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Embodiment and Gender Identity in Virtual Worlds: Reconfiguring our “Volatile Bodies”¹

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INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of graphical virtual worlds, such as Second Life (2003) and Entropia Universe (2003), the creation of our second lives in cyberspace no longer relies predominantly on text-based means, as it was in the case of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) or MOOs (object oriented MUDs). The focus of the online existence in VWs (virtual worlds) shifted from text-based descriptions to graphical representations of ourselves as avatars and of the virtual reality surrounding us. The customization of our virtual personas (choosing the name, adjusting body parts and selecting clothes) entails above all gender specification. As it turns out, coexisting in virtual communities as avatars, the majority of us seem to project an equivalent of reality onto our cyber bodies. Despite the fact that the Internet itself constitutes a flexible tool, which could be used to implement revolutionary ideas contradicting stable and fixed gender boundaries, the traditionally defined gender identity

based on binary oppositions (male versus female; heterosexual versus homosexual) is still being reinforced online. We are more likely to fill the virtual worlds with unusual objects or imaginary scenery than to populate them with gender ambiguous creatures. Oftentimes, in the most fantastic virtual spaces, our avatar's gender identity constitutes the most stable point of reference.

The research revolving around identity is, in most cases, based on the following key cultural and sociological markers: race, class, gender and sexuality (Bell 2001). This paper will focus on the question of embodiment and gender explicitly and will explore the implications of technology and cyberspace on the way gender identity is or may be constructed in virtual worlds, such as Second Life (SL) or Entropia Universe (EU).²

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first constitutes a theoretical introduction and places the problem of gender identity and body in a wider cultural context, encompassing postmodern and post-postmodern concepts on identity. We are referring mainly to chosen feminist theories, as they cover the most vivid disputes over the place of gender and body in Western culture. In our understanding, feminism (or feminisms) is the crossover area of various perspectives present in the contemporary humanities. Demarcating rigid boundaries between gender studies, women's studies, queer theory etc. is not indispensable in this chapter (disregarding the fact that oftentimes it is impossible).

In the second part, we will analyze how chosen theoretical perspectives are realized empirically in Second Life and Entropia Universe. Virtual worlds constitute communication technologies enabling its users to create arbitrary identities; hence we selected them as our

focus points. We decided upon such reference points as New Communication Technologies (NCTs) make perfect tools for the creation of arbitrary identities. Since in cyberspace we are not constrained by real bodies (cf. Doyle's chapter, this volume) and we create our virtual bodies from scratch (although the metaphorical 'meat' has not been left behind), we could start the process of identity construction anew, entering the age of post-humans and cyborgs, existing beyond gender constraints in a post-gender world (Haraway 1991).

Our aim is to examine whether users devoid of certain constraints in constructing themselves, create new identity models or whether they duplicate the ones present in reality. If so, what models will they be? A similar point was raised by Lisa Nakamura and Daniel Punday, who speculated whether "the Internet [can] propagate genuinely new and nonracist (and nonsexist and non-classist) ways of being, or [whether] it merely reflect[s] our culture at large" (quoted in Nakamura 2002: xii)? Nakamura further notices that the Internet may be viewed twofold: either as a progressive tool used to implement social change or as a "purveyor of crude and simplistic stereotypical cultural narratives" (xiii). In order to conduct a thorough and well informed analysis, and to place the research on the continuum between those bipolar attitudes, it is crucial to narrow the focus to a specific rhetorical space related to the Internet. Taking into account the diversity of online applications and considering Nakamura's valid point we contained our study within the boundaries of virtual worlds only, disregarding other spaces, such as chat rooms, websites or fora. Observing the avatars in Second Life and Entropia Universe we will explore the question of identity construction online, and try to determine whether users creating their characters in cyberspace are "electing to perform versions of themselves as raced and gendered beings" (Nakamura 2002: xiv) or whether they

develop their cybertypes irrespective of various stereotypes, which are already at work in the offline world?

Fluid Identity

In accordance with classic theories put forward by the sociologists of culture, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000; 2001; 2007) and Anthony Giddens (1991), identity is perceived as fluid and changeable, and its creation as a never-ending task. As Bauman notices, nowadays “... everyone has the right to choose who they want to be or become” (Bauman 2007: 27); “... everything may happen and all can be done ... there are few footings in this world, which could be recognized as solid and trustworthy” (2000: 49). For Giddens, identity “... is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created ...” (Giddens 1991: 52).

Such a state is, on the one hand, the consequence of the *Entzauberung der Welt* (Weber) – referring to rationalization and discovering the illusory nature of fundamental concepts – and on the other – the result of real civilization changes, which loosened up traditional national, religious or social ties. Globalization and the phenomenon of eradication influence “the stability and durability of identity, which under its influence become as ‘mobile’ as the world itself; changeable and unstable; evasive and elusive; uncertain and fluid” (Bauman 2001: 11). A community model, in which a group assigned a particular identity to the individual on the basis of constant cultural standards, ceased to exist. It has been replaced by “hybrid identities” (Mamzer 2007: 8) comprising various elements, no longer inherited but constructed in accordance with individually chosen criteria.

It seems that the human body could be a stable support for the fixed identity. Inborn and irremovable, the body allows others to recognize our sex and race, which constitute the basis of self-determination for our selves. However, recently various practices have disturbed the cultural status of the body (particularly with reference to sex/gender), depriving it of its durability and certainty.

The Body

Since the turn of the 19th and 20th century onwards, in the Western Humanities the importance of embodiment has been increasing up to the point where it has become impossible to associate a human being with pure consciousness and following Descartes, to separate it from its corporeal foundation.

Beforehand, the body connecting the human with temporality, unforeseeable natural forces, and the biological, perishable dimension of our existence, constituted an obstacle on the way to perfection, which - depending on the current philosophical or religious ideologies - was associated with the world of philosophical ideas, God or reason. According to Elizabeth Grosz, the Cartesian division of a human being into distinct substances (body as *res extensa* and mind as *res cogitans*) originates from Plato's somatophobia (Grosz 1994: 5), and its final intensification was gained in the Age of Enlightenment.

For the next 300 years following Descartes, philosophy sought to 'tame' the body, which more recently has begun to be perceived as something more than the vehicle for the mind. The following statement by Maurice Merleau-Ponty marks a symbolic end as well as the

beginning of a new chapter in corporeality: “I am not in front of my body... I am in it, or rather I am it” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 173).

