The Lost Gardens of Apollo:
Intersections in Space, Mythology and Masculinity

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Abstract

The three dimensional virtual environment of *Second Life* is a platform that contains various spaces that are devoted to escapism through the screen. The *Lost Gardens of Apollo* is one such region that conjures traditional Western notions of paradise, readily evoking the Mediterranean and its associated mythologies, particularly that of Ancient Greece. Paradoxical to the ideas of corporeal escapism however, there is a reaffirmation of the lived conditions of Western culture, particularly that which positions identity within late-capitalism, hyper-consumerism and a body-centric individualism. The overt mythological representation of *Apollo* is grounded in the Ancient Grecian ideal of masculinity, male beauty and privilege, and the potential for subversive male-centred sexuality. This potential for subversion however, supports a tension on *Apollo* that negotiates between an open and proud homosexual identification and one that is hidden, codified in the consumerist practices of the late capitalist Western world.

Key words:

Virtual environment, masculinity, mythology homosexuality, Second Life.

Title Image: Image taken by author, within Lost Gardens of Apollo

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Whilst cyberspace and virtual worlds may seem initially as very different forms of space from those experienced offline, they operate in much the same way, using the same foundational codes and conventions of our off-screen lives. Even in the search for utopian space, or escapism from the everyday, there is a reaffirmation of ideological fabulations that exist in the spatial and representational features of these worlds. The Lost Gardens of Apollo (Apollo) is an island region within the three dimensional virtual environment of Second Life (SL). It is a space that suggests traditional Western notions of paradise, readily evoking the Mediterranean and its associated mythologies. Through this encapsulation of visual splendour and fantasy there is a re-inscription of power and discourse predicated on the Western corporeal tradition; space and experience are framed in the historical and cultural conceptions of masculinity that reassert patriarchal assumptions of history and culture, and these spatial practices reveal a similarity to the corporeal, even in the knowledge and practice of different forms of embodiment and movement. Similarly, space within virtual environments is an obviously produced phenomenon by those who create the space. This means that power structures are more visible, and more transparent, within the virtual environment – there is little scope for falling back on natural and essentialist assumptions of the world in a space that has been entirely created. Yet, even in the acknowledgement of an entirely fabricated space, the distinctions of gender and its assumptions remain. Principally on Apollo, there is a reaffirmation of the lived conditions of Western culture, particularly that which positions identity within late-capitalism, hyper-consumerism and a body-centric individualism. The interpretation of mythology within the space modifies history and myth within malleable narratives that ultimately reflect the prevailing discourses of contemporary Western culture. The overt mythological representation of Apollo is grounded in the Ancient Grecian ideal of masculinity, male beauty and privilege, and the potential for subversive male-centred sexuality. This potential for subversion however, supports a tension on Apollo that negotiates between an open and proud homosexual identity and one that is hidden, codified in the consumerist practices of the late capitalist Western world. Arguably, it is the latter condition (of an unspoken and unacknowledged sexuality) that remains the more powerful and ultimately more visible in its invisibility, able to subsume a homosocial and homoerotic otherness within a hyper-masculinised and heterosexually assumed identity.

The Space of Apollo

Three-dimensional virtual environments have become a feature of the internet in the last decade. Participation within these environments has increased "due to improvements in virtual-reality technology (adapted from electronic gaming), continued drops in personal computer prices, increases in computing capacity, and greater broadband network access"(Messinger et al., 2009, p. 3). This upsurge in many ways has followed on from the text-based MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) culture of the 1990s where users created the world, and often rules, around themselves (Boellstorff, 2008, pp. 50-51). Contemporary 3DVEs are in many ways graphical equivalents of these earlier platforms, with the socially based environments such as Second Life (SL) having the purpose of using the platform as primarily for human interaction rather than gaming. It is this social impetus of the environment that lends itself to more direct comparisons with corporeal life, where "we observe the symbiotic emergence of culture and content" (Messinger, et al., 2009, p. 1). The SL platform has various areas that are suitable for general content, such as those areas used for education, through to areas that have a mature rating, for those spaces with highly sexual content, and everything in between. Regions of SL are generally discrete, are usually owned by private landlords and creators, and usually have their own rules for conduct, which are generally policed by the owner of the space.

