hips or in his repetitive conversation skills, but in the on-screen interactions of the avatars as dictated by pose balls – which could be used by any resident who wishes to reenact the scene. Plus, in *Second Life*, sex is rarely a one-shot deal; both users admit to cybering multiple times in the past, often in similar scenarios, and may well to do again in the future.

[22] **5. A game must have tension:** Tension is crucial to play, says Huizinga, because it imbues it with "uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it." In Huizinga's own words, rife with sexual implications, "the player wants something to 'go', to 'come off', he wants to 'succeed' by his own exertions," to achieve a release. Like any sexual encounter, Larry and Cheeree's relies on tension to create an erotic charge. This charge builds as the two meet, engage in foreplay, and eventually join their virtual bodies. Tension also builds through the rhythmic moans and sighs of their text chat. At the same time the users' real-life arousal mounts, ending, in Larry's case, in non-virtual orgasm.

[23] **6. A game ideally involves special clothing.** While it's not required that players always sport a change of garb, Huizinga does express that the "secrecy" and "differentness" of play are most vividly expressed through dressing up. Attire here takes on the role of the mask, of an assumed identity (a familiar concept, by this point, in a discussion of *Second Life*). For Larry and Cheeree, "special clothing" takes on multiple meanings. Their presence as avatars, certainly, represents one layer of "dress up." On another level, they are literally wearing sexy outfits – like Cheeree's tight-fitting dress or Larry's black mesh thong – in order to signal their interest in the erotic. Even body parts become special clothing. Larry's penis, with its mismatched skin tone, reads more like an ill-chosen fashion accessory than an extension of the virtual self.

[24] **7. A game must have rules.** This last criterion is also one of the most important for Huizinga. "Play creates order, is order," he insists (though on this issue in particular Caillois will insist on a difference between the order of games and the chaos of play). "Into an imperfect world, into the confusion of life," writes Huizinga, "[play] brings temporary, limited perfection." As for Larry and Cheeree, at first glance it may seem that they play – if they play – by no rules at all. Yet they are bound by a set of invisible expectations. Shared ideas about sexual contact lead them to follow a traditional order in their actions: flirting, then foreplay, then penetration. The freedom of *Second Life* allows them to be direct in their search for sex, but online etiquette still restricts them from touching one another before a scene has begun, getting it on in the middle of a crowded club, or asking questions about each other's offline personas.

[25] With some minor provisions then, Larry and Cheeree's encounter does fit the above criteria for classification as a game. At the least, Huizinga's list highlights the play-like nature of online sex. However, to declare *Second Life* coitus a game is quite different from declaring it "just a game." Without the negative connotations of the latter, the former label might offer insights into virtual interactions: what would it mean to play the game of internet erotics? The obstacle of negative connotation begins to fall away, luckily, when applying Huizinga's criteria to sex in real life. If "natural," offline experiences too share this ludic quality, it becomes harder to dismiss Larry and Cheeree's encounter as mere play. Declaring flesh-and-blood sex a "game" would also further blur the boundary between the virtual the real, bringing into question not just the realness of virtual worlds, but the virtual qualities of real ones.

### IS SEX ITSELF A GAME? Turning the Ludic Lens on the "Real"

[26] Admittedly, Huizinga himself shies away from calling sex – as opposed to courtship – a proper game. He does so not because he takes issue with the game label, but because he doesn't think sexual interactions can hold up to his own criteria. "If we stick to the formal and functional characteristics [of games]," he writes, "caresses as such do not bear the character of play." Specifically, Huizinga is referencing what he sees as the pragmatic nature of sex, i.e. its reproductive potential, which doesn't fit with criterion #2, the "superfluous" nature of games. "The biological process" of procreation, which he considers the norm, fails Huizinga's test by producing something of

use: children. By contrast, he reserves the game label "specially or even exclusively... for erotic relationships falling outside the social norms" (43). This provision speaks to the ludic qualities of non-reproductive sex, which defies use value. In addition, far from supporting the idea that "caresses as such do not bear the character play," such a provision further strengthens the reading of Larry and Cheeree's encounter – itself the non-utilitarian union of avatars, not bodies – as a game.