Interestingly, the first attempts to embody the subject were almost automatically associated with its sexualization. The Cartesian privilege of the mind was questioned by the assumptions of Freud’s psychoanalysis. Not only did he refute an idealized image of human consciousness, spotlighting its subconscious areas, but also emphasized human corporeality (sexuality). In *The Mystery of Second Sex*, Paweł Dybel claims that it is due to psychoanalysis that “referring to the universal, sexually neutral subject has become problematic” (Dybel 2006: 7).³

The question of the sexed body has been mostly scrutinized by feminism, both from its socio-political as well as academic standpoint. Dealing with the above issue seemed inevitable, as it was determined by the culturally well established interpretation of the relation between the feminine and the corporeal, which are perceived to be of equal value (we will discuss this point in further paragraphs). Feminism could not have stayed indifferent with reference to this fact. Its relation to the body has been always ambivalent in that a successful liberating strategy could have consisted in the body’s radical transgression or, quite on the contrary, in its full cultural reconstruction. Due to such an extremely diverse attitude towards the body (as well as various other fundamental differences), we should not refer to feminism as a homogenous concept, but we should rather talk about feminisms.⁴

Nowadays, it seems almost impossible to fully embrace all the diversity of feminism. The body, perceived as the basis for female identity, constitutes a criterion which allows for

partial systematization of all the branches. It should be stressed that the dualism of the body and mind – an order attributed to nature and culture respectively – is automatically followed by yet another dichotomy, that of femininity/masculinity. “Sometimes a woman is defined with the word 'sex'; she constitutes the body, delight, and danger” (Beauvoir 2003: 174). In the 1940's, Simone de Beauvoir pointed to the above, exemplifying the cultural leveling of a man with the sexually neutral category of a human being, as opposed to a woman, who is always referred to as the Other. The causes and results of the above assumptions were analyzed in the 1970's classic academic article of a significant title “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”:

Because of woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man is. (...) Since men lack a 'natural' basis (nursing, generalized to child care) for a familial orientation, their sphere of activity is defined at the level of interfamilial relations.

(Ortner, et al. 1974: 76-79)

Since it is men, not women, who are associated with culture (in opposition to nature) and as Ortner notices by creating it, men compensate for their reproductive incapacity, the culture embodies predominantly male subjectivity. Man becomes the universal symbol of humankind, an everyman combining all the plethora of human experiences in his self. “Identifying the cultural *neutrum* with a man is such a common practice that it has become imperceptible. Taking into consideration language ... male-oriented politics, history, literature, art and culture in general ... the universal and the common to all mankind is that

which is masculine” (Walczewska 2006: 125, authors’ translation). Femininity, being associated first and foremost with corporeality,⁵ constitutes only one of the possible scenarios of humanity. Similarly to nature, which has to succumb to culture, a woman needs to accept male dominance. An alternative for this is for women to enter into the cultural sphere and fully participate in its creation. Allegedly, the above scenario may be realized twofold. 1. ‘As a woman’- the subject is defined with reference to sex, but it is done anew and not in opposition to what is masculine. 2. The second strategy assumes entering into the culture ‘as a man’, which is possible only once the binary oppositions have been invalidated and traditional concepts on femininity and masculinity deconstructed.

Thus, a legitimate entanglement between the concepts of femininity and corporeality would form a stem from which various feminism branches sprout. Elaborating on the figure of feminism as a tree, its boughs seem to bifurcate into two interpretative tendencies: the affirmative and the deconstructive one.⁶ Historically, the first tendency originates in naturalistic and biological essentialism (1960’s and 1970’s) while the second one in Cultural Theory representing the body as an entity formed by culture.

Early essentialism, focusing on the universal nature (essence) of femininity, in its subsequent phases has been surpassed and turned into a multidirectional “sexual difference theory”. Sexual difference feminism is still looking for the specific character of femininity on the basis of female corporeality, albeit in a less biological and more symbolic sense, for instance by examining the ‘language’ or common experiences of women. Corporeal feminism, represented predominantly by Elizabeth Grosz or Susan Bordo, would constitute the most recent branch, in which the mind/body hierarchy has been turned upside down. It is the body,

not the mind, that constitutes the basis for the subject formation, and the dualism itself has been rejected in favor of a fluid body/mind consolidation. Corporeal feminism is an alternative to some concepts of postmodernism, which disregard the corporeal dimension and thus constitute the opposing branch of the bifurcation in feminism we have mentioned above.

Its symbolic beginnings date back to Cultural Theory or constructionism (a movement in anthropology), which perceives every human action as influenced by culture. The rudiments were established in the 1930's by Marcel Mauss or Margaret Mead, who demonstrated how body and gender are constructed in different societies. On the basis of similar assumptions, the differentiation between sex and gender could have been made and the faith in full biological determinism could have been questioned.

Inspired by the poststructuralist concepts, over time constructionism developed into “gender theories”, questioning all material foundations of femininity (and masculinity), and pointing to their relative and performative nature. Gender is treated as a category created either by means of socio-cultural practices (see Michel Foucault and ‘power-knowledge’) or discourse (see the concept of ‘différance’ introduced by Jacques Derrida). The traditional concept of subjectivity has been also broken down, and as a result queer theory (with Judith Butler as its precursor) and gender transgressions have come into being.

None of the above tendencies constitutes a coherent whole. However, it may be observed that their bifurcation duplicates the academic opposition of sex vs. gender; as the first trend defines femininity by means of widely used biological categories, while the second one by their socio-cultural counterparts. Such a distinction gives rise to the problems of theoretical

and political nature. Theoreticians supporting sexual difference feminism are accused of secondary sex polarization, and deriving gender identity from the body seems to be somewhat controversial. For instance, Grosz claims that gender cannot exist in the body of the opposite sex, and the surgical change performed by transsexuals constitutes a mere “crude transformation” (Grosz 1993: 207-208; Hyży 2003: 249). On the other hand, the deconstruction of sex and the affirmation of fluid identities contribute to the very dispersion of the category of a woman, which comprises the basis for feminist activity. If we assume that gender is not determined by the body, but depends entirely on our choices, practicing the politics of equality becomes even more difficult. Yet another accusation may refer to the abstract nature of theories, which do not adhere to real life. The above *status quo* has been very accurately summarized by Inga Iwasiów (a well-known Polish feminist), who commented on Braidotti’s vision of ‘nomadic subjects’ in the following words: “While nomadology is a romantic and postindustrial adventure, concrete persons fight for their identity, in the world of which having a passport is a privilege/burden” (Iwasiów 2004: 194).