The Lost Gardens of Apollo is a visually rich island full of complexity and detail which was designed and created by Dane Zander. The region is featured in SL's destination guide, which in part explains its popularity - during the time spent researching Apollo, there were a number of instances where the sim was too busy to visit. Limitations on visitation numbers to the sim are due to the phenomenon of 'rezzing', whereby the screen lags, making real-time interaction difficult. The region is rated G, general classification, which means it is forbidden "to advertise or make available content or activity that is sexually explicit, violent, or depicts nudity" (Linden & Linden, 2012). The welcome note of the island (the pop-up that appears upon teleporting to a space) states "No nudity, No RP (role play)" (Zander, 2006) which reinforces the Linden classification and the non-sexual nature of the sim. Although the welcome note states that the island is for "all genders, shapes, creeds and colours" (Zander, 2006), the avatars present throughout the research were predominantly human in form, hyper-gendered and attractive in terms of Western norms.

There were many avatars in the appearance of fantasy or mythological characters which emphasises the other-worldly and ancient utopia feel of the region.

F1: Apollo Harbour   F2: Avatars performing Tai Chi, Hyacinth Valley

There are many places on the island that encourage seclusion and it is very common for avatars to be seen alone and not interacting with others in many of the places on Apollo. The exceptions are Hyacinth Valley where small groups of avatars can be witnessed practising Tai Chi, and at the Salsa y Boleros where avatars slow dance together on a suspended platform overlooking a coastal section of Apollo. Both the Tai Chi and slow dancing can be performed by any avatar that utilises the 'pose balls' situated at Hyacinth Valley and Salsa y Boleros respectively. There are other pose balls located around Apollo in secluded places, on chairs or rugs for example, that animate avatars into cuddling each other. These animations are consistent with the sensual, but not overtly sexual, theme of the island.

It is both the popularity of the space, as well as its rating as a space for all that prompted its selection for analysis, particularly in regards to gender. In the constructed space of Apollo, space, representation and interaction are all symbolic. Meaning on the island is produced through relational signifiers that draw upon the social practices of corporeal existence. Furthermore, these practices are specifically laden with power relations, so that power is constituted both through and within spatial practices that mirror the corporeal. It is these reflective spatial modes, ones it could be said that enact 'real' experiences, which reinforce the discursive power structures in-world. As a virtual space, Apollo is defined through the corporeal and is representative of the cultural paradigms from which it promises an escape. The rules of the 'real', of the everyday are inscribed upon the virtual, in a fantasy world that is as much anchored in discursive practice as the daily life of corporeal existence.

Virtual space and embodiment

Representation, rather than simulation, is used here as a tool for discussing SL because of the type of platform SL is: it is a space for real-time interactions on a social level that often features lag-time between direct interactions with others. Much work on simulation theory (Frasca, 2001, 2003) relates to video games, and whilst there are similarities there are also important distinctions, such as the format and depth of the first-person perspective. Given the time differential between actions in-world within SL, as well the time spent exploring the environment and many other, often static, features, SL here is read as a series of semiotic texts, rather than a ludic field that contains a strict adherence to formal rules. SL is arguably more of an arena for social performance and interactions, and so has more similarities with other forms of social networking than with video games.

Identity in the SL environment is expressed through the visual form of signification and representation, primarily in the form of avatar embodiment. It is impossible, however, to reconcile avatar representation on the screen with any truth of an individual's actual selfhood and/or experiences: an individual's geography, history, ethnicity, age, gender and other bodily markers are removed in-world. This is perhaps one of the greatest attractions of the environment, as with the internet generally - anonymity to present oneself and interact as one chooses. Similarly, SL spaces and regions have political and cultural relevance dependant on sign values as constructed in corporeal life. As recognised by Lefebvre (1991), space itself is a signifying practice that holds discursive value and can modulate the behaviour of individuals within a given environment. The configuration and conception of space holds within it the power, ideologies and subjective imaginings of those who create it and those who prescribe its use. Here, both identity (through representational embodiment) and space are utilised as signifying practices for the purpose of analysing power structures. Given that both are user-generated in the SL environment the analysis of signifying practices shows that there is a high reliance on replicating many of the discursive practices of corporeal life even in the face of endless possibilities of creation and appropriation.

