

Sex-Interface-Aesthetics: The Docile Avatars and Embodied Pixels of *Second Life* BDSM

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1. Introduction

Anyone paying the slightest attention to virtual worlds knows that sex is a major part of them, in particular, more fetishized forms of sex, including cyberstripping and escorts, furry sex (sex between humanoid-animal avatars), and BDSM. Virtual world sex is ubiquitous, appearing in fantasy-themed commercially created worlds such as *World of Warcraft* [9; 15]. But sex, especially fetish sex, comes into its own in metaverses with user-created content, such as *Second Life*, *There*, and *ActiveWorlds*. There are obvious reasons for the popularity of fetish sex in these worlds: they can be considerably less expensive than real-life fetish sex (rubber outfits, whips, restraints, and swings add up); the anonymity of these worlds frees people to act without the usual social restraints; and the increasingly compelling visuals of these environments provide high quality visual stimulation.

Yet the obvious explanations fail to account for the attractiveness of a subculture, such as that of BDSM, in the first place. We believe that metaverses such as *Second Life* provide new interfaces to a classic, if taboo, aesthetic. BDSM is often understood as a form of sexual practice, especially in academic literature [8, 13]. The practitioner literature [1, 14] commonly extends the practice to a “lifestyle,” which in addition to sex also includes regular household and even public/social interactions; this literature also typically derides the notion of dominance and submission (D/s) as little more than a form of kinky sex.

What is BDSM, beyond a type of sexual practice? We believe that BDSM encompasses a powerful aesthetic, and that its sexual practices are a part of that aesthetic. We understand “aesthetics” to cover embodied or enacted *forms of beauty* or more generally systems of pattern and arrangement (including balance, structure, variation, symmetry, harmony, and ornament, among others); a *sense of transcendence* or sublimity, phenomena whose very greatness expands and transforms the self; and *communities* that share the value systems that

connect forms of beauty with that sense of transcendence.

We contend that virtual worlds enable the construction of a BDSM aesthetic that is connected to, yet distinct from, the real-life BDSM aesthetic, and that moreover the differences can largely be explained by structural forces associated with computer interfaces themselves. As noted earlier, members of a community share a set of values; these values are embodied in rituals, social interactions, and artifacts. In virtual worlds, all three of these embodiments are computer-mediated. Speech is mediated through an IM window; leather and lace are equally made of pixels; furniture and sex toys are mediated through clickable objects; these objects are accessed from a Windows Explorer/directory tree “Inventory” interface; body parts, such as hair, genitalia, and nipples can only be touched through dialog boxes; enterprising partners who want to design their own sexual experiences often have to write scripts in the C-like Linden Scripting Language (LSL), though some vendors facilitate this process by selling generic, customizable scripts. Whatever artistry there may be to the construction of a scene, its theatre, its thematic coherence, its embodied imagination, all of it is mediated by computer interfaces. Interface and aesthetics are mutually interconnected.

To explore the mutual relationships between the interface and aesthetics of BDSM, we consider the interfaces using the traditional aesthetic categories of visual aesthetic, literary aesthetic, and propose a new one, the interaction aesthetic.

2. Visual Aesthetic

The visual aesthetic associated with BDSM is visible, if distorted, in mainstream culture. It includes leather, body piercings, and tattoos for dressing up the body. Accessories include whips, paddles, rope and the like. The mere presence of leather straps or a tattoo is not sufficient to constitute an aesthetic object; rather, its arrangement, or participation in a larger visual-semiotic system, distinguishes between a scrap of leather on the floor and a part of a work of art. The BDSM subculture has a number of aesthetic arrangements of its objects. For example, in the

pony sub racing fetish, submissives are elaborately outfitted as ponies, forbidden to speak, and displayed and raced as ponies in a competition [7]. Japanese rope bondage is another BDSM art form, with its elaborate knots, rope patterns, and sculpted body positions. Indeed, fetish art is a popular topic of erotic photography books, such as [2, 4, 11].

All of these forms can be seen in *Second Life*; however, the realities of its authoring capabilities affect how they appear. For example, pony racing attire and accessories are readily available, in part because *Second Life* makes it easy to create clothing. Another popular fetish along these lines is the submissive as kitty cat fetish, in which submissives have pointy cat ears, tails, drink milk from bowls, and use cat boxes. Japanese rope bondage is harder to find, perhaps because rope is difficult to model well in *Second Life*; rope outfits that recall Japanese rope bondage are available, but rope kits that could be used in a scene are difficult to find.