However, does constructionism belong entirely to the academic utopia? We should refer here to two different standpoints. Not only have they approached identity from different perspectives, but also turned out to be practically applicable, which makes them an inspiring starting point for further reflections.

The first and most obvious association is connected with Judith Butler, one of the most distinct representatives of postmodernity. According to Butler not only gender but also sex is artificial and constructed, and so the opposition between the two is eliminated. Butler does not undermine the existence of biological differences and does not negate real bodies, but

rather questions their 'reality'. For her, the bodies are the carriers of cultural significance. Although they are not fictitious in themselves, it is the fiction that constructs and signifies them. Using the word fiction we refer to cultural norms connected with gender – the norms which do not originate from the bodies, but are imposed upon them. Defining the body as either male or female places it in the heteronormative social order. In the light of Butler's concept, the question of 'being' a woman or a man is not considered in terms of fate, but emphasizes its performative dimension. Gender may be treated as a corporeal style. It is also a space for all the subversive acts - dressing-up, parody, stylization – treating sex instrumentally (drag queens, drag kings, cross-dressing). Butler not only changes the established interpretation of sex/gender, but also describes people, for whom gender instability (transgender, ambigender, non-gendered, gender-neutral, gender liminal, agendered, etc.)⁷ forms the basis of their identity. These people refer to gender irrespective of their sex. The following quotations clearly illustrate the point made by Butler (although being from two entirely different sources, they describe the same bodily reality). The first one constitutes the philosophical description of the bodily condition in postmodernity as understood by Monika Bakke:

Disregarding anatomy, humans have the possibility to embody various cultural genders, without the necessity to support one of the sites. By doing so they gain a multiple social identity. The assumption that one body corresponds to one cultural gender is no longer in force, which leads to gender relativism.

(Bakke 2000: 148)

In the latter one, members of a domain-specific portal for cross-dressers have turned the complex academic cultural theories into a few straight-forward sentences describing their lived experience as individuals freed from gender constraints:

There are no boundaries. There are no divisions into men and women. There is no grammatical gender connected with sex. We play with names; with verbs; with language. There is no feminine or masculine. Everything just is.

(All about crossdressing, comment posted on May 15, 2006)

An equally revolutionary concept was introduced by Donna Haraway (1991), although its character is somewhat different. Instead of the academic interpretation of the category of gender, Haraway creates a vision of its final transgression by creating a post-gender or post-human body. The strategy of surpassing corporeality may be achieved by a cyborg, being a combination of a man (woman) and a machine, and creating a hybrid organism, which guarantees the elimination of natural differences existing between the sexes. If the skin is no longer the borderline for the body, the cyborg has the power to subvert the natural order. This blurs the boundary between the body and technology, between nature and culture, and thus between femininity and masculinity. As Agnieszka Gajewska notices, this shift is achieved by means of a “patriarchal and military” product, which “has been used against their fathers” (Gajewska 2008: 82). The myth of a cyborg is developed by Sadie Plant, who created theoretical foundations of cyberfeminism – a multilayered women’s activity in the Internet.⁸ Acting in alliance with technology, women can become fully emancipated, as their common ground lies in being subordinate to men (Plant 1996; 1997). The activity of cyberfeminists,

oftentimes controversial and subversive (as in the case of ‘cybergrlls’), corresponds to the above statement. Women unite in groups - such as the most popular Old Boys Network and VNS Matrix – and their activity surpasses the boundaries of cyberspace and encompasses, for instance organizing international conferences in real life.

Preliminary conclusions

The postmodern discussion on sex/gender oftentimes includes the convergence of theory and practice. We cannot disregard people for whom the evident transgressing of gender boundaries, or manifesting it in opposition to the well-established social norms, constitutes the basis for self-definition. In the light of the above observations, we are posing the following question: are gender and corporeal transgressions only appealing to minorities or do they reflect the universal longing of the postmodern human for fluid identity? Bearing the above issues in mind, we will analyze these relations focusing on two of the most popular virtual platforms (Second Life and, to a lesser degree, Entropia Universe). We will perceive these virtual worlds as the areas in which the virtual equivalent of real⁹ life is created.

The question of ‘net utopianism’ has been raised by quite a few researchers (e.g. Faith Wilding 2001; Katherine Hayles 1999; Donna Haraway 1991) and so our aim is neither to reformulate it nor to use it as our own original idea.¹⁰ In this paper we will, however, focus on concrete examples. In so doing, we seek to examine the role of body in cyberspace, concentrating on the experience of avatars, taking into account avatars’ interaction with the interface elements.

CASE STUDY: VIRTUAL WORLDS

The question of gender in two of the most popular virtual platforms (e.g. Second Life and Entropia Universe) seems to be inextricably connected with graphical representations of our virtual personas, i.e. avatars. Social interactions in those worlds are no longer achieved by means of text-based descriptions only (as it was in case of Multi User Dungeons – MUDs, which we will briefly discuss in the following paragraph), but include visual stimuli and virtual body language as well. Since our perceptions and categorizations with respect to gender, race and class are based on appearance, the importance of a corporeal dimension in virtual worlds cannot and should not be downplayed. Prior to a closer analysis of embodiment and re-embodiment and its interdependence with the process of avatar creation, we would like to delineate the distinction between virtual worlds (VWs), virtual realities (VRs) and virtual environments (VEs), as well as discuss briefly the notions of the real, the virtual and the actual (Boellstorff 2008: 20-21).

Virtual worlds, virtual realities or virtual environments?