[27] Keeping in mind Huizinga's protestations, the following section moves again through his seven criteria, turning the microscope instead on real-life sex. Without a specific encounter to reference however, as in the previous list, this analysis runs the risk of generalizing, over-simplifying, even idealizing: turning sex, always a complicated and personal endeavor, into something falsely universal. This, however, raises relevant concerns about what defines the "norm," as well as social expectations for erotic interactions. Given the open-ended nature of the present inquiry, Huizinga's rules are here posed not as statements but as questions.

[28] **1. Is sex voluntary?** Often, if not always. Cases of rape, molestation, and coercion cannot be overlooked – yet Huizinga's clarification of "voluntary" as that which is not "needed" but merely "enjoyed" resonates with the search for pleasure that drives participation in non-professional sex. Granted, a valid counter argument might hold that, unlike virtual bodies, physical ones are indeed driven by needs: the need for release, as well as a biological imperative to reproduce. Even Huizinga admits though that this gray area of the "need" to play complicates criterion #1 beyond its breaking point, and so leaves it for future scholars to interrogate.

[29] **2. Does sex produce anything useful?** As discussed, Huizinga says "yes." However, taking reproduction off the table – sticking to sex that is not heterosexual, or vaginally penetrative, or which involves contraceptives, etc. – changes his answer to "no." The practice of kinks, for example, lacks "use value" in the traditional sense (again excepting instances where individuals gain "profit or material interest"). Such practices, for Huizinga, fall outside the social norm; for this reason, they might even be classified as "perverse." This perversion, it seems, is inextricably bound up with playfulness. Both qualities shine through the virtual encounter between Larry and Cheeree, which certainly falls outside accepted offline norms, reflecting the "uselessness" of real-life sex by removing all possibilities of non-virtual reproduction.

[30] **3. Does sex stand outside "ordinary" time and place?** Though a regular occurrence, sex rarely happens within just any moment of daily life. It is considered special time, intimate or merely coveted, and has its own socially accepted magic circle: somewhere private, romantic, like the bedroom, or even the bed itself. It starts and stops, as it's commonly perceived, with clear delineation from other activities (rarely does one hear, for example, about a couple having sex in five-minute spurts between household chores). Its end is also marked by the arc of the partners' pleasure, which reaches a bodily climax that traditionally defines the border between coitus and post-coitus.

[31] **4. Is sex repeatable?** Practically speaking, no two sex acts, repeated by different people or even at different times, will ever look identical. However, as particular pairings of bodies that can be broken down into Karma Sutra style instructions (right leg goes here, left leg goes there), positions can be taken up again and again, and by all. Repetition also appears in the metaphorical bedroom in the form of rhythmic physical movement: hips thrusting, a tongue licking, a hand moving up. Thus even small actions, microcosms of the sexual experience, can be done again and again. The repeatable nature of sex, like the repeatable nature of games, does not diminish the pleasure it gives the participants. It not only can be repeated, but entices players to do so.

[32] **5. Does sex have tension?** Hopefully! Sexual tension, whether online or offline, is what gives erotic interactions their charge. It builds between individuals, between emotions, between body parts – a pressure headed to release, which can even be seen in the nervous, flirtatious energy stirred up in Huizinga's favorite part of the process: courtship. Again, the prescription that players press ahead in hopes of "coming off" reads easily as "getting off." Success, as a theory posited by the game criteria, might take the form of orgasm, or an intimate connection. Either way, it means riding tension's climax.