The real-life BDSM visual aesthetic can be seen in erotic photography and pornography. Bitmap images of real-life BDSM art and porn is readily available in *Second Life*, much of it for sale inexpensively in BDSM malls throughout the world. Interestingly, *Second Life* has become a major source of virtual pornography. Two well known [10] examples are the virtual porn magazines *Player* and *Slutler*, both of which feature stereotypical SM imagery in some of their layouts. Specialized BDSM virtual pornography is also available; for example, one *Second Life* BDSM celebrity sells high-resolution virtual photos of her avatar in bondage-themed layouts. Even truer to the *Second Life* participatory aesthetic, one BDSM virtual porn vendor offers buyers an erotic photo session of their own for 1,000 Linden Dollars (about \$4 US).

3. Literary Aesthetic

One under-recognized aspect of BDSM, seen both in real life practice and in *Second Life* practice, is the narrative organization of its events. Aspects of this literary aesthetic include the “scene,” the sophisticated role play, and the use of scripted rituals.

3.1 The Scene

The D/s scene is well documented in both academic [13] and practitioner [12; 14] literatures. In real life SM practice, the scene is a

sexual event, negotiated and scripted in advance. It typically comprises a setting, roles, and a story. Negotiation includes a discussion of what each partner is willing and not willing to do (consent remains the key to all SM practice), the all-important safeword, as well as the shared construction of roles and a narrative. Weinberg [13] characterizes the scene as a “keyed” transcription of another narrative, in which one story (e.g., the professor and the student) is systematically remediated into a D/s scene. In *Second Life* both the scene and its pre-negotiation are both common practice. However, the difference between avatar and one’s physical self surely alters the nature of the limits to which people are willing to extend themselves. While safewords are common in *Second Life* BDSM practice, their significance as a physical safeguard is diminished, because the virtual submissive can always release her- or himself from any situation by detaching a scripted object, “standing up” from a restrictive device, teleporting away, or even logging out.

3.2 Role Play

Role play is a critical part of the literary aesthetic of BDSM practice. In addition to the general role of dominant and submissive, partners often take up more specific, story-based roles consistent with the more general roles. Thus, a dominant may role play a professor, while submissive role plays a student. Other pairings include master and slave, homeowner and maid/manservant, doctor and nurse, and so on. One aspect of *Second Life* that adds a new dimension to role play is the capacity to change one’s avatar radically: in seconds, one can change outfits, race, gender, and even species. The relationship between a dominant and a submissive is extensively discussed—and with quite a bit of consensus—in real life [1, 8, 14] and *Second Life* (e.g., the hundreds of “books” in the “libraries” in the Gorean community of Ar and at Perilous Pleasures on the Isle of Bliss) practitioner discourses. Characterized in terms of balance—one writer [5] compares dominants and submissives to the black and white of the Chinese yin-yang symbol—both dominants and submissives have seriously articulated rights and responsibilities, limits as to what constitute appropriate behavior, attitudes, and expectations. Observation of the roles results not only in a fulfilling relationship with the partner, but it makes it possible for submissives to enter a commonly, if vaguely, described special

submissive head space, which we interpret to be a kind of self-transcendence or aesthetic rapture.

In addition to balance and transcendence, BDSM role play often enacts the aesthetic form of ornament. In addition to the visual ornament associated with BDSM accessories, submissives often play the role of ornaments for dominants, as sexually appealing adorers on the floor, on leashes, and even in cages. In *Second Life*'s permissive culture, such displays are common and accepted in public spaces, such as clubs; as a result, particle-based chain leashes, cages and cushions with submissive poses, and the like are easily available.

3.3 Ritual

Significant moments in SM relationships are often marked with a ritual, just like other human relationships. Common rituals include submissive training rituals, collaring rituals, and rites of release (for the dissolution of relationships). Collaring ceremonies are particularly important, both in real life and *Second Life*, often involving a script with a set of questions and the enactment of a contract. The *Second Life* versions of this ritual have a few interesting twists. Part of the Gorean collaring ritual is to inquire whether the submissive has alts (other avatars) in *Second Life* or in other virtual worlds, such as *Active Worlds*. The intrusion of these questions in a community based on a series of fantasy novels is strikingly non-deictic; evidently, it is worth breaking the narrative illusion to ensure that the submissive's collaring is meaningful. Another ritual takes a peculiar form in *Second Life*: the ritual of release. In the Gorean community, slaves who break off from their masters go through a rather extreme ritual: execution! In practice, this means that a representative of Gor confronts the slave, states in the chat window that he has killed her or him, and that she or he is now officially dead to Gor. This is followed up with banishment from the servers on which Gor resides, but not before a rather absurd dialogue in which the (dead) former slave expresses shock, demands to know the reasons for her or his execution, and often argues with the executioner about the appropriateness of the punishment.

4. Interaction Aesthetic

Perhaps the most conspicuous disjunction between real life and *Second Life* BDSM practice is in the area of interaction. Replacing human

bodies in the physical world with avatars in a virtual world fundamentally alters relationships, sexual pleasure, and possibilities for the collaborative construction of fantasy. It also changes the nature and use of toys and other artifacts.