In order to be terminologically consistent, we would like to emphasize the differentiation between the following terms: virtual world (VW), virtual reality (VR) and virtual environment (VE). In the 1990's Sherry Turkle (e.g. in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*) referred to text-based virtual communities (MUDs) as virtual realities. Although she did mention the importance of hardware (helmets, goggles, data gloves), she

decided to refer to MUDs as to “text-based, social virtual reality” (Turkle 1995: 181). Richard Bartle narrows down the definition and notices that “... virtual reality is primarily concerned with the mechanisms by which human beings can interact with computer simulations; it is not especially bothered by the nature of the simulations themselves” (Bartle 2004 quoted in Boellstorff 2008: 20). In other words, the sense of immersion in VR is triggered by interface technologies, e.g. data gloves or goggles, which constitute the basis for the VR reception. Virtual worlds, on the other hand, rely mainly on the users’ experience generated by means of graphical interface or in the earlier days – a text-based one (see: MUDs and Object Oriented MUDs, i.e. MOOs). Thus, taking into consideration Bartle’s remark, Second Life or Entropia Universe should be referred to as virtual worlds, not virtual realities (although some researchers might use the category of VR here). Another term we would like to call into question is a virtual environment (VE), or to be more specific, a collaborative virtual environment (CVE), which exemplifies an immersive virtual reality. As Jeremy Bailenson points out “CVEs are systems that track verbal and nonverbal signals of multiple interactants and render those signals onto avatars, three-dimensional, digital representations of people in a shared digital space” (Bailenson 2006: 255). CVE might be perceived as the next step in videoconferencing techniques in that it maps the movement in the physical world to the one taking place in the virtual environment. Just as in the case of VR, it is the mechanisms and interface technologies that play a crucial role here.

The above distinction between the three different terms referring to the virtual sphere may seem somewhat simplistic, but our intention is to merely outline the idiosyncrasies and clarify the choice of terminology, so as to make it more consistent. Therefore, in this paper, we are

using the terms virtual worlds, virtual platforms or, alternatively, virtual universes (the latter one used specifically in reference to Entropia Universe).

The Virtual, the Real and the Actual

Conducting research in the virtual, it seems almost inevitable not to juxtapose it with the concept of the real. However apparent the virtual-real opposition may seem at first, the phenomenon is far more complex. The issue has been raised by Boellstorff in one of the most recent publications on Second Life. Drawing on extensive analyses concerning the virtual made by other researchers (e.g. Taylor 2006; Deleuze 2004; Markham 1998), Boellstorff concludes that the virtual is in fact real and should be rather opposed to the actual instead. He agrees with the presumption that our experiences online (in virtual worlds) are perceived and felt as real, and may turn out to be as meaningful as the ones encountered offline. “In other words, ‘real’ often acts simply as a synonym for ‘offline’, and does not imply a privileged ontological status ...” (Boellstorff 2008: 20). The virtual thus becomes part of the real, and both states are opposed by the actual world. Nevertheless, in our understanding the categories of the virtual and the real belong to two mutually exclusive orders - the former focusing on what is created, the latter on what is experienced. Boellstorff does emphasize the same question, evoking the etymology of the adjective “actual”, which originates from the verb “act” (from L.L. *actualis* ‘active’, adj. form of L. *actus*; cf. ‘act’).¹¹ He does so, however, to stress the fact that both these terms (the virtual and the actual) belong to the same order and hence they qualify to be juxtaposed. We, on the other hand, argue that since the virtual and the real are governed by different rules and express divergent levels of our existence (that which is made/created and that, which is experienced), the distinction between them does not

disrupt the understanding of the virtual-real relation. Also, since we are referring to the question of corporeality (corpus from L., lit. ‘body’; reality from L.L. realis; meaning ‘real existence’),¹² bringing up the real instead of the actual makes our argumentation more consistent. Thus, directing the reader’s attention to the allegedly problematic distinction between the virtual and the real, we have decided not to introduce further terminological confusion and simply use the virtual when referring to the virtual worlds, and the real when referring to the ‘actual’ world.

VIRTUAL BODIES, OR ‘DO AVATARS DREAM OF ELECTRIC STEAK?’¹³

Having introduced some theoretical background and hopefully clarified major terminological issues, we are now moving on to the second part of our paper, in which we shall look for reference points of chosen theoretical standpoints in the empirical process of creating one’s gender identity in SL and EU.

In the first few paragraphs we will focus on the corporeal dimension of avatar creation and their very existence within virtual worlds, i.e. Second Life and Entropia Universe. Referring to Kristeva’s notion of abject, we will touch upon the question of the virtual body and its gender constraints exemplified in the above platforms. The avatar will constitute our starting point in the discussion on fluid identity, disembodiment and re-embodiment, and the utopian dream of a post-gender world as evoked by e.g. Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991). To put some order into this multilayered discussion, we have arranged it in terms of three main thematic areas. First, we will focus on the process of avatar creation (body

creation) in Second Life and Entropia Universe. Our second area will revolve around the question of experiencing the avatar's body through the interface. And finally, we will concentrate on the social dimension of bodily interaction and examine the phenomenon of gender restricted regions in SL. All of the above phenomena discussed by us belong to the visual channel of communication. We will not focus on text-based or auditory channels.¹⁴

Creating the Avatar's Body

The notions of embodiment or disembodiment or re-embodiment became particularly important and relevant as soon as virtual worlds moved from the era of text-based 'chat rooms' (MUDs) to complex graphical spaces inhabited by avatars equipped with perceptible cyberbodies. Since the focus shifted from the textual to the graphical, the process of creating one's virtual persona has considerably changed. The purely verbal dimension (performing a socializing function) prevalent in MUDs has been moved to the background. In graphical virtual worlds "embodiment [has] become central to online selfhood ..." (Boellstorff 2008: 134). Among four prime needs of SL avatars for instance, the communicative and interpersonal one, constitutes 24%. The predominant need (41%) tends to be the aesthetic one, based on the avatars' appearance (Ensslin 2011b: n.p.). Such a shift, both from the textual to the graphical and what follows from the interpersonal (text-based) to the performative, marks great changes in the construction of gender as well. It seems as if our imagination was constrained by visual means of description and as a result avatars became more standardized, restricted in their bodily form and gender. In the early text-based virtual worlds (MUDs), users were given the possibility to choose from up to ten different gendered and agendered identities, represented by a pronominal system:¹⁵

Neuter: it, it, its, its, itself

Male: he, him, his, his, himself

Female: she, her, her, hers, herself

Either: s/he, him/her, his/her, his/hers, him/herself

Spivak: e, em, eir, eirs, eirself

Splat: *e, h*, h*s, h*self

Plural: they, them, their, theirs, themselves

Egotistical: I, me, my, mine, myself

Royal: we, us, our, ours, ourselves

2nd: you, you, your, yours, yourself

(Rosenberg 1992)

As Boellstorff rightly notices “these ‘genders’ refer to linguistic gender and assume lack of visual embodiment” (2008: 140). Even though the majority of MUD residents would categorize themselves as either male or female (Rosenberg 1992), there were other more flexible possibilities for the ones wishing to transgress the obvious gender boundaries. Having more advanced tools at our disposal, we have apparently moved from flexibly gendered MUDs to virtual platforms, such as SL or Entropia Universe, where the user’s choice is oftentimes limited to two genders only. Although in SL it is possible to change one’s embodiment (e.g. into an animal or an inanimate object) just the way one would change

their t-shirt or haircut, there are only two gender options available in the 'Appearance' tab (either male or female), which restricts a fully malleable agendered process of creation of our virtual personae.

