

# The Lonely Raccoon at the Ball: Designing for Intimacy, Sociability, and Selfhood

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## ABSTRACT

Designing for sociable systems requires, among other abilities, a sensitivity to the meanings, structures, and nuances of technology-mediated experiences that are simultaneously felt by users to be intimate and also social. Such a sensitivity is not easily acquired, and design researchers have recommended the use of social theories to guide designers' readings of technology-mediated social experiences. We use philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of identity (and social power, discourse, sexuality, creativity, and style) known as "the care of the self," as a scaffold with which to produce a sensitive interpretation of the intimacy (and expert social creative) practices of adult users of the virtual world *Second Life (SL)*. This reading sheds light on several skilled and creative intimacy practices in *SL*. It also offers a philosophically grounded hermeneutic strategy for designers interested in analyzing intimate experiences.

## Author Keywords

HCI; design; intimacy; identity; sociability; sexuality; user experience; creativity; amateurs; making; maker culture

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

## INTRODUCTION

The turn to experience in HCI research [33], which began over a decade ago, has led to a focus on social as well as intimate experiences. Often, these two are intertwined. For example, HCI studies have focused on communicating and supporting intimacy for couples in long-distance relationships [8,24], maintaining intimate relationships between family members in their domestic lives [23,44], creating experiences of relatedness [21], understanding the roles of interactive technologies on intimate relationships [44], and

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theorizing intimacy in virtual worlds [2,3,9,36,40]. Intimacy also emerges as a related topic in research on embodied interaction [26], identity and selfhood [30,46], domestic life [6], and human sexuality [1,7,10,19,25].

This research suggests that intimacy is a phenomenon that is difficult to isolate from a host of other equally complex topics. Schiphorst et al. characterize social intimacy as "the interplay between people and a set of networked objects in a social or public space [that] can be used to create awareness between others, sensitivity and more vital connection between groups of people in a public space" [42, p.23]. Koefoed Hansen and Kozel write, "Acknowledging the sensory, affective, poetic and corporeal qualities of the moment of lived experience" has become the key to designing the next generation of technologies [26].

A challenge for designers is to develop the skills needed to insightfully interpret intimate social experiences. To improve these skills in design, Batterbee and Koskinen call for a "research paradigm" distinct from experimental studies, which would combine the following three elements: "a theoretical framework that sensitizes designers to how...social organization takes shape, and how it affects the ways in which people experience designs"; a means of observing interaction as it is experienced in socially meaningful ways; and a cogent "interpretative procedure for making sense of the data" [4, p.474]. "The most important thing," they add, "is that there be a sensitizing framework that helps designers in making sense of the intricacies of interaction and what it does to experience" [*ibid*]. Such research does not always yield easily packaged design implications, but instead it enriches the perspective from which design framings and concepts are generated.

In sum, designers have a need to understand experiences of social intimacy; such experience requires a trained "sensitivity" to perceive and understand the "intricacies" of technology-mediated intimate experiences as they are embedded in (and not abstracted from) deep issues of selfhood, embodiment, social power, pleasure, and emancipation; this activity is supported by the appropriation of a theoretical framework that sensitizes designers to social experience.

The present work fits within that paradigm to offer a "sensitivity" analysis of technology mediated social intimacy. Specifically, we present a critical interpretation of an empirical study of how *Second Life (SL)* users characterize their

online experiences of “intimacy” (as they themselves define and understand the term). The study is empirical, because the source material we work from is user accounts of intimate experiences. This study is critical in that it explicitly appropriates the identity theory of philosopher Michel Foucault to amplify our sensitivity to these users’ responses. We appropriate Foucault’s identity theory, in particular his “care of the self” as developed in [15,16] and other works, because it offers a system of concepts and a hermeneutic approach that helps render visible the diverse relationships among intimacy, sexuality, identity, and social power.

Briefly, Foucault argues that the self emerges as an emergent outcome of *subjectification*, which he characterizes as the dual processes of becoming *subjected to* regulatory systems, comprising institutions, body practices, and discursive frameworks, and so forth, as well becoming the *subject of* our individual responses to and creative stylizations of that subjection. A simple example of this is motherhood. Mothers are governed by laws, moral prescriptions, and social conventions not only to care for their children, but to do so in certain ways. At the same time, the mother’s feelings of love for the child are usually experienced from within; they do not *feel* imposed on from the outside, and neither do laws or prescriptions for care typically interfere with the intimacy of that love (indeed, a Foucauldian perspective would argue that external forms of governance often *enhance* that felt intimacy, e.g., by rewarding the mother’s child care labor with social praise). Obviously, the point is not to explore the labor politics of motherhood, but simply to point out that “mother” is both a public and a private designation and that the two aspects interrelate.

Our analysis of user accounts of intimate experiences in *SL*, guided by Foucault’s “care of the self,” helps us understand the nuances of the relations between designs and human experiences. Recent HCI research [e.g., 18,28,45] on collective creativity, craft, expert amateurs, machinimators, everyday design, and appropriation, for example, is about highly skilled users formed into social collectives and using open-ended technologies (or technological ecologies) in highly creative ways. *SL*, whose content is nearly all user-created, puts its users in this category. However, our research focus is on their social experiences, rather than their creativity practices narrowly construed. Our analysis reveals, then, not only the expected linkages among intimacy, selfhood, and the social, but also linkages between intimacy and skilled social and creative practices mediated by sociotechnical systems, specifically, avatar design, virtual confession, gender performance, and cybersex.

