

Science of Sex

by Anne Machalinski, Aili McConnon and Christie Nicholson

Dating and mating in Second Life

Sex in the clouds and men having babies: A 3D-virtual world is transforming thousands of 'real' lives in shocking ways.

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Ravan DaSilva, 6 feet 10 inches with a muscular body covered in tattoos, needed a change of scenery. Last summer he bought a plot of land on remote, tropical Ferox Island, where he decided to design and build a house. Conveniently, Ruby Riva, his stunning next-door neighbor had expert architectural skills. He noticed right away that she too was single.

They took the time to get to know each other. And there was no denying something else was at work.

“A little connection started within the first few days,” said Ravan.

Soon, others on Ferox noticed they were spending little time with anyone else. Their intense romance landed them at the altar a month and a half later.

In Essex, England, Steve Farrant, a 34-year-old former body builder with red hair, was experiencing a similar pull of attraction and desire. His pursuit was Jayne Roden, a divorced 39-year-old mother of two from Wales. They met online, and their casual, flirtatious banter quickly escalated to long conversations each day. Within six weeks of their first online meeting they started having phone conversations. They decided to meet in person to test their compatibility. Farrant drove the 200 miles from the south of England to Roden’s Welsh home.

Through the entire nerve-filled drive Farrant felt like a teenager on a first date. “My brain was all over the place,” he said. When he pulled up to her driveway his hands were shaking. He walked up to her house and somehow got the courage to knock. He was dumbfounded when she opened the door.

“I didn’t know if I should shake her hand, spin her around or kiss her,” he said, of the brunette waif. “I was like a scared rabbit in headlights.”

Roden took the initiative. She grabbed hold of Farrant and gave him a kiss. He was thrilled. “I was at a loss for words,” he said. “It was one of the best nights of my life.”

Ravan and Ruby. Farrant and Roden. Parallel love stories, parallel lives. But Ravan and Ruby are not real people. They are "avatars," digital characters in the online universe called Second Life (secondlife.com). Ravan is the creation of Farrant; Ruby the creation of Roden. And based on their avatars' romance, Farrant and Roden tested their relationship in the real world. Perhaps no technology has begun to rewrite the rules of courtship more than Second Life.

Second Life is one of the increasingly popular “massive multiplayer online role-playing games” or MMOs. Most MMOs involve sci-fi battles like dragon slayings or space wars. But “Second Life” allows people to create alternate lives in a virtual world.

Avatars do nearly everything humans do. They go shopping, plan dinners or buy beach houses, using a special currency called Linden dollars, which are exchanged through PayPal to U.S. dollars. They dance in clubs, attend conferences, have sex.

Who’s in Second Life?

Second Life has exploded, expanding from 100,000 users at the end of 2005 to more than a million today. Two-thirds of users are from the United States, with Canada, the Netherlands and Germany following. Nearly half are women and the median age of users is 32.

The average user logs on for 10 hours a week, but Farrant and Roden interacted through Ravan and Ruby for up to 12 hours a day.

“Every time I signed online, I looked for her,” Farrant said in a phone interview. “I started ignoring more and more people.”

Things were heating up between the two and they were soon experimenting with virtual sex between their avatars. Embedded programs called “pose balls” can move avatars in a variety of ways. When Ravan and Ruby consummated their virtual relationship, they built a structure called a “skybox” for privacy. Then they used 30 to 40 different animations to simulate the act. Farrant and Roden enhanced their encounters in Second Life with sexually charged phone conversations and instant messaging chats.

“It could get pretty hot and erotic at times,” Farrant said. “You see your avatar placing your hands on another avatar, which is a very sensual thing.”

Still, their online sex seems fairly tame considering the technology that is becoming available. Kyle Machulis, a cyber-sex developer now working for Linden Lab, the company that introduced Second Life, has made it easier for couples to experience actual pleasure during virtual sex. One of his devices is a sex toy interface, which each user attaches to him or herself. Through this hardware, the controller is able to remotely stimulate his or her real world partner behind the avatar.

Virtual Sex Research

To what extent does sex in video games replace real sex? No one is sure, but Brenda Brathwaite, a video game developer and expert in online sex games, has been looking into the question. She has seen some users log on to experience sexual acts impossible in the real world, like having sex while lying in the clouds. Of one thing she is certain. There is no substitute for the thrill of the physical. “It’s as if someone put 20 pictures of lasagna on my desk,” she said. “It still wouldn’t replace even one of the real thing.”

Brathwaite worked in video games for two decades before she began focusing on sex games. She was hired in 2003 as a developer on “Playboy: The Mansion,” a simulation game released in 2005 in which the player assumes the role of Hugh Hefner. Intrigued by the growing field, she’s held a Sex in Games roundtable in 2005, chaired the first Sex in Games Conference in San Francisco last June and written a book on the subject, “Sex in Video Games,” to be published by Charles River Media this fall.

While virtual sex happens in designated “mature” spaces in Second Life, it is only part of the larger constellation of relationships formed within the virtual world. Braithwaite has known couples in Second Life who adopt virtual children through the game when they can’t conceive in real life.