While the Second Life platform required avatars to be either male or female, it was easy to take on an embodiment that did not clearly mark gender (a box, for instance, or a blue ball of light, or an androgynous figure).

(Boellstorff 2008: 143)

In this sense, it seems as if our online bodies in SL were *prima facie* subject to flexibility and fluidity. Also, in Second Life one can switch between the available genders and modify the appearance of one's avatar repeatedly during the avatar's virtual life. The name of the avatar, once chosen, cannot be altered, so in order to disguise oneself efficaciously, it is advisable to pick a neutral name.

The fact that the appearance of one's avatar in SL may be altered at any time implies the possibility to create one's identity beyond the constraints of corporeality. It is, however, the virtual community that imposes the restrictive rules on its users. Since the avatar's name cannot be altered, every possible permutation of its body is still assigned to a particular virtual persona, entangled in fixed social relations. Since frequent appearance modifications are not highly approved by the SL community, most of the avatars keep their visual representations stable throughout their SL lives.

Entropia Universe is even more restrictive. Not only can the user choose between two genders only (either female or male), but once created, the appearance of the avatar cannot be

changed. The announcement on the welcome screen states the following: “You will not be able to make changes once you ‘accept’ your appearance.” As declared by the EU’s developer, enhancing the avatar’s appearance may be performed only by a hair dresser or by a face or body sculptor. When it comes to “sculpting” the avatar’s body, both in SL and EU, it is possible to adjust particular body parts, and so our female avatar may exhibit masculine body features (and vice versa). It is worth noticing, though, that the very framework is still very limited; our avatar will not be extremely fat (a certain degree of obesity is possible), bony or wrinkled. The “Randomize” option in SL, on the other hand, allows us to follow a standardized masculine or feminine embodiment, which succumbs to the stereotypical representation of females and males – slim waist and wide hips versus muscular shoulders in the latter case.

The representations of femininity and masculinity in the above virtual worlds seem to comply strongly with socially acceptable norms and further reinforce gender classifications. This stereotyped visual bipolarity, as Schmieder (2009: 8-9)¹⁶ rightly notices, depends on the decisions made by the designers and/or programmers of a particular platform. Gamers/users, however, do play a crucial role in the process of creation. It is their attitude that is taken into consideration by the producers during ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ tests.

Having briefly looked at the process of avatar creation in Second Life and Entropia Universe, we will now move on to some theoretical reflections questioning the supposedly flexible nature of virtual worlds and cyberspace. In the light of some postmodern as well as post-postmodern theories we will refer to in this section, new technologies seemingly empower us to create our identities (and cyberbodies) from scratch. Our enacted bodies (real life bodies

placed in front of the computer screen, cf. Hayles 1999) impose a certain social identity on us. We are recognized and judged by others on the basis of our sex, race, ethnicity, social status, amongst many others, regardless of whether these categories comply with our own perception of ourselves.

In cyberspace, on the other hand, it is us who decide what data (e.g. bodily categories) we want to disclose to others as our virtual bodies are fully formable or at least this is the way we would like it to be. We impose a particular image of ourselves (in case of SL or EU that image is reflected in our avatar) on the online society. It seems as if virtual worlds enabled us to be highly creative in constructing our identities. Since in cyberspace we are devoid of enacted bodies, we could re-embody and recreate ourselves blurring the boundaries at will. However, we do not seem to be making use of this opportunity and instead we create a mere virtual equivalent of the well known reality. Even though the Internet allows us to impersonate different identities and genders, most of the time we do not dispute the well established identity based on binary oppositions – feminine vs. masculine, hetero- vs. homosexual etc. The Internet, the virtual, although being a technology of great potentiality, is still based on the heteronormative cultural, social and political order. The tool that could be well used to implement revolutionary ideas existing in theory becomes the tool promoting the essentialist point of view. So, how may the process of avatar creation in SL or Entropia Universe be analyzed in the context of fluidity or a utopian post-human and post-gender cyberspace?

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, graphical virtual worlds have shifted our attention to the corporeal dimension of virtual existence (however contradictory the juxtaposition may

seem). In the light of the Cartesian body-mind split prevalent in e.g. cyberpunk fiction (cf. *Neuromancer* by William Gibson 1984), disembodiment is considered to be the ideal form of virtual existence. The so called 'jacking in' (leaving the 'meat' behind) presupposes abandoning the body and uploading the consciousness into the virtual, *ipso facto* enabling a pure connection with the technological medium.

A similar attitude towards the body as a limitation was also present in the academic discourse revolving around the post-human view, in which a human being was perceived "... as a set of informational processes" (Hayles 1999: 4). As Katherine Hayles further explains, "Embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the post-human ..." (Hayles 1999: 4). The information pattern, the code, the mind were regarded as the superior components of post-human existence. Evoking Gibson's metaphor again, the post-human body may be described as 'data made flesh'. The body, if considered at all, acts as a prosthesis controlled by our consciousness. Yet again, in the dialogue between nature and culture, the latter one turns out to be taking the helm. In "A Cyborg Manifesto" Haraway refers to "... the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender; ... the cyborg [being] a creature in a post-gender world ..." (Haraway 1991: 154). And although the body is present in her dream, it is not constrained by the organic wholeness and has no origins in Western thought. It is a merger between humans and machines, which questions the binary oppositionist nature of our existence. "The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically" (Haraway 1991: 151). The concept of a cyborg is supposed to liberate women from the patriarchal order, which is responsible

for the present gender, race or class consciousness. Haraway notices that communication technologies give women the possibility to re-craft their bodies and create new social relations, new meanings, not necessarily encapsulating female embodiment within the role of the mother. In the case of women, therefore, the notions of becoming disembodied or cyborg-like signify freedom from the constraints of the patriarchal social system.

