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A Second, Second Life

A Virtual World Where Transgender People Can Experiment

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Article appeared in Polare magazine: April 2012 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Friends chat at the BAB North Sim

Undergoing gender transition can be described as "creating a second life" for oneself. There is no standard way of doing it, and there are always problems, surprises and delights along the way. But what if you could practise or rehearse some of your transition, in an environment where your real life identity is anonymous, where you could have almost any shape or set of clothes, and where you could meet others with similar problems or experiences? Well there is such an environment, and it's called *Second Life*.

Can't 'dress' in real life? You can in Second Life and changing gender in Second Life is one option of many possible changes you can make to your avatar's appearance.

This is one of numerous virtual worlds available at the moment, with thousands (if not millions) of participants accessing them via the Internet. But just what is a virtual world, and how can a virtual world help one in the *actual (real?)* world?

Virtual worlds have been around in one form or another since the middle of the 1980s. The earliest virtual worlds were 'massively multi-player online games (M.M.O.G.s)' (if you watch the television show *Good Game* you'll have seen reviews of some of these), where large number of players accessed the same networked environment and could interact with each other and that environment to play the game.

This is different from a simple chat room in that (on the whole) the environment is graphical in nature, is a representation of a world of some kind (not always 3-D), and exists whether you're logged in or not. The last is really important because, like the actual world, it gives a sense of continuity and narrative.

Virtual worlds are, however, not all games (like *World of Warcraft* and *Onverse*). Some (like *I.M.V.U.* and *vSide*, and *Kaneva*) are sophisticated 3-D chat rooms, where you can customise your avatar (a representation of yourself) and your own spaces, participate in chat rooms that are actual rooms, dance and do other things like buy, make and sell clothes, furniture and rooms. The noticeable thing about these virtual worlds is that they are often a series of connected 'rooms' - 3-D spaces in which your avatar can move about and interact with both the environment and the other users. But ultimately while these spaces can sometimes be quite large - *Twinity* has recreated the streets of the C.B.D. of places like Berlin and Singapore - the overall shape and content of those spaces is mostly set by the organisation that runs the virtual world.

And then there are environments like *Second Life* or *Active Worlds*. While the group that runs the world will create a certain amount of content, on the whole the majority of that (including the land) is created by the users themselves. Such worlds tend to be contiguous - instead of swapping from one room to another by selecting a link, you can walk (or fly) there! Such worlds might still have disconnected areas (in *Second Life* they're called *sims*, and a *sim* not adjacent to another *sim* is an 'island') but often your avatar can 'teleport' to these places. The reason I mention this is that the range of movement available within a 3-D environment affects just how immersive that environment feels. The more immersive an environment is, the more a user or player will come to identify with their avatar, and the more 'real' it will seem.

And there lies the difference between the M.M.O.G.s, 3-D Chat rooms, and Open Worlds. Each can be immersive in its own way, but the options, customisation and possibilities vary enormously. An M.M.O.G. may be extremely immersive, with many ways to upgrade or customise your character, but the vast bulk of those options and customisations are likely to be supplied by the commercial venture that runs the game.

With 3-D Chat Rooms there is likely to be much more user-created content and customisation, and with Open Worlds it'll be the vast majority of stuff found.

There are different commercial models for virtual worlds as well. A game might have a free option but on the whole it will limit what your character can do, or only last for a certain period. 3-D Chat Rooms and Open Worlds often have free and paid options for users.

While you can enter these worlds on a free account, a paid one will open up opportunities like access to restricted content, the ability to own (and maybe rent out) land, and extended support.

In worlds where users can create their own content there is also a virtual economy where users via their avatars can buy and sell items for in-world currency. That currency is usually bought using real money, and in some worlds that can go both ways, so that in-world currency can be traded back out for real money. Some people actually make a living in *Second Life* by creating and selling content!

The only real hitch is technical. With *Second Life* (and other virtual worlds) you have to have the hardware capable of running the viewers reasonably well using a broadband connection (anything slower and animations look more like a slideshow). There are viewers for P.C., Mac and Linux. There are also text-based viewers that can be used to communicate in-world without the need for 3-D rendering.

All of which is nice, but what has this to do with gender transition or being trans? Well like the internet as a whole, a virtual world like *Second Life* provides a play area where one can play, where risks can be taken with minimal consequences, and social connections can be made and maintained. *Second Life* in particular is noted for its large user base, customisation and content. It isn't the largest virtual world around, but it has a large number of groups and organisations in it that focus on a huge variety of interests and issues. Businesses and support groups have branches there! One such focus is L.G.B.T. issues in general and a variety of transgender issues in particular.

There are a number of transgender groups in *Second Life*. You can search for them online via [Second Life Search](#)  or in-world. There are groups for she-males, transgender women and men, a group that maintains an in-world Day of Remembrance Memorial, trans social groups and clubs, trans fanciers (an awful lot of cybersex is alleged to happen in-world) and much more. There is even an L.G.B.T. group with its own Pride Parade! Like real life equivalents, such groups are only as good as those that run and participate in them.

Now of course it's possible to use chat rooms anywhere on the net, you don't have to go into a virtual world just to do that. However, having a very customisable avatar to represent yourself does make a difference, because it also give an opportunity to play around with body image. The more immersive the environment, the more likely you are to identify with your avatar.

Can't 'dress' in real life? You can in *Second Life* and changing gender in *Second Life* is one option of many possible changes you can make to your avatar's appearance. You can make your avatar look the way you do now, or how you'd like to be. And that doesn't stop at only what's possible in real life - avatars can be robots, aliens, demons or vampires, furrries (humanoid furry animals), or almost anything else. That means you can 'try on' looks in clothes and bodies easily and quickly - something unlikely in real life.

There's also plenty of role playing if you want it. As each user is anonymous who's to say what and who you are in real life? Most folk in-world don't care and there are plenty of themed locations in which you can play out fantasies and ideas.

A good percentage of these are sexual (heaps of B & D and 'Gorean' sims.) but by definition it's all consensual. But sex play is just a portion of what can be done. There are therapists and counsellors that work through *Second Life* for clients who can't easily access them in real life. The legitimate ones will refer you to their websites where you can check out their credentials.

Second Life also hooks into real world events. Every 20th November there is a commemorative event at the International Transgender Hate Crimes and Suicide Memorial, and once again if you can't get to a local event, at least get to one in *Second Life*. Lectures, forums and support meetings also happen in *Second Life* (as do concerts, dances and other social events). In other words it's another net-based resource that you can plug into and use, one to which you can contribute and from which you can benefit.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc. which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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