The easy availability and low prices of BDSM furniture and toys enable people to construct BDSM spaces on a scale quite different than what can be done in real life. Understanding the role of toys in *Second Life* BDSM scenes presupposes an understanding of object basics in this environment. Toys are made from simple 3D, primitive-based models (cylinders, cubes); scripts; "poseballs," or invisible objects that put an avatar's body into a particular pose; dialog boxes; and ASCII text files. Because so much human interaction surrounds the use of these toys, it is worthwhile to categorize them and discuss their significance for interaction.

The first category of toys in *Second Life* is invisible toys. A common example is that of the pose, which is often embodied in the form of a sphere, whose visibility can be turned off. Submissive poses are readily available, which position the sub on her or his knees, laying flat on the stomach, and in other poses of submission. These are often embedded in physical objects as well, so that one can buy a submissive's pillow, which, when the sub sits on it, also puts her or him in a submissive pose. Also invisible are penis, clit, nipple, and ass toys. These are embodied as invisible spheres that overlay the avatar's body in the appropriate spot. Once worn, these toys enable other people to interact with the avatar's body; for example, if one user clicks on another's nipple, a dialog appears that enables the first user to stroke, pinch, or bite the nipple. Scripts link these toys together, so that playing with a nipple might cause the clit to react, contributing to or bringing the avatar to virtual orgasm (indicated by text in the chat window and a brief, shuddering animation). Other toys, such as floggers, may also contribute to orgasm through scripts.

The second group, which we call props, is another common type of toy. These are largely decorative and non-functional. For example, cages, slave pillow/master throne combinations, and maid serving trays contribute to atmosphere, but users cannot meaningfully interact with them, besides sitting on them. They may have semiotic value: the maid tray, for instance, may

contribute semantically to a scene involving humiliation.

The third category includes visible, interactive toys. These include toys that affect others, such as floggers, whips, and vibrators. There is also a market in toys that remove one's control of the self: blindfolds that literally turn the user's screen black; cuffs that prevent the user from moving her or his avatar and enable others to forcibly move the avatar; and gags, which prevent users from being able to use the chat window. All of these toys of control have built-in escape/release mechanisms, so that avatars always have an escape.

The final category has no real-life equivalent: toys of mass automation. Their existence is an example of the logic of computing extending BDSM practice. We have seen two toys that fall into this category: the Slave Tracer, which regularly IMs reports to masters of a slave's whereabouts, traveling habits, and whether the slave removes the device; the device even makes it so that the slave her- or himself does not know whether she or he is being monitored. The Slave Tracer accomplishes in virtual toy form the functionality of the panopticon prison system, described in [3]. Another example is the Slave Punisher, which compels the slave to repeat random words or to count, notifying the master via IM in the event the slave doesn't comply.

Taken together, these toys represent—but in conspicuously abstract ways—the toys of real-life BDSM. A virtual blindfold that turns the screen black, or a gag that algorithmically turns all typing into garbled text, are far from the loss of control that accompanies their real-life counterparts. That giving a handjob involves clicking on a penis, making a choice in a dialog box, and reading textual output in a chat window alters the relations of pleasure-giving and feedback beyond meaningful recognition (not to mention the particle effect semen that shows up seconds too late because of lag). The sheer quantity of affordable toys, props, and furnishings makes the construction of visually elaborate sets much easier than in real life. Finally, the automated toys introduce an inhuman and impersonal agency into the most intimate of relationships. In short, the acts of imagining required to construct and then perform fantasies are altered from their real-life counterparts at every turn by the interfaces in which and with which the relationship is enacted.

5. Conclusion

In spite of the efforts of the virtual BDSM subculture to recreate the real-life BDSM subculture online, the result is a BDSM aesthetic that is perceptually similar yet cognitively different. One of the hallmarks of BDSM sex—the erotic use of pain and domination—is replaced with *representations* of pain and domination. The subculture is open to abuse by “players”: those who represent themselves as available partners interested in constructing the balanced relationship between dominant and submissive, but who are actually trolling for kinky sex. Its toys are a strange approximation of their real-life counterparts. Rituals inadvertently become absurd, precisely when they should bear the most meaning. Teleportation, logging off, the use of alternate avatars, and the ready availability of other virtual worlds collectively weaken the intensity of avatar-to-avatar relationships. None of this is to say that two people cannot construct a deep and meaningful D/s relationship in *Second Life*; as [1] says, “the brain is the largest human sex organ [so] BDSM is truly a mind-game.” It may be that *Second Life* offers a new interface to a classic, taboo aesthetic; but in doing so, it also transforms that aesthetic in subtle, yet profound ways.

6. References

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