Eventually, all those abstract theories and literary dreams had the chance to realize themselves online (in text-based MUDs), where the textual body could have been re-crafted, redefined or abandoned altogether. A similar situation took place in the late 1970s and prevailed in 1980s (with the outburst of MUDs), when, as Sherry Turkle observes, the abstract philosophical ideas of the decentered and multiple self were concretized by experiencing online communities. “The disjuncture between theory (the unitary self is an illusion) and live experience (the unitary self is the most basic reality)” was brought down to earth (Turkle 1999: 646). There is, however, one crucial difference between the two scenarios - while in the latter case purely theoretical assumptions found their practical counterpart online, the dream of a disembodied cyborg devoid of gender never came true.

As it turned out, the physical body situated in front of the screen cannot be disregarded and ignoring its importance will not help women in building a more independent social image. It seems as if the reflection on the body in cyberspace has proceeded from leaving the ‘meat’ behind to its rehabilitation and reformulation of its importance. The body has been moved from the periphery to the center of analysis (especially in corporeal feminism, cf. Grosz 1994). After all, the body made of flesh and bones sits in front of the screen and interacts physically with the computer in order to launch the mind into the virtual and re-embodiment itself.

This phenomenon may be referred to as the double-situatedness of the body, which “implies, on the one hand, that user-readers are ‘embodied’ as direct receivers, whose bodies interact with the hardware and software of a computer. On the other, user-readers are considered to be ‘re-embodied’ through feedback that they experience in represented form, e.g., through visible or invisible avatars...” (Ensslin 2009: 158). The concept of the human-machine cybernetic feedback loop has become settled in the academic discourse in recent years and seems to be giving justice to both, mind and body. Not only has the Cartesian dualism long gone, but the importance of the body itself has been revived. Human-machine interaction is as dependent on the cognitive processes as it is on physical reciprocity.

The above theories constitute just a fraction of various attitudes that have sprung up in recent years. For the purpose of this paper we decided to focus on a few, which seem to track the changes cybernetics and body studies have undergone. Some of the ideas presented in this paragraph had the chance to move from theory into practice and be concretized in cyberspace (e.g. the fractured and multiple self), and some remained in the sphere of pure theory. As said previously, although new communication technologies give us the possibility to become even more flexible and escape binary oppositions, we use them to reinforce the already existing ones. We re-embodiment female or male avatars, we create gender restricted regions (in SL), we form societies and rules corresponding to the ones valid in real life. And even though our SL avatar may become a ball of light or an androgynous figure, from the level of the interface we are still either male or female. Our eccentric outfit (texture) becomes one of the clothing items we may put on. In MUDs (as mentioned in the previous paragraphs) some attempts were made to give more gender freedom to its users. However, since we have moved from

text-based virtual platforms to graphical worlds, such as SL or EU, gender arbitrariness seems to have become restricted. It may be due to the fact that these platforms are no longer created by online communities, but by commercial companies, which are not focused on fulfilling the needs of niche users.

Experiencing the Virtual Body

We will now move on to the second thematic area revolving around the subject of experiencing the virtual body, and focus briefly on the interface elements in SL, discussing their significance in creating the stereotypical heteronormative model of avatar behavior. Since experiencing the real body by going beyond its rigid and stable boundaries (various body fluids, which cross the body's surface, i.e. skin) constitutes an extremely important dimension of our corporeal existence, we will draw on Kristeva's notion of the abject with reference to avatars' bodies as well.

Stereotyped heteronormative bipolarity in SL is not only reinforced by means of graphical representation, but is also reflected in our avatar's motor skills, such as walking, sitting, dancing or making gestures. As it turns out, experiencing the virtual world and interacting with its objects and other avatars by means of SL interface, is to a large extent determined by our avatar's sex. As part of our methodology of research involved spending several hours in SL and interacting with its content, we encountered numerous instances supporting the above point.

The most discernible manifestation of heteronormativity refers to our avatar's walking style. In SL, those motor skills are clearly dependant on the avatar's sex. Our female avatar swayed

her hips gently, while its male counterpart plodded along in a stereotypically masculine manner, invading the cyberspace self-confidently with his straight-up chest and wide arms. Interestingly, the way avatars sit also exhibits their physicality dependent on sex. It is not possible for a female avatar to walk or sit like a man. To communicate with one another, avatars may also use a plethora of gesture patterns. Apart from the standardized gestures, we have a number of female or male shrugs, cries or chuckles to choose from. Some gestures are also accompanied by auditory effects accordingly. ‘Dance Balls’ constitute one of the most entertaining phenomena relating to gender and sex movement manifestations. The two round objects placed above the dance floor may be activated by clicking. Pink dance ball is meant for female avatars and blue for males. We made our avatar dance in the Fabglitter Woman's Club (a place for women only) by clicking on the ‘Intan Feminine Dance Ball’ and browsing through many different dance styles for female avatars, e.g. easy kneesy, boogie or lime jelly. There are also dance balls intended for couples (abiding by heterosexual norms only). Even in SL gay clubs, the couple dance balls are divided corresponding either to male or female dance styles. One can, however, activate a male dance ball for a female avatar, which may be perceived as the manifestation of fluidity, at least to a certain extent.