Embodiment, in both virtual and corporeal spaces, is a cultural expression of societal norms placed on the body and regulated through accepted modes of interaction and display. This interaction in the virtual environment occurs through modes of representation, so

that identity is performed through the body, or in SL, the avatar. There is consistent interaction between the mind, body and space, being inseparable from social interaction and culture, so that "the full explanation of our knowledge of self arises from the participatory interaction with our embodied existence" (Gibbs, 2006, p. 17).We gain meaning, and a sense of self, not from looking inward, but in looking outward in projected reflection of others, what Sartre describes as "being-for-others" (1943, p. 305), suggesting that "I must apprehend the Other first as the one for whom I exist as object" (p. 339). If the idea of body and self are dependent on the reflection and interaction with others, then they are constructions of interaction and thus constructions of culture:

> Bodies are not culture-free objects, because all aspects of embodied experience are shaped by cultural processes. Theories of human conceptual systems should be inherently cultural in that the cognition that occurs when the body meets the world is inextricably culturally based. (Gibbs, 2006, p. 13)

Embodiment is therefore subject to cultural influence, categorisation and construction, as the body-in-world is shaped socially and ultimately politically. Vygotsky articulates this premise by contending that social processes "operate according to sociological and economic principles, particularly the principles of exchange value and commodification" (cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 60). These principles of exchange and commodification have a profound influence in consideration of body-as-object and the body as performative.

For screen embodiment, the process of cognition between the corporeal self and virtual self are altered to include a differential in online perception. There is an ownership of the screen-self, but one that is enacted with temporal and affective states that are separated from the immediacy of the corporeal body. Research into video game embodiment by James Paul Gee shows that there is a three-way relationship between the physical mind and body, the on-screen avatar, and the on-screen environment, which all interact to produce action of the virtual self, or avatar(2008, pp. 259-260). Although writing from a gaming perspective, Gee highlights the potential for experimentation in embodying a character, avatar or other self in reference to affective states onto the corporeal identity/self:

So in playing a game, we players are both imposed on by the character we play (i.e., we must take on the character's goals) and impose ourselves on that character (i.e., we make the character take on our goals). (2008, p. 260)

This conception is useful for conceptualising embodiment in SL as we may take on the idealised self of our selected avatar, effectively playing with affective states in view of alternate embodiment.

The freedom of choice associated with embodiment and space within SL is both a form of escapism as well as an active participation in a world that can be seen to exist on the boundary of corporeal and virtual lives. In addition to a possible desired self as signified by avatar selection and adornment, there is the promise of desired (often utopian) spaces which evoke an imagined or idealised realm. As described by Eben Muse, meaning is afforded to a space, whereby it becomes place, due to temporal and spatial experience that produces affective states. These states create a relationship with objects within the space that operate as place-markers, or unique identifiers of a particular place, and which hold meaning. Muse describes this as presence:

Presence is a process that creates a sense of place; place therefore is constantly being defined by experience. A particular place may share a common tonality or keynote with other places, making it part of a larger, identifiable landscape. Those other places may not be contingent within the space; they may be linked more tightly by keynote than geography. The place itself is distinguished from other places in the same landscape less by borders than by placemarkers holding both cognitive and emotive content. The placemarkers may be unique to a place, but they are more likely to be unique in their relationship to other elements of the place or to the observer. These relationships occur both spatially and temporally and are defined through experience of the process of that space. (2011, p. 206)

The markers in an environment such as the buildings, structures, gardens, beaches and other static features, in conjunction with the other bodies that occupy the space and the imposed rules of the space, all combine to produce a relationship between the self and the place. This relationship can be carried over to other places through the 'keynotes',

'placemarkers', and symbolism of spaces of similarity. The environment of Apollo contains keynotes in relation to sexuality, subversion and ancient history. The placemarkers that signify these elements arguably produce a consistency of meaning throughout the island, but also produce an individualised relationship to the specific place itself. In analysing the Ancient Greek symbolism of Apollo, it could be expected that the consistent imagery of the Classical Greek world (ancient monuments, sculptures, Mediterranean gardens, mountains and coast-lines) would produce consistent meanings attached to gender, sexuality, and the body. This happens in part, with connotations of sexual subversion and the importance of beauty. However, such placemakers also work to produce identifiers unique to place that can undermine some shared meanings attached to the keynotes. Meanings ascribed to sexuality and masculinity within Apollo can have multitudinous variations that are dependent on the number and type avatars that are using the space at any given time, as well as the cultural foundations of the individuals using, and viewing, the space.