[33] **6. Does sex involve special clothing?** Often, though not necessarily. (Remember, this is Huizinga's most optional criterion for games.) Western culture does stress attire and accessories as parts of the act: sexy lingerie, sexy high-heels, sexy costumes. The very act of dressing up comes with sexual overtones – explaining the adult garb that gets brought out for Halloween. There's also the more figurative way to dress up for bed: role-playing. A couple might, for example, take on the characters of a naughty doctor and a tantalizing patient. Even if acting out this scenario doesn't mean any actual wardrobe changes, participants are putting on new faces, personas tailored like clothing.

[34] **7. Does sex have rules?** Play, according to Huizinga's last criterion, creates order. However, the erotic is usually portrayed as something chaotic, wild. Though it may not seem so in the moment, sex definitely has rules – both as a physical and a cultural phenomenon. Normative sex, as Huizinga defines it, is limited to those qualities that have been sanctioned by said norm: heterosexual, procreative, non-kinky. Sex that doesn't fit this particular rule set (take, for instance, subcultures like BDSM), still plays by clear guidelines as dictated by safety, as well as by community perceptions of that which is meaningful or harmful, eligible or not eligible for consent. Sexual etiquette too insists on order: whom to touch, when to touch them, where to touch them. The bedroom scene, with

all its unspoken rules, is like a tiny affront against social chaos.

### SEX AS GAME, GAME AS SEX: New Media Bodies Confronting Boundaries

[35] Any one of these seven questions could, of course, be explored in much greater depth and nuance. However, it is clear that real-life sex too – like sex in *Second Life* – can fit Huizinga's definition of a game. Erotic interactions that do not result in reproduction (and are perhaps a little kinky; think of the language of play used in "play parties," "play partners," "scenes" to be played) match these criteria particularly well. Mostly, the above reveals the play-like qualities of nearly all offline sex, even that which does not meet every one of Huizinga's categories. Conjecturing that sex in both its real and virtual forms can be considered a game offers a new perspective with which to return to the high-tech connections of internet residents like Larry and Cheeree. Their encounter can no longer be called "just a game." Or, if it can, so can all sex.

[36] In this way new media seems to champion the non-normative, the perverse, human contact that goes beyond use value. Still, these ambiguous terms need not be embraced to find the positive in this reading of online sex – which speaks above all to the tenuous divide between the real and the virtual, particularly when it comes to erotics. As Boellstorff points out, "negative assumptions" about virtual worlds thrive on a widespread "[failure] to appreciate how human experience is always culturally mediated" (Boellstorff, 27). Emphasizing the ways in which "natural" bodies are regulated by social constructs forces a reconsideration of the assumption that human interactions in constructed universes like *Second Life* are somehow themselves unnatural. "Humans make culture in virtual and actual contexts," he emphasizes. "Since humans are part of nature, and the virtual is a product of human intentionality, the virtual is as 'natural' as anything humans do in the actual world" (19).

[37] Concluding with the verdict of sex as game links online and offline erotics, lending the credibility of the latter to the former. At the same time, it places both under scrutiny. It challenges detractors who would label *Second Life* interactions "just games," but also challenges the presumption that erotic encounters of the flesh do not themselves follow rules; participants just don't know they're playing. Some might read this game label, applied to real-life sex, as itself pejorative. Others, though, may see it as liberating: a playful freedom between the lines of constraint. Additionally, in the way that this line of inquiry challenges notions of the sexual, it also challenges notions of games. If something so complicated, weighty, and culturally rich as sex can be a form of play, does the term "just a game" – with its implications of something small, meaningless – ever apply? The claim that sex is innately ludic also carries the insinuation that play may be innately sexual. New lines of inquiry multiply out onto the horizon if new media embraces its playful and therefore erotic nature by accepting the label of "game."

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### Notes

[1] As of March, 2008, according to Linden Lab's own economic statistics, 12,719,077 residents had registered in *Second Life*, of which 899,500 had logged in during the last 30 days. By January, 2011, the number of registered residents has nearly doubled, though the active population has dropped as Linden Lab has downsized the project and its support staff.

[2] References for Huizinga's rules for games come from *Homo Ludens*, pages 7 to 14.

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