

Milking Cows and Second Life

By Valle Hansen

A few months ago, I made my very first friend from Iowa. Sure, she's technically from the state capital, which is most likely somewhat "urban," but still, she's from the state capital of *Iowa*. She has, however, morphed herself into a chic, classy city girl since she moved to the Big Apple, but there are, unsurprisingly, some redneck skeletons in her country closet. One of these, I was mildly astonished to discover, was her annual summer vacation to an Iowa farm. After I gracefully surpassed the initial shock, I naturally had a few questions. Chief among these was whether she wore her hair in pigtails (no) and whether she milked cows at four in the morning when the cock crowed (yes). Determined to learn more, I continued my line of interrogation and discovered, to my great dismay, that the pure, innocent act of extracting lactose products from the teats of our beef bearers has actually fallen prey to the current trend of avoiding interaction by exploiting technological advancements: The milk is no longer taken using that molestial method we all learned so much about in *A League of Their Own*, but rather by means of a mechanized milking machine. In short, we do not anymore wake up at four in the morning when the cock crows and trek out to the barn and heave the stool under a heaping bosom for a solid hand-on-teat milking session. Instead, we throw a contraption on a flaccid nipple and hope for the best. And this, I realized as my friend demonstrated for me using vivid imagery and wicked gestures with a cigarette dangling from her lips, was the beginning of the last straw.

"Cyberspace: a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation."

We are a fortunate generation of brilliant sophomores. We have, in the span of less than two decades, figured out how to completely eradicate the need for real, live human interaction. We text instead of call; we e-mail instead of write; we g-chat instead of meeting up for a drink; we exercise with the Wii; we travel from Point A to Point B with earbuds plugged in to our facial orifices; we have 137 "friends" on MySpace with

whom we never have even a messaging conversation; we have even developed a highly complex system of punching in numbers to avoid talking with a human being when we need something like a prescription refilled or a basic household service performed. And now, finally, at the apex of scientific advancements, we have not discovered the cure for cancer or figured out a realistic way to use renewable fuel, but we HAVE managed to create an entirely new world wherein we can manufacture an entirely new self, which is all anybody really needs anyway. Another way to be someone you're not while simultaneously obviating the need for human contact. It's called Second Life.

“Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely created by its Residents. [Note the perplexing capitalization.] Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe.”

A few months ago, my company (which is a publishing house) announced that they would be hosting one of the first ever “virtual book signings” in an attempt to infiltrate the growth potential that is the cyberworld of Second Life. While I am not exactly sure how one would go about virtually signing a book [although I'd wager that the inscriptions are far more personal than real ones], I have to admit I was intrigued. I didn't know too much about Second Life at this point—I knew about some folks called “avatars” (literally [and I'm quoting from the third Webster's definition here] “an embodiment, as of a concept or philosophy, often in a person”) (it could also mean “the incarnation of a Hindu deity” or “a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity”); that these avatars can spend money, and sometimes it's fake money, but sometimes it's real money; and that when it is real money, the entities controlling the avatars [who are, presumably, web beings incarnated as the person you wish you were] get the things they bought sent to them in first mail. [In the interest of avoiding further confusion, I will now refer to “real” life as “first” life. Thus, “first mail.”] For example, as I understood it, clothes or CDS or maybe even tickets to a special Avatar Island Event. But my question was this: If you're creating this avatar as a personification of what you WISH you were, how does this work? Observe: If I make my avatar self a size 0, but in reality I am a size 16, and then I go and buy avatar clothes with first money, what the hell good is it going to do me to get a size 0 skirt sent to me in f-ing first mail? Or, similarly, if my “dream avatar” likes listening to country music, I guess I'm not really clear on why my first self

can't just start listening to country music, without the added medium of Second Life and their damn lindens or whatever. Is the idea that I can "be all I can be" and if I, for example, don't necessarily want to admit to liking country music, then I can just blame the new influx of Garth CDs on my avatar? As though it's a rebellious child or something? I just really wasn't too clear on this whole thing. And for Christ's sake, what about the real estate situation? Apparently one of the first "investors" in Second Life real estate is now a millionaire in first life. How can you make millions of dollars off of a cyberisland? And where does it end? Can one lose one's virtual virginity, or give birth to a virtual baby? Can one quit smoking in first life, but still get the nic fix by smoking in Second Life? Interestingly, there are schools of thought that hope first society can be "fixed" by using Second Life as a place to get out "unnatural" urges, including homosexuality and adultery. (I was unable to find mention of cultlike virtual worlds as a problem to be dealt with.) This all came as a great shock to me.