The Ancient World and Mythologies: Affirming Masculinity

What is of importance, in the creation and appropriation of SL space, is the collective imagining of space, history and mythology. Parallels between conceptions of ancient culture within the virtual are represented strongly through the symbolism on Apollo, in the objects, buildings, structures and architecture of the island, which often evoke the masculine in form. An initial understanding of the relevance of the island's name is central to the discourse of the mythological, from which the other representations on the island signify. The Ancient Greek discursive practices of male dominance, hero-worship and homosexual infatuation and Eros are played out in the myth of Apollo and Hyacinth (Hyacinthus):

> In the god's most celebrated affair, an outstandingly handsome boy named Hyacinthus is the object of Apollo's desire... While throwing the discus together, a favourite pastime for Greek lovers, Hyacinthus, perhaps accidentally, steps in the way of Apollo's hurtling discus, which strikes him fatally in the head. (One version of the myth states that Zephyrus, the West Wind, also loved Hyacinthus and, when rejected in Apollo's favour, jealously diverts the discus's trajectory, causing it to strike the young man) (Harris & Platzner, 1998, p. 169).

In mourning of the death of Hyacinthus, Apollo is said to have named the Hyacinth flower after him. Although Apollo had a number of female lovers, it is the love of Hyacinth that is associated with the island, and is the most well-known in contemporary Western literature. The island of Apollo can be seen to honour the ideal of the beautiful young male as represented by Hyacinth. The valley that takes his name, Hyacinth Valley, is the entry point onto the island; avatars generally teleport to Apollo through the hubs located in the valley. That the island's name and its central region are named after the myth of two beautiful young male lovers leads to the appropriation of this central signifier to all other aspects of the island itself, signally participation into the narrative and its associated positioning of the male as beautiful.

The male body in ancient Greek is understood as an object of beauty; "the norm, against which those of boys, females, slaves, and barbarians were all seen as deviations to a greater or lesser degree" (Stewart, 1997, p. 11). The buildings and statues of Apollo epitomise the perfection of male beauty; they are muscular, controlled and dominant over the landscape.

F3: Male statues   F4: Apollo Harbour

Graceful in their suspension, the male statues of Apollo (shown above) represent the physical ability and strength of the male subject, youthful and virile: "the sculpted naked body was a harmonious design that illustrated divinity and strength" (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 23). Each sculpture faces the other in unison and they almost touch at the torso, which suggests a homoeroticism of the male form, one that is thought prolific in Ancient Greece. According to Whitley "Of all Greek art forms, sculpture was held in the highest regard" (Whitley, 2001, p. 270), and "were idealised representations of how gods or heroes ought to appear, using the language of realism without in any sense being realistic" (p. 278).

The Apollo statues evoke such idealism of the male form and reinforce the contemporary normalisation of the male body as commodity and as examples of an ultimate standard of aspiration. Moreover, the statues depict a contestation, a snub, to the principles of physics suggests a mastery over the constraints of science in the realm of fantasy. The masculine ego can become uninhibited in the virtual space that is not confined to the laws of physics or science as in RL. The ego can acutely display a mastery over the environment as it projects itself into the future where it can become even more masterful in its control. In contemplating art and science as they correlate to the male ego, Antony Easthope suggests psychoanalytically that artistic expression relates to sexual drive as "a form of sublimated desire". Moreover "scientific projects, the attempts to master nature through knowledge, are explained in terms of narcissism and the ego" (Easthope, 1992, p. 39). Thus, the Apollo statues evoke both "drives" of masculine ego; they are structures that exhibit the ideal of masculine perfection and masculine homoeroticism as well as being symbols of male control, mastery and power.

