

[-empyre-] [Missive 6] Alterity and dystopia in SL - a response to Dissidents in SL

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 - *Subject:* [-empyre-] [Missive 6] Alterity and dystopia in SL - a response to Dissidents in SL
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 - *Date:* Sat, 11 Aug 2007 14:25:34 -0500 (CDT)
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I love Ana Valdez' question of representations of people and places "other" than the, actually updated 50's modernist dream of corporate america remediated from the Streamline/Googie ages to the cybertopian WIRED one. >From a historical perspective, it is the reiteration/remediation of the American love affair with technology. The translation of physical dreams of the technological utopia reminds one of the iconic imagery of Lang's "Metropolis" or Scott's "Blade Runner"; the latter of which I greatly prefer.

Valdez' question of where the disenfranchised are represented in SL is something that I have been obsessed with. In many ways, the utopian dream alludes to a Western Postmodern failure of the future promised by Star Trek or even Blade Runner, in which resources are depleting, population is exploding,, and the creation of Second Life is an urge to "start over, with new bodies, new worlds, to replace the ones that we cannot reach within the agespan of the Baby Boomer generation.

However most of my practice has been exploring "cultural cracks", and this has led to looking at the things in SL that are outside of the Venn diagram of the virtual technotopia. Conversely, the "Id Complex" of SL has its own banality, as the gambling, stripclubs, sex shops are shallow expressions of circumventing the most basic unfulfilled desires and taboos. There are a few exceptions that are of interest, such as the ban on underage avatars for sexual/suggestive purposes, which is another whole issue in itself.

However, what then is left? The most basic dystopia is Electric Sheep's Nexus Prime (who a student of mine, Artemis Fate, helped develop). It's a Gibson/Stephenson cyberpunk ruin, and fairly straightforward. Another is Jennie, an Escap From New York style urban dystopia - again a pretty close remediation from literature and cinema. It's even ironic that the New Orleans/French Quarter arena hasn't a single displaced person or shingle out of place.

But the question remains - what of the disenfranchised, ugly, homeless? There are instances of a soup kitchen in SL, of which I was aware happened in mid-2006. I have not seen many instances of squalor, but it's interesting to note that a sizeable portion of avatars are, in fact homeless

in SL. This means that they either do not have their financial information in the system, do not own land, are alternate identities, etc.

However, this does not answer Valdez' question. A good instance might be Virtual Darfur, which is more of an awareness/social justice site.

The two aspects of alterity that I have found most interesting are representations of squalor and the "ugly" avatar. In regards to the former, there is a cardboard favela, originally built by Ian AH/Ian Murray located underneath Jeremy Owen Turner/Wirxli FlimFlam's glittering PR facility on Odyssey. While Wirxli's Cultural Relations office is meant as the futuristic extension of Warhol, I/Man Michinaga moved in with Ian in the shanty after a run-in with an explosive neighbor in Han Loso that caused me to sell all my holdings.

At that time, Man was homeless, and suddenly crashed in the shanty, virtually fought with Ian over the wOOT Loops (breakfast cereal) and discarded bottles of Absolut from Wirxli's parties, and bickered about Ian's propensity for Swedish editions of Playboy, while I preferred the Hong Kong and Croatian editions. The dumpster outside seemed to usually have lots of hors d'oeuvres and even though Ian usually took far too long in the portable toilet, we get on.

<http://slfront.blogspot.com/2007/03/man-in-interim.html>

The funny thing is that on more than one occasion, class groups have been spotted in the squat, and when I am or I have been inside (I usually park there to Instant Message), we have been told to leave because a class is visiting. "But this is our home!", we protest, only to be asked to leave our own residence.

On the other hand, the avatars that question the technotopian ideal of "always young, always beautiful" are my favorites. By the way, the other model I find most banal are the beautiful alien/faery avatars that again merely reiterate the utopian fantasmagoria. Ian Ah's middle-aged avatar, sometimes with a cane, and Beavis Pavlovski's dumpy foreman with cement shoes are brilliant examples of breaking the SL lifestyle with really evocative shapes.

As a little intermezzo, the usual avatar, or worse yet, the remediation of the real life appearance, is completely at odds with the Linden rhetoric. The continual reiteration of phrases of "creativity" and "your world" deflate when people given the gift of open-ended goals, choose to recreate their virtual portrait, their living room, or the standard canon of storybook scenarios. In many ways, it is the well known axiom of giving the starving person a vast menu, and not knowing what to order, getting a cheeseburger for its familiarity.

Therefore, the shapes of alterity, in many ways, hold the potential for the realization of the technotopian ideal of creativity, diversity, etc., but then other questions arise. Who is behind the avatar, what are their choices for that avatar, and does envisioning alterity actually create a culture that actually reflects an intentionality that truly desires empowering the "other" and the disenfranchised?

The closest I have found are perhaps Laura Gagliano's Montevideo area that was envisioned to create a voice for non-urban Brazilians from the Bahia and Amazonia regions. While I have not visited since its completion, I'm interested in seeing how this part of its mission is being articulated. In addition, I am in dialogue with Polvo Gallery of Chicago, a prominent Latino

venue as an incubator for a possible extension into SL on the Columbia site.

Lastly, what, if any, role does dissent and protest have in virtual worlds? With the momentary newsblip that the Second Life Liberation Front caused by creating a "Virtual Nuke", what potential does dissent have at all on servers? Somewhere between the inability to protest in shopping malls and the silent tree falling in the distant woods lies the questionable potency of protest in Second Life.

For example when Columbia College Chicago had its annual Manifest senior art festival, protesters fought for better health care for contacted security guards. However, when the picketers were dispersed in the physical, they arose again in the student center in the public SL projection. The move was lauded as novel by our faculty, but they missed the administrators by 15 minutes, therefore felling their own silent tree.

Therefore, a better approach may be a multivalent tactical media approach. The real site of engagement is no longer the sever, but the record from their server, post to YouTube and multiple blogs by protesters and their sock puppets. And, if the object of the protest responds, the cycle repeats, inviting additional media organs. This is possibly one of the few ways virtual protests could be structured to create larger social ripples.

Visions of alterity in technotopian worlds like SecondLife are few, whether by defaults imposed by education, economic or cultural privilege. But this does not mean that they do not or can not exist. P

- **Follow-Ups:**

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 - *From:* "Ana Valdés" <agoral58@gmail.com>
- [Re: \[-empyre-\] \[Missive 6\] Alterity and dystopia in SL - a response to Dissidents in SL](#)
 - *From:* timothy murray <tml@cornell.edu>
- Previous by Date: [Re: \[-empyre-\] dissident Art in SL?](#)
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