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Rethinking Virtual Commodification, or The Virtual Kitchen Sink

By Lori Landay, Berklee College of Music

Keywords : virtual worlds; virtual goods; commodification; machinima.

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Rethinking Virtual Commodification, or The Virtual Kitchen Sink

By Lori Landay, Berklee College of Music

In a piece I published last year in *The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* entitled « Having but Not Holding: Consumerism & Commodification in Second Life, » I critiqued commodification in the virtual world. But, after another year of being in Second Life, I see that I underestimated some important aspects of virtual goods and services, and I am here to recant. Virtual consumption is not only about not knowing what else to do in a virtual world except remake the actual world, or even about having easily what is difficult, impossible, or even undesirable in the material world. It is also about the value of virtual objects, how virtual commodities connect to social relations, and the importance of virtual « home. »

First, all virtual objects are not equal in terms of quality. In my earlier piece, I create, or "rez" a sphere and claim I can make whatever I want in Second Life for free. This is true only if I want spheres! OK, I can make other things, but there is an opportunity cost in terms of time, and there are some things I cannot make myself as well as others can, for the same reason that I do not make my own clothes in the actual world. Look at me a year ago, and look at me now. I cannot make the hat or top that I am wearing. Lady Thera made them, and they are worth paying for. Moreover, part of the fun in this ludic environment is the instant gratification of being able to transform myself from a human ... into a centaur for the equivalent of a few U.S. dollars. The objects you now see in this video—flowers and plants by Alexith and Shirah Destiny, Maya Paris's burlesque items, Flithy Fluno's virtual exhibition of the physical paintings which he sells through Second Life, or Rayzer Haggwood's animations so your avatar can play the guitar—were all made by people who not only crafted their virtual goods but also thought carefully about how to display and sell them. They are skilled designers and talented artists who deserve to be compensated for their creativity, labor, resources, and time.

Second, I underestimated the connection between the social and economic aspects of Second Life. When I wrote the earlier piece, I had not been inworld very long, and didn't have many friends, or understand the interactive nature of Second Life. Now I realize that part of the virtual economy is the gift economy, the exchange of items that can be transferred, and how exchanging, giving, and sharing objects can be part of friendships. In addition, virtual objects are not only meaningful for how they express identity, create environment, are aesthetically pleasing, or perform a compensatory function for unsatisfied desires in the actual world, but they can become significant because of their provenance, where they came from, who gave them to you.

And finally, I now have a better understanding of how important place can be in a virtual world, and the role that "home" can provide. A virtual home, rented or on one's own land, whether similar to an actual world home or some other kind of space, is not just a simulacra of the familiar to make the metaphors of place manifest in a virtual world. It is not just a mirror image, but its own place, a locus of experiences that have occurred there, and are now a part of me. I still do not see the appeal of a virtual kitchen, but I have also spent enough time in Second Life now to know that people's uses of commodities are often creative and ludic, providing frames for play and interaction that stimulate the imagination in ways I could barely glimpse a year ago. Maybe that could even include the kitchen sink.

Notes on Rethinking Virtual Commodification

Part of my 2008 essay, “Having but Not Holding: Consumerism and Commodification in Second Life,” was a machinima (neologism of machine and cinema, meaning digital video captured in a virtual world or 3-d game environment) of my avatar, L1Aura Loire, talking from “her” perspective about virtual commodification. It was my early foray into what became the focus of my sabbatical year in Second Life: virtual subjectivity, both in imagining and performing an avatar's perspective, and in attempting to express ideas in a non-written format. A year later, I stand by most of what I said in the essay and machinima, but there were a few things I got wrong. I chose to make a machinima in response to my earlier piece instead of writing another essay to show as well as tell about the virtual goods I discuss.

I am excited about the possibilities for machinima for creative documentary-style pieces with voice over narration like this one, for narrative, for music video, and for experimental video. The biggest challenge for me is to create images and sequences that illustrate the concepts I want to express. Once I plan out my ideas and write my narration, I storyboard the shots I want to use. I set up shots with my avatars, sometimes other people, and sometimes I can use footage I already have. I capture video within Second Life on my MacBook Pro with the software program IShowU HD. I often use two computers, with a second avatar (an “alt”) functioning as the camera, hidden out of sight. To move the “camera,” I sometimes use the SpaceNavigator by 3Dconnexion instead of the mouse. I edit the footage in Final Cut Pro. My other machinima are online at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ProfLL>.

Finally, here are some thoughts that flesh out what is in the machinima. “Creationist capitalism” is the term anthropologist Tom Boellstorff uses to place the confluence of creativity, social relations, identity, and consumerism in Second Life in a wider context. He defines creationist capitalism as: “a mode of capitalism in which labor is understood in terms of creativity, so that production is understood as creation. Techne is the modality this creation takes; self-fulfillment becomes a means of production—a Robinson Crusoe-like fantasy of the individual working outside social relations” (206). In last year's piece, I am that Robinson Crusoe, alone on the platform I built, giddy with the possibilities of creating out of the virtual nothing, rezzing spheres, making my own clothes. In this year's piece, I am a participant in the virtual economy, a consumer as well as a producer, involved in a social network, with places to go, people to see. It is possible that I have simply been coopted, or caught up in the hegemonic ideals of beauty and behavior of the culture in which I have chosen to engage. At this point in my exploration of virtual worlds, I perceive participating in the virtual economy not so much as playing a game of consumerism (as I did last year), but as an integral part of the virtual world, because I now value virtual goods and services in a different way.