Masculinity in the Apollo region is chiefly inscribed through representations of Ancient Greece, including its associated mythology. The ideas of maleness and modern masculinity have historical roots in ancient cultures that privilege the male form as active, muscular and powerful as well as beautiful. To uphold such gender divisions, and therefore reinforce the position of man, it was necessary for Athenian male citizens to continuously perform masculinity which was bounded by the framing of the state and its prescribed norms. According to Matthew Fox, scholars of the Athenian male suggest that he was not a free subject but was constrained within the structures of society that necessitated masculine performance: "the citizen is bound by the conventions of his society both to exercise mastery over his social inferiors, and to devote the same effort to mastering himself" (p. 7). In drawing upon the work of Winkler, he explains:

> The citizen elite consists of individuals dedicated to maintaining their reputation; to penetrating others, retaining identification with an integrated and inviolable phallus, and warding off any suggestion of being like a receptacle for the sexual or social desires of others. (p. 7)

Fox maintains that these accounts of history have a tendency to critique ancient societies within the established framework of contemporary political discourses, especially in

reference to Foucault's conception of sex as a key indicator of identity. Whilst this critique is certainly supportable in reference to finding out the truths of ancient civilisations, this self-perpetuating understanding of the world through current perspectives is illustrative of the popular imagination: "The Real confirms the partial quality of all discourse" (p. 18). Our understanding of ancient cultures then is always, to varying degrees, mythological. That such myths are reproduced in the virtual environment is fitting in the de-elevation of the truth to imagination.

Broader contextualising of masculine fantasy and myth evokes ideas of the natural self, isolation and separateness where the stagnancy of civilisation and RL can be transcended. According to Gregory Woods, such exploration provides "fantasies of pre-industrial peacefulness and prelapsarian sexuality". Islands such as Apollo allow the body to "resume its 'natural' condition" (1995, p. 126). Woods identifies a key narrative of the island fantasy that closely aligns thematically with Apollo:

Isolated males form a relationship with the landscape and the elements, then relate homosocially and homoerotically to each other, in febrile renegotiations of their masculinity, before returning to white heterosexual civilisation. (1995, p. 126)

In light of the fact that Apollo is a PG rated island, it can be assumed that avatars do not visit it for overt sexual purposes, so given the homoerotic nature of the island, Woods' notion can be made applicable to a masculinised relationship with Apollo: users may log on to SL for escapism and during this time renegotiate their identities within the island narrative of a pre-industrialised, pre-civilised landscape. Such renegotiations may well be covertly sexual and may be projected onto the landscape (Woods, p. 129). On Apollo this projection takes form in the 'natural' landscapes that are occupied and the masculinised objects that are observed; the feminine is controlled and appropriated whilst the masculine is uninhibited and displayed.

Contemporary Masculinities: Contextualising the Male Subject

A tension exists between Western standards of normative conduct as ascribed to the masculine subject and the subversive signifying of the homoerotic, and potentially

homosexual. Apollo, despite appeals to the contrary, is much more a place of patriarchal fantasy than an environment of anything-goes gender and sexuality. This is due in part to its PG rating "where two or more of any orientation can non-sexually cuddle and enjoy the surroundings" (Zander in James Au, 2006), but is also due to the normalising power of the majority. Although there are many examples of homosexual signification throughout the island, much of it can be read through the lens of a contemporary masculinised sexuality of male beauty. It can be argued that the objectification and sexualisation of the male body on Apollo invites the female gaze and is thus empowering. However, due to the extent at which the masculine form is prized on Apollo, there is also a sense of a competition of beauty and of being noticed that crosses over gender displays. On Apollo, as reminiscent of Ancient Greece and gay male culture, it is not necessary for the female to display beauty, to be objectified, or even be present at all. The significance of beauty is of and through the representation of the masculinised ideal that moves between the homosexual and heterosexual.

Representations of the homoerotic on Apollo range between displays of art and architecture and through the representation of avatars and their symbolic depiction. Male avatars often appeal to the Westernised norm of attractiveness, often times conservatively dressed. Some male avatars however, exude more sexuality in their appearance, with exposed muscles and what could be considered as more fashionable, and perhaps flamboyant, attire.