“Furry” romance and other sex-based subcultures

Catherine Smith, the marketing director for Linden Lab, explains: “Second Life is a social environment, it’s a creative playground, a place to try new things risk free.” She says one of the largest, most active groups in the virtual world is called the “Furry Community,” since the members create animal avatars with human-like physical and personality traits. It’s the next step in “furry fandom,” a genre of literature, comic books and role-playing. Within the larger Second Life community, there are Forrest Furies, Naughty Furies and some 50 other groups with 1,400 members.

Among them is Rebekah Gatian, a 23-year-old from Kansas, who has been a furry artist for years, most recently recreating a sketch of a feminine feline in her avatar, K’Sharra Manimal, a Naughty Furry.

Online, K’Sharra met Fallen Vaughan, a handsome tiger created by Chris Manifold, a 20-year-old prep cook from British Columbia, Canada.

And like Farrant and Roden, Gatian and Manifold decided to meet in person last February after three months of online conversation. They have been dating ever since. Gatian plans to move to Canada to be with her beau as soon as she finishes massage therapy school this fall. But for now their relationship is confined to the online world, interactions over Web cam and the fantasy artwork she draws, erotic depictions of two tigers at play.

“My avatar is a representation of the ideal me,” Gatian wrote in an interview conducted via instant messenger, “sexy, exotic, tough, and independent. Qualities of a tiger.”

Gatian describes herself as “a bit heavysset but well proportioned.” At 5’5” and 200 pounds, her svelte and sexy tigress avatar has positively affected her in real life, she said. “It’s given me an ideal to look up to,” she wrote. Allowing her character to do things she can’t in real life, “gives me a sense of freedom.”

Furies aren’t the only sex-based subculture in Second Life. There are also the Goreans, a male-dominant group demanding female submission. “Every single sexual subculture has come into Second Life,” said Wagner James Au, a journalist from San Francisco who writes *New World Notes*, a blog chronicling avatar dramas in the virtual world. Linden Lab employed Au from early 2003 for three years as an “embedded journalist” to blog about the personalities in Second Life. He continues reporting as Hamlet Au, his dapperly dressed avatar who sports a crisp white suit inspired by Tom Wolfe.

He believes Second Life will continue exploding. “I think it will be the next generation of the Internet,” he said. Going beyond the personalized Web pages of MySpace, Second Life’s “fully immersive, fully interactive three-dimensional environment” has the ability to push the boundaries of how people meet, form and experience relationships.

Au said he has seen all the drama and jealousy of the real world repackaged and expressed online – with a lot more action. “You’re role playing in a sex soap opera,” he said. Au recalled a blog entry he wrote last year titled: “Online gumshoes for hire in Second Life.” He discovered virtual private detective agencies to check up on virtual spouses, using sexy decoys in the classic “honey trap.” If spouse A takes the bait, the detective teleports the wronged partner to the scene.

If every aspect of sexuality is expressed in Second Life, it's not surprising to find an avatar dominatrix, Cheri Horton, earning 1,300 Linden dollars per customer in her fetish business called the Dashwood Dungeon. Noche Kandora, Cheri's real world controller, spends three to four hours a week in the dungeon. "I do what I want and they enjoy it," she said. In her 30-minute routine she uses props, including a paddle and whipping post, to physically dominate her virtual client while typing erotic text.

Kandora first logged on to Second Life in September 2005. In real life Kandora is a journalist in Nevada with a blog, Apogeevr, which discusses "desire in the digital age."

Kandora discusses real world jealousy from Second Life relationships on her blog and ponders the allure of bondage and other fetishes in Second Life that don't involve real world touch and pain.

"This is a dawning of an age where humans are going to be interacting more and more in these environments," she said. "Second Life is just living out your life in a different setting."

Wedding Bells

This could not have been more true for Britain's Farrant and Roden. After they had virtual sex, a steamy phone conversation and a Web cam chat, they decided their avatars, Ruby and Ravan, should become engaged. They planned "the ultimate Second Life wedding" with the help of wedding planner Pentium McKenzie and her company, Wedding Bells, Farrant said. The wedding cost 35,000 Linden dollars (about \$100 at the time), which Farrant paid with direct transfers from his bank account to the suppliers.

Joyce Bettencourt owns a virtual cathedral in Second life for such momentous occasions and her avatar, Rhiannon Chatnoir, acts as a wedding impresario. "Some people have weddings in Second Life because they were unable to have the pomp and circumstance wedding in real life," Bettencourt said. She makes about 1,000 Linden dollars per wedding, or \$3.

Farrant said he and his virtual bride had "all the bits and pieces as a real wedding." Ruby wore a wedding dress and had her hair done. Ravan picked out a new outfit and had a best man. Nearly a dozen guests attended the wedding in the gothic cathedral.

Not long after this virtual celebration, Farrant made the trip to meet Roden in person at her real home in Wales. He ended up staying for nearly two weeks. Then he returned to Essex, sorted out the details of his life, and drove right back to Roden with a van packed with his belongings.

Ten months have passed since they moved in together, and they're still going strong as a couple in both the real and virtual worlds. They still log into Second Life, but with much less frequency than when their courtship began. Together they've purchased a virtual island, Utopia, where Ravan's building a nightclub and Ruby's building another house.

"We're in love more now than when we first met," Farrant said, "and I thought that's as good as it got."

Soon, Farrant plans to ask Roden to marry him. For them fantasy and reality have become one and the same.

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