For the producers and sellers of the virtual goods featured in the video, there is an economic motivation, and a payoff; their inworld businesses are profitable, in their definitions of that word. In terms of disclosure, the artists featured in the piece are people who I know inworld, some of whom I have met in person, and I appreciate their talent and aesthetics. Instead of researching the economic bottom line of their inworld businesses, I chose to think through the ways in which the virtual goods they produce and distribute are presented in the virtual world, and how I interact with their objects. Only Filthy Fluno's inworld objects have a direct link between the virtual object and a material, physical one. The virtual items for sale in SL by Shirah and Alexith Destiny, Maya Paris, and Rayzer Haggwood only exist within SL.

The flowers, plants, and trees that Alexith and Shirah Destiny sell through their inworld business Destiny Blue Designs (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Destiny%20Blue/57/60/22>) make virtual space into place. SL residents can use them for landscaping their environment, and they can also be given as gifts, some in vases, planters, or bouquets. The “shop” is a beautiful garden sim where the plants are both in beds and also part of the landscape, with music, dance balls, and places to visit. Some of the plants also have an interesting story. Alexith and Shirah, who are married in Second Life, went to Fiji together—the actual people, to the actual Fiji—and took photographs of orchids that they used to make the textures for the virtual flowers. Alexith's technique for making detailed objects that are very low prim (one or two prim per plant) push the boundaries of Second Life graphics, and the challenge of getting the most depth and beauty out of a prim drives Alexith's creativity forward. For me, his plants hit just the right chord of blending realism and abstraction for representation in the virtual world, capturing the essence of the flower or plant without being too detailed or too cartoony.

Maya Paris's burlesque items play a function familiar to many artists; she makes and sells well-designed consumer items to fund her inworld art. In particular, her animated dance fans and animated stockings combine flair and wit. To me, they and her other burlesque items participate in the often-hilariously over-sexualized environment of Second Life with a knowing wink. (When I someday do a piece on sexuality in Second Life called “Being Had without Being Held,” I will feature her items!) How the objects are displayed in her two shops (Bluestocking Burlesque at <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Tigerclaw/228/144/55> and also in a “mall” at <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Dindrane%20Elfor/184/175/47>) show her eye for design. Like her virtual art sculptures and installations (which she also sells at Bluestocking Interactive Art Gallery, <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Tigerclaw/233/174/63>), these objects call attention cleverly to the absurdity of the virtual, creating ludic interactions with sound, style, and animations.

Filthy Fluno's CounterpART project, featured in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/magazine/08fluno-t.html?_r=1, exists both in Second Life at Artropolis (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Artropolis/169/147/22>) and in an actual world gallery in Lowell, Massachusetts, USA. Original paintings, some inspired by Second Life, can be purchased through Second Life, so Filthy, who is also Jeffrey Lipsky, crosses the borders between the virtual and actual worlds, using SL as an extension of his actual gallery and business, although not a simulation of it. The digitized images he displays in his sim, Artropolis, however, are not what I would consider virtual art any more than a digitized image on a Web site is virtual art; they are digitized reproductions of artworks displayed and exhibited in a virtual space. (Virtual art as opposed to art in a virtual world, in my criteria, uses the possibilities of the 3-d, interactive and immersive space of a virtual world.) The gallery in SL, however, is a virtual place, and Filthy's use of virtual exhibition is smart and engaging, with reproductions of posters, articles about him and his work, as well as the virtual representations of the actual paintings and prints for sale through the SL sim, and on the Web.

Rayzer Haggwood's HUDs (heads-up displays) scripted objects can be seen in the user's interface and used to control an avatar or interact with an object. The rock animation HUDs he sells at Rayzer's Rock Quarry Animations (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Sukhumvit/161/105/21>) for playing guitar, singing into a microphone stand, playing other instruments, and playing guitar with a floor monitor all simulate rock performance movements, and make Second Life a little more like Guitar Hero or Rock Band. The details Rayzer includes in his animations capture the spirit of rock performance; to me, when my avatar strums the guitar, so cool, or twirls full around, landing perfectly, it is transcendent, and great fun. Like Alexith's flowers, Rayzer's animations find a subtle sweet spot between realistic and iconic, an appropriate tone for experiences in the stylized visual environment and social world of Second Life.

Although I have discussed the virtual goods as existing only in the virtual world, overall, I recognize the virtual world as a place that is not dichotomous to the physical world, but see the connections between the two. The vibrancy of the virtual economy points to the permeability of the boundaries between the virtual and the material. The experiences one has within a virtual world become part of a person, like telephone conversations can—or dreams.

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