So, in the interest of research, in the name of science, and against my better judgment, I entered the virtual world of Second Life and tried to embrace [read: create] my better self. I told my friends and family that I was conducting "an experiment" and that they needn't worry—first life would always be my first choice. Still, given my propensity for procrastination and my [somewhat] addictive personality, they were worried. And they were right to be. I quickly found myself swept up in the virtual domain.

My first task upon registering was choosing the physicality of my avatar, and the possibilities were extremely limited. I didn't fret though; the website allowed me to "pick how I want to look" and promised that I would "have plenty of opportunities to be almost anyone [I] want should [I] change [my] mind later." Whew, that was close. I thought I'd be stuck with my "nightclub female" label for the duration of my stay.

Her name is Patsy Dumpling and, like so many of my alter egos, she is dirt poor. (She can demonstrate the "smoking gesture," but she can't actually buy cigarettes.) She has no friends, but she has met a few interesting folks ("Golden Shower," "Sexy Texty," etc.). But perhaps the most fascinating part of Second Life that I've encountered thus far is the superhuman aspect which, by definition, is quite unlike first life and therefore should have no place in Second Life. Patsy can fly. Patsy can defy physics and walk

along the ocean floor. Patsy can travel to the edge of the universe (Yes, there's an edge.). And Patsy can't die. (Yes, I've tried to kill her.)

The most significant superhuman, superworldly characteristic of Second Life, however, is the absence of providence. Call it God, fate, coincidence, destiny, determinism, et cetera. Whatever your philosophy in first life, it has no place in Second Life. Natural disasters, acts of terrorism, violent crime, love at second sight—none of these instances of chance, which can make or break a day or a lifetime, is a part of Second Life. At least in the Oregon Trail, random diseases can befall various members of your wagon crew, and you can lose your load running into a poorly placed rock in the Green River Crossing.

I have to admit (somewhat shamefully) that I was quite taken with the idea of flying. I enjoyed my aerial expeditions immensely. It felt like a game. But the thing about Second Life is that it's not a game. It's not like Dungeons & Dragons, or SimCity, or Super Mario Brothers—entertainments that we grew up enjoying because we knew that they were entertainments. Second Life is the real deal [or, if you will, the "first" deal]. People are choosing Second Life over first life. People are choosing to shop on Second Life because they don't have to deal with first salespeople and first dressing rooms. People are choosing to go to virtual book signings and virtual Gothic dance parties in cemeteries (Yes, Patsy did that. Too bad she can't dance.) People are choosing to be who they are not, and to change their images of themselves but not their actual selves. People are choosing to live without chance. It's easier, it's cleaner, you can be as rich and famous as you want, and you don't have to be a first person who knows other first people and does first things and has first problems. Escapism!

I will be the first to admit that I take relatively full advantage of the culture of convenience. I've got a [Bono] iPod, a sick digital camera, an iBook. I drop off my laundry and let someone else do it. I shop online. And I even have to say that I get the allure of Second Life, in a superior, condescending sort of sense. It's fun to do mindless-thought-mildly-interactive things. I like TV shows; I like Facebook; I like playing Sudoku at work. But the thing that sets first me apart from Patsy and the other 9 million Residents of Second Life is that I don't drop off my size 0 avatar laundry for someone else to do it. I prefer the who-knows-what-will-happen-next, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-avatar-pants idea

to the predictability of no natural disasters or, even, death. And, if I don't have enough first dollars to buy first real estate, I'm not going to put myself into fake debt buying fake real estate that doesn't actually mean anything at all. Hello, *real* estate?

How is this not in the DSM-IV? Shouldn't all this be classified as some sort of psychological disorder, or at least the manifestation of one? Agoraphobia? Avoidance? Schizophrenia? Soon we won't be able to speak face-to-face with our friends without declaring "LOL" instead of actually laughing. Soon we'll be walking around with an icon bubble that classifies our mood as "sullen" so no one will bother. Soon we'll be so terrified of actual human contact that we'll stop having first sex, everyone (men included, presumably, because, well why not?) will have virtual babies, and all of humanity will be completely wiped out.

The point, it seems to me, is that we are forgoing reality for the hallucinations of the fateless cyberspace. The point is that we won't even touch a cow's nipple anymore without some sort of intermediary between our hands and the teat. And let's face it—when we voluntarily stop copping a feel, there's a serious problem in the works.