Having browsed through various gesture patterns, we came across ‘female cry’. We double-clicked the gesture to play animation and sound. To our astonishment, the avatar, although crying out loud in a very realistic manner, did not shed literal tears (the same applies to avatars in EU). This experience pointed us in the direction of examining the avatar's body, taking into consideration its fluids and what follows, Kristeva’s notion of the abject. As Grosz notices “the abject is what of the body falls away from it while remaining irreducible to the

subject/object and inside/outside oppositions” (Grosz 1994: 192). The idea of the abject is closely related to body fluids (i.e. tears, sweat, menstrual blood, saliva, vomit etc.), which “attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside ... to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside”(Grosz 1994: 193). The avatars’ virtual bodies in SL and EU are empty and therefore stable and fixed in that they do not secrete bodily fluids. Since they are deprived of their fluid and unstable dimension, they may be defined by and reduced to binary oppositions, such as inside/outside or subject/object. Lack of bodily fluids with reference to avatars may be also an interesting point, when it comes to the way body is (or bodies are) idealized in our culture – body as a stable object regulating the influence of fluids (in our case completely withstanding their influence) is perceived as pure and clean. Therefore, the virtual bodies in SL or EU may be regarded as superior to their real counterparts. The concept of the pure and idealized body links to the remark on the avatars’ bodies made in the previous paragraphs – SL and EU avatars cannot be obese, bony and they never get old. In case of virtual bodies in the above platforms, certain parts and functions have been privileged, while others minimized or left underrepresented (Grosz 1994: 192). As Grosz explains, “it is the ... culture [that effectively intervenes] into the constitution of the value of the body” (192). In other words, the avatar’s body may be referred to as the proper social body; the reflection of the process of cultural codification and construction.

Sexual relations between the avatars of both sexes, analyzed with reference to the abject theory, constitute another interesting point. As Grosz notices, “in certain cultures each of the sexes can pose a threat to the other, a threat that is located in the polluting powers of the

other's body fluids" (Grosz 1994: 193). In *Second Life* the avatars may have sexual intercoursés and the genitals are easily visible, however, no transfer of sex fluids occurs. In the light of Grosz's remark, we may assume that the role of the female body and the notion of sexual difference in virtual worlds has been shifted. Since the avatars do not secrete any fluids (and may be thus perceived as empty or two-dimensional only), the uncontrollable element of the female body - connected with leaking and lack of self-containment (Grosz 1994: 203) - is no longer in force. Female avatars' bodies may no longer be treated as containers or vessels. The distinction between women as corresponding to nature and men to culture has been also undermined with reference to virtual worlds. Pushing these conclusions even further, we may say that the female body has been thus reconstructed and re-embodied in the virtual, thus regaining control and an equal cultural status with the male body.

However, since there is no exchange between the inside and the outside, and the avatars' bodies are two-dimensional only, a crucial question arises - can they be treated and interpreted as legitimate bodies at all? Maybe it is more reasonable to refer to the avatars' skins, which points to the surface and thus the outer (and only) layer of these virtual bodies.

Moving from virtual worlds to the realm of video games, it is worth noticing that in some of them the superficiality of the virtual bodies is transgressed to a certain degree and graphical representations of selected bodily fluids do occur. As Ensslin accurately points out, "food and energy provision, intake and expenditure have a crucial function in the macrostructure of a large number of videogames" (Ensslin 2011a: n.p.). This does not mean, however, that the avatar's body in every game is subject to physiological processes. One of the most interesting examples, from the point of view of the abject theory, is *The Sims 2* (Electronic

Arts, 2006), where Sims succumb to the following needs: hunger and bladder. The latter case is particularly interesting as "... visits to the toilet are not tabooed or semiotically erased" (Ensslin 2011a: n.p.). This adds a highly realistic dimension to the life of the Sims and metaphorically fills their bodies and enables the interaction between the inside of their bodies and the outside world. Apparently, Sims can also get sick, in which case vomiting takes place. The instances of abject, however, are very rarely depicted in video games. Food consumption - be it organic, synthetic or abstract - is a very popular interface element in many games, but hardly ever is it interlinked with the processes of excretion.

Gender-restricted SL Regions

As we have presented in the above paragraphs, gender fluidity in SL or EU may be and is restricted by means of the very interface. In such case, the users do not have a direct influence on that process and in order to interact within the virtual world, they have to follow the rules established by the producers. On the other hand, SL allows its users to create their own land, clubs, shops and other venues, for which the guidelines or terms of use are established by the users themselves. Theoretically, with the help of given interface elements, one might create an unconventional region devoid of traditional social constraints or gender restrictions. Yet again, users do not eradicate identity based on binary oppositions. The model of Internet identities merely mirrors the model of the ones present in the real world. Hence, SL is filled with gender restricted regions, which further contributes to the limitation of flexibility. The phenomenon related to generating such places, reflects very accurately one of the viewpoints presented by cyber feminists. As the cyberspace seems to be a zone predominantly governed by male users, it is understandable that women demand a fair share in its creation. Women

try to conquer and seize this new space, stereotypically being in the possession of men. In the light of such arguments, the creation of gender restricted regions in SL seems justified to a certain degree. To examine how this phenomenon is realized in virtual worlds, we have explored a few SL regions for women only. Having visited the Isle of Lesbos, for instance, we found out that land rental in the district of “Whispering Big Pines” is intended exclusively for women. One of the points in the agreement states the following: “In order to rent on the Whispering Big Pines region you must be female” (Second Life). Clearly, this regulation is in force with reference to the avatar’s appearance. It operates, thus, on the virtual level only and one should not confuse it with the actual person sitting in front of the computer screen.

FabGlitter Women’s Club operates in accordance with even more limiting and restrictive rules. Again, FabGlitter is a male free zone. There are certain exceptions to the rule, but in such a case male avatars need to wear special tags not to be banned from the region. It is surprising how exclusive such places may be when it comes to the avatar's appearance. Avatars are most welcome to FabGlitter “as long as they are in a female shape (butch or androgenous is welcome just not male specific shapes)” (Second Life). After hours of research, we have stumbled upon Venus Beach, whose rules have struck us yet again as being extremely gender restrictive. The beach allows heterosexual, bi-sexual, lesbian as well as transsexual/transgender women. Also, its owners do specify what exactly they mean by a male avatar – “Our basic definition of a man is an AV with a penis, and/or having an obvious masculine physical form” (Second Life). Male avatars, once entering the beach, are ejected and/or banned. The virtual body as the indicator of one’s sex and presumably gender turns out to be a determinant factor in restricting one’s access to certain regions or sites.