F5: Avatar, Salsa y Boleros   F6: Avatar, near Apollo Harbour

In encouraging the gaze they epitomise the contradictory nature of homoeroticism: they convey the ideal of the masculine form but in doing so can feminise themselves as objects of desire. Although such desire may be grounded in heterosexuality, the display of overt masculinity is a performance of the self - inasmuch as it is comparable to the

performance of others and so correspondingly encourages the subject to gaze on others mutually as he is gazed upon. According to Rohlinger, male attractiveness has become commonplace in society due to cultural and economic trends shifting to a greater commercialisation of the body and its associated performance:

> In recent years, sexualized images of men, or the "erotic male," have proliferated in men's magazines. In these images, the erotic male represents a physical and sexual ideal, whereby an attractive, muscular man is placed on display. Such imagery is undoubtedly in part a response to the economic trends over the last 50 years, but it is also a product of cultural changes in American society. (2002, p. 62)

In her analysis of magazine images she notes that there has been a significant movement towards male representation of 'unknown sexuality'. This ambiguity points to the commercialisation and commodification of the masculine in Western society, and not only signifies a growing acceptance of the homoerotic form, but also the objectification of the male heterosexual body.

However, displays of 'unknown sexuality' as described by Rohlinger, illustrate the remaining unease of overt homosexuality within society, particularly that characterised by gender subversion. On Apollo, as in Rohlinger's case study on magazines, sexual and gender expression adheres to the cultural standard, so that the appeal to the homosexual gaze becomes codified, where the subtext lies in the tension of looking and being looked at. Sexual ambiguity evokes the unease that comes with the transgression of sexual boundaries; there is an unknown quality in the looking-ness, in both application and reception, as the gaze moves undeciphered through the spectrum of homosexual, homoerotic, homosocial and heterosexual connotations. The movement between heterosexual appreciation and homosexual desire of the male body not only evokes a tension of sexuality but also the anxiety about the masculine performance of the commodified body. As a reflection of corporeal society, Apollo highlights the interdependence of the homosexual/homosocial continuum, whereby the homosexual is an accepted facet of culture in its codified and covert representations. The hyper-masculine may also become commodified, like the female body, but not to the extent that it is feminised insofar as it does not take on the same level of objectification and subjugation, and therefore is able to maintain its status as an expression of power. Homosexuality then, is both present

and absent on Apollo, and often becomes more identifiable as homosocial masculine display. According to Sedgwick's understanding of the homosocial, "masculinity is seen quite literally to depend on both the permanent presence and indeed absence of homosexuality" (in Edwards, 2006, p. 95). Masculine expression can be seen to be defined through the tension between the ever-present possibility of homosexuality and its denial. This acknowledgement and dismissal of homosexuality positions gay males, and even males of atypical masculinity, in a tenuous position within society: "gay men are neither more or less 'masculine' or misogynist than straight men, but located in an awkward, and perhaps even dialectical, relation to gender both psychologically and socially" (Edwards, 2006, p. 96).

Femininity and the Patriarchal Assumption of Space

The gendered assumptions of space are replicated in the visual and functional characteristics of Apollo. Representing two distinct, but overlapping spheres of nature and technology, the island reinscribes notions of power within spatiality and representation. Firstly, there is the construction of nature, which replicates ideas of paradise through the screen: manicured gardens, lush greenery, and precocious animals. This is nature as female, as the binary opposition to masculinised culture.

F7: Apollo coastline   F8: Hummingbird, Hyacinth Valley

The ideal of nature being eternal, wholesome and beautiful is asserted through the various landscapes of Apollo. Even the sublime elements of nature, such as the central mountains, are seen as non-threatening, and ultimately consumable. This is nature's place in view of the masculine mastery of computer generation; nature has been tamed, domesticated. Furthermore, technology and digitisation are the vestiges of maleness, enacting the "male gaze of domination" (Nye, 1994, p. 283).

David Nye remarks on the ultimate feminisation of technology as it becomes part of the everyday, and as the sublime becomes commonplace, stating that "Each form of the technological sublime became a 'natural' part of the world and ceased to amaze, though the capacity and desire for amazement persisted" (p. 284). The sublime remains a privilege for the masculine gaze; the discoveries, the awe, the reverence, are reserved for those who dominate and master their environment in a continually evolving (arguably devolving) enterprise of progress. Consuming and producing space then, are irrevocably masculine notions. The feminine therefore, is the object of the gaze and of consumption.