Another aspect of our contribution is that our respondents are older (avg age 42) and also more gender diverse than is typical for empirical studies of social technologies: 51.7% female; 46.4% male; and 1.9% transgender. At the time of the data collection, the median age of *SL* users was 37 and the gender split was nearly even. We argue that this study reveals the ways that the intimate, social, and identity-

constructing habits of *mature adults* can be mediated and creatively fashioned in and through technological systems.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

**Study Site.** We chose the virtual world of *SL* as our study site. Virtual environments have long been of interest for research on identity practices: [39] writes of creation of the cyber “I,” “me,” and digital “generalized other”; [34] analyzes the co-evolution of avatars and ourselves, [5] studies the emergence of new forms of personal connection, and [9,12,31] explicate the evolving performances of gender, race, conflict, and the interplay of self and group. We chose *SL* in particular primarily on account of its culture of intimate interaction [2,9], its emphasis on skilled user-created content [3], its blurred boundaries between the real and the virtual [27], and emphasis on identity performance [32].

**Data Collection.** The main reason we focus our research specifically on intimacy is that it is deeply linked with physical and social behaviors, with attitudes, experiences, and other psychological phenomena, and it is an important locus of sociability. Not too surprisingly, the closely related topic of sexuality comes up much, both in our data and in diverse literatures about intimacy, so we want to take up this question head-on. Sexuality has been argued to be directly linked to identity by sociologists [17,20], psychologists [13,37], and philosophers [41]. Researchers have proposed sexuality as constituting identities that give sociopolitical meaning to the body [11], as the purpose of establishing a primary identity [29], as a major developmental issue during adolescence to construct the psychosocial identity and self-understanding [43,41], as a subjective impression of being part of the private self and distinct from the public one [37], as the embodiment of self-realization and the definition of oneself as well as the relation to others [14]. As philosopher Russon writes, “[s]exual experience is the experience of our embodiment as the locus of *intersubjective* contact and compulsion” [41, p.106].

We asked *SL* users to tell us about their experience of intimacy in *SL*. This method was based on psychology researchers Register and Henley’s [38] phenomenological approach to intimacy. In the Register and Henley study, study participants were asked to

*recall and describe a specific incident in which you experienced what you would call an “intimate experience.”*

No additional information was given, including any definition of “intimacy,” because the researchers wanted the subjects to tell them what they thought intimacy was. For Register and Henley, such a phenomenological approach to intimacy offered a means to solicit a “systematic, descriptive account of the most fundamental aspects of an experience” from study participants.

For this study, conducted in parallel with [36], we adapted Register and Henley’s question to address the specificity of intimacy in a virtual world. Following Register and Henley,

we did not offer any definition of “intimacy” and encouraged participants to recount and share as much detail as they feel comfortable. An emphasis on the words and descriptions provided by participants is at the foundation of the work presented in this paper. Our question was as follows:

*Please recall and describe a specific incident in which you experienced what you could call an “intimate experience” in the virtual world you chose. This can be as short or as long of an experience as you would care to write about. For our purposes, it is not as important what you say, as that you say it clearly and \*\*in as much detail as possible.\*\* Please try to include as much of what you were aware of in the account as possible.*

We used a Web form to solicit their responses. We distributed the URL to 12 different channels, including popular forums, such as *SL*, *SL Universe*, and *MMO Champion* as well as numerous group lists and game research forums, such as *SLED* and *DiGRA*. The form was widely distributed across virtual worlds not just for the purpose of increasing participation but as an intentional strategy to incorporate the perspectives of participants of many different virtual worlds into our research on intimacy.

As of this writing, 211 *SL* players (109 reported females, 98 males, and 4 transgender) completed it. They provided their ages within ranges, as follows: 17 were aged 18-25, 80 were aged 26-41, and 114 were older than 42. Regarding virtual world experience, 73.9% of all participants (N=156) had used *SL* for at least 1 year, while only 13.3% (N=28) had used *SL* for less than 7 months (and another 27 had no response). We conclude that our sample was composed largely of serious, veteran users of *SL*. Seven participants said they had never had such intimate experiences in *SL*. Two participants skipped this question. In all valid responses (N = 202) analyzed for this study, the median word length was 85, with a max length of 4078 words.

**Analytical Procedures.** We conducted our analysis through a procedure known as *explication de texte*, or close reading, an analytical method originating in the humanities [35] and involving the careful examination of diction, rhetorical devices, style, and other formal and thematic elements in a text. Two of the three researchers involved in the data analysis have doctoral training in the humanities and are experienced with this analytical practice.

This phase followed a process. Initially all three researchers conducted their close readings independently of one another to identify her or his own set of findings and the corresponding examples. Based on what we were seeing, we agreed that Foucault’s identity theory could be of service in unpacking the complexity of issues surrounding intimacy, for the reasons we summarized in the introduction. We individually returned to the data, focusing on participant statements in which they characterized their becoming *subjected* to external structures (e.g., *SL* as a platform, prac-

es of cybersex, and practices of avatar, gender norms) and characterized themselves as the *subjects* of their own experiences and intentions. After independently returning to the data to read from this perspective, we collaborated to combine, refine, and distinguish among the preliminary findings before arriving at the most resonant ones, presented in the next section.

### INTIMACY, SUBJECTIFICATION, AND SECOND LIFE

We present our findings by focusing on those aspects of the intimacy accounts that express different aspects of the system of concepts that comprise Foucault’s “care of the self.” Again, our research goal is to perceive design-mediated intimacy situated in its complex relationships with sexuality, selfhood, pleasure, and sociability, with the hope that this helps us to generate new design insights and more broadly contribute to designerly sensibilities. Our goal is *not* to empirically validate the “truth” of Foucault’s