CONCLUSIONS

The question of embodiment, gender and fluid identity may be scrutinized from numerous perspectives. Taking into account the size constraints of this chapter, we have focused on gender and body with relation to virtual worlds. Having examined the above notions, concentrating on a purely visual channel of virtual worlds (as opposed to the textual and the auditory ones further elaborated on by Schmieder 2009), we have touched upon the following thematic scopes: the avatar's body, experiencing it through the interface, and finally its placement in SL gender restricted regions. Extrapolating from various theories relating to identity (Dybel 2006; Merleau-Ponty 2002; Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991), gender (Hyży 2003; Butler 1999; Hayles 1999; Haraway 1991) or net utopianism (Wilding 2001), among many others, we conclude that cyberspace is not liberating users from heteronormative and phallogocentric constraints. However, this current situation is not rooted in the nature of the medium, which does allow for flexibility, but in the users themselves who recreate their social, cultural and political experiences of the real world in their cybernetic communities. Theoretically, we have the facilities to enter an age of gender-free cyborgs liberated from bodily constraints, but the question is whether the post-human reality is a dream projected by a handful of researchers that does not seem to reflect general tendencies present in the postmodern society.

The topic we have examined from one of many possible perspectives has a lot of potential and constitutes rich material for future research. Possible thematic ramifications may concentrate on various other online phenomena. Body rehabilitation and its reconstruction as understood by corporeal and cyberfeminism can be linked with the fact that women are taking

the helm of originally masculinist cyberspace. Regaining cyberspace by women takes place on many different levels. They establish varied support groups or cultural projects, such as Old Boys Network, Wise-Women, the Bitch magazine or ArtWomen.¹⁷ Excluding virtual worlds, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) and video games in general also constitute fertile ground for gender analysis. As far as gaming and women support groups are concerned, Grrl Gamer comprises one of the most interesting cases relating to the fact that women begin to find their legitimate place in the gaming field, originally a male dominated zone.¹⁸

There are many more examples of the above kind, which only adds strength to the fact that gender related issues do make up an extremely broad field. We hope our perspective on the role of gender and body in virtual worlds contributed to a greater understanding of the above phenomena and the way they function online. Although we have discredited the fluid nature of cyberspace, we do hope that one day it will turn into a zone unrestricted by essentialist social order and its undisclosed potential will come into force. As for now, however, the virtual worlds remain mere reflections of the already familiar reality and cyberspace cannot be “regarded as an arena inherently free of the same old gender relations and struggles” (Wilding 2001: n.p.).

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¹ After Grosz (1994)

² Second Life is a virtual world developed by an American company Linden Lab and launched in June 2003.
Entropia Universe is a virtual world created by a Swedish software company MindArk and released in
January 2003.

³ Paweł Dybel is a Polish philosopher and a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

⁴ That terminological issue has been emphasized by Robyn Warhol and Diane Prince Herndl (the editors of
Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism), who stated the following: "...we've used the
plural form 'feminisms', rather than 'feminism', to acknowledge the diversity of motivations, methods, and
experience among feminist academics" (Warhol, Herndl 1997, X). Plural form is also used in a volume ed.
Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (see Kemp, Squires 1998).

⁵ Referring to essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynous thought confines women's role to
biological needs connected with reproduction; assuming that women are somehow more biological, corporeal
and natural than men (Grosz 1994).

⁶For the purpose of this chapter we have simplified the distinction, disregarding various fluctuations present within those movements. We also refer to subject in a general way, excluding the variation of contexts, in which this term may be analyzed in contemporary philosophy.

⁷ It is impossible to discuss the problem of transgenderism and its various subcategories within the confines of this single concept. Academic definitions may be found, for instance in the writings of Stryker (e.g. 1994). However, since arbitrariness forms the basis for this phenomenon, the terminology is also diverse and unstable. Usually, the differentiations between certain concepts are based on subjective and fluid criteria. Establishing one's gender irrespective of sex is the linking point.

⁸ No unified definition of cyberfemism exists; even its founders describe it through negation. The manifesto of the movement is included in "100 anti-theses" formulated at the First Cyberfeminism International in Kassel in 1997 (<http://www.obn.org/cfundef/100antitheses.html> [accessed July 15, 2009]).

⁹ Or 'actual' after Deleuze. We will explain the distinction between reality and actuality in a later section of this paper.

¹⁰ Net utopianism is characterized by anti-corporeal discourse, which "... declares cyberspace to be a free space where gender does not matter--you can be anything you want to be regardless of your 'real' age, sex, race, or economic position--and refuses a fixed subject position. In other words, cyberspace is regarded as an arena inherently free of the same old gender relations and struggles" (Wilding).

¹¹ actual. (n.d.). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved May 17, 2009, from Dictionary.com website <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/actual>.

¹² corpus. (n.d.). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved May 17, 2009, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary1.classic.reference.com/browse/corpus>.

reality. (n.d.). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved May 17, 2009, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary1.classic.reference.com/browse/reality>.

¹³ Cf. Ensslin, Astrid. "Do avatars dream of electric steak?" – Games, energy supplies and the cybernetic body'.

¹⁴ For the analysis of the three channels (visual, textual, auditory), see Schmieder (2009).

¹⁵ Spivak pronouns are gender-neutral pronouns in English, which were introduced by Michael Spivak and became popular as one of the numerous genders available in MUDs and MOOs.

Splat pronouns are formed by using an asterisk to replace the letters used in standard English pronouns, for instance instead of him or her, we may type in h*.

¹⁶ In his article Schmieder (2009) focuses on *World of Warcraft* (a MMORPG – Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game). However, the process of decision making and designing may be applied to other platforms of similar kind as well; SL and EU in our case.

¹⁷ “OBN is regarded as the first international Cyberfeminist alliance and was founded in 1997 in Berlin. OBN is a real and a virtual coalition of Cyberfeminists. Under the umbrella of the term 'Cyberfeminism', OBN contributes to the critical discourse on new media, especially focussing on its gender-specific aspects” [accessed April 10, 2009] <http://www.obn.org>.

“Wise-Women is a world-wide, online community of web designers, developers and programmers” [accessed April 10, 2009] (<http://www.wise-women.org>).

“*Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, a print magazine devoted to feminist analysis and media criticism. *Bitch* features critiques of TV, movies, magazines, advertising, and other elements of pop culture. We also interview feminist pop culture makers, review new books and music, and lots more” [accessed April 5, 2009] <http://bitchmagazine.org>.

A website cumulating “visual art and feminist cultural production across and between disciplines and geographical boundaries” [accessed April 10, 2009] (<http://www.artwomen.org>).

¹⁸ Retrieved March 25, 2009, from <http://www.grrlgamer.com>.