Many of the female avatars observed take the form of traditional Westernised beauty and sexuality that is diametrically opposed and complementary to that of the masculine. Body shapes are typically slim and slender with some emphasis on female curvaceousness, particularly in the emphasis of hips and breasts. Hairstyles are often long and flowing, and the clothing adorned is commonly graceful and glamorous, although some avatars are more distinctly sexual in their attire. There is a noticeable display of female avatars in ball gowns and long flowing dresses which perhaps points to the notion of SL as a realm of fantasy play; it is possible that these avatars are reproducing virtually their 'owners' versions of a princess fairytale, searching for their Prince Charming in a mystical land. Other avatars symbolise more contemporary forms of female sexuality; short skirts and near-exposed breasts are very common. For all the possibilities of SL, and the stated inclusiveness of Apollo, there is an overwhelming representation of an ideal figure. As with the masculine, the feminine is generally bound by the norms and regulations of RL, but furthers it greater through representation, so that the gendered-ness produces an even stricter binary of difference between male and female.

Although the symbolism on Apollo is significantly masculine, there are some elements of feminised expression, albeit within the established confines of spatial regulation. The major locale for this expression is at the centre of island, within Hyacinth Valley, which is surrounded by mountains. Only a few passages lead out to the coastal regions of Apollo, dissecting the sheer cliffs that surround the valley. Much of the coastline is typified by cliffs and rock-faces, or 'man'-made structures such as the male statues or Apollo Harbour.

F9: Welcome Statue   F10: Avatar, Hyacinth Valley

These elements combine to present a mastery of nature, with the most masculine features at the island's edge, encapsulating a more feminised centre. It is if the feminised beauty of the island, including the allusions to the myth of Hyacinthus and the Eros shared between him and the god Apollo, necessitate protection and containment from the more masculine extremities of the island. The gardens within Hyacinth Valley and elsewhere are other examples this containment. Although they may typify femininity as representations of beauty, they are equally controlled and ordered through the spatial configuration of the island; they can be looked upon as elements of beauty without encroaching on the principles of orderly space or movement.

As part of the Ancient Greek symbolism there is a specific representation of a goddess in the centre of Hyacinth Valley, where stands a welcome statue of a white goddess rising, or perhaps escaping, from a figure of blackness. In Ancient Greece, the wings of a god or goddess have been ought to represent freedom and a magic or mastery over the mortal world - it is possible that the figure symbolises a freedom of spirit in the virtual world of SL, and in particular Apollo, where individuals can escape the darkness of the real world and transgress the boundaries of society. Alternatively, it can be argued that the goddess represents the tensions of gender and power through historical narrative.

In the mythology of Ancient Greece, the goddess represented the ideal female form, but was often idealised as very different from the standard woman:

> For the Greeks woman is a necessary evil... an evil because she is undisciplined and licentious, lacking the self-control of which women are capable, yet necessary to society as constructed by men, in order to reproduce it (King, 1993).

The goddess was a different type of woman, more aligned to the male/patriarchal binary than the inferior female domain. They were "immortal, ageless and powerful" (Lefkowitz, 2002, p. 325). The goddess depicted on Apollo could be Eos, rising out of a figure of darkness that could possibly be Nyx, the goddess of night who was thought to exist underground in a place devoid of light. Eos, according to the mythology, had a desire for beautiful male youths. Whilst the fascination with male beauty within contemporary society is generally accepted, as is an expressive female sexuality within accepted norms, in Ancient Greece an expressive and dominant female sexuality was seen as a real threat to the patriarchal society. Andrew Stewart explains that the story of the female goddess Eos and her desire for abducting youths could have been meant as a warning in Greek society: "not only do these pictures hint at the evils of female dominance (gynaikoarateia) and easy capitulation to desire, but nervously evoke their appalling consequences: female control of the phallus" (in Lefkowitz, 2002, p. 327).

Sexuality and Difference

Contrary to the perception of the space as an all-welcoming space of difference, Apollo is arguably a more comfortable space for heterosexual coupling than a space for the expression of divergent sexuality. Although many avatars visit Apollo as individuals, taking in its serenity and beauty, the island is well equipped for romantic liaisons between avatars. There are various spaces that feature chairs and rugs overlooking beautiful views where avatars are able to activate 'cuddle' pose balls that animate the avatars into non-sexual cuddling. Slow dancing can also be experienced at the Salsa y Boleros, which is a dance platform overlooking the Apollo coast.

F11: Salsa y Boleros   F12: Secluded avatars

Avatars are able to dance with each other by activating pose balls situated on the platform. The island even features a wedding chapel that can be hired out for weddings (which is the major source of funding for Apollo) and has ministers available for services (James Au, 2006). According to Ramus Overlord, of Second Life Traveller, "The Lost Gardens are arguably the most romantic sim in the metaverse, from waterfalls, to towers that reach the clouds, not many other places in Second Life have the views and beauty of Apollo". He also suggests visiting with a loved one: "being here by yourself can be a bit depressing. The sim is usually jam packed with lovers" (Overlord, 2007). Rather than inhibiting hetero-masculine expression, the existence of gay-male sexualities in codified forms do not threaten the masculine display of the heterosexual, and can instead reinforce it through the expression of patriarchal dominance.

Places such as Apollo are part of the wider matrix of homo-acceptable places that have permeated the globalised and capitalised landscape. Within this landscape the fluid and disjunctured are commonplace, allowing greater space for non-heteronormativity and non-cohesiveness of the typical. However, the same forces of globalisation and capitalism that allow for such fluidity paradoxically impart a homogenising effect onto difference, so that even difference is subjected to the commodification of form and expression. Within the subculture of homosexuality and sexual difference on Apollo there is a normative effect acting through commodification on physical perfection and masculinity. According to Warner, homosexual culture has been greatly influenced, and is still inseparable from, the creative forces of the capital economy:

> In the lesbian and gay movement, to a much greater degree than in any comparable movement, the institutions of culture-building have been market-mediated: bars, discos, special services, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, urban commercial districts... This structural environment has meant that the institutions of queer culture have been dominated by those with capital: typically, middle-class white men. (in Binnie, 1995, p. 185)

It is the domination of those with capital power that can be seen to shape the production and administration of space. Although its setting is of a place far removed from the urban city spaces of middle-class Western men, Apollo can be seen as a fantasy island, an escape from the city, but a place that is still bounded by the conventions of the city.

The city reproduces the forms and relations that are seen as exciting and marginal yet still subsumed with dominant discourse.

On Apollo, as well as the wider SL platform, gender is one of the major aspects of performance that differentiates avatars in their behaviours and interactions with each other and the space. The representations and performances on the island contribute to the discourse of gender that delineates the masculine from the feminine, where it is the masculine that is privileged on Apollo in terms of spatial representation. These representations provide a spatial paradigm for the performance of masculinity within the boundaries of a 'perfected' masculinity of beauty, strength, youth and homosocial interaction, all underscored with the influence of Ancient Greek symbolism. Performance on the island becomes bound within these guidelines, so that a perfected form of masculine representation becomes the norm, as does the ornamental feminine as its opposition. Edwards argues, "masculinity is seen to increasingly depend on matters of style, self-presentation and consumption... (and) is perceived to be increasingly predicated on matters of how men look rather than what men do" (2006, p. 111). This shows that the contemporary norm of masculine performativity is now more closely aligned to the Ancient Greek ideal, although influenced now far more by the consumerism associated with bodily displays and performances. This provides a potential restriction on Apollo for those who may wish to embody themselves outside of this norm, and thus highlights the impossibility of removing the established conditions of culture from virtual spaces. Although imagined, it is still based on a consciousness, which cannot exist outside of subjectively lived experience. Although it can be considered to lie on the margins of possibility, and does allow for behaviours outside that of the corporeal, it cannot exist value-free.

Conclusion

The case of Apollo highlights the connectivity between our corporeal lives, and the established conditions of existence, and imagined spaces, whether they are virtual, mythical or historical. These conditions prescribe the narratives of lived or imagined experience within these spaces so that the predominant power structures are reaffirmed, and meaning generation reflected through these same discursive structures. Space on SL is both produced and conceived, and ultimately reintegrates ideological fabulations onto the virtual landscape. These same ideologies are reaffirmed by reading history through a contemporary lens, so that

our comprehension of historical practices is veiled by contemporary debates regarding morality and values. This extends to utopic spaces and those imagined for the future, whereby there is a reluctance of envisioning ways of being that are not structured by the here and now. It is no wonder that SL spaces reaffirm the dominant modes of being, those that are desired and aspirational; the conditions of late capitalism emphasise the circumstances of success through the body. Within this affirmation of success and desire, gender normativity is implicated as necessary. In a space where one can potentially be anything, or anybody, the eagerness to fulfil established gender representations is testament to the cultural and societal importance placed on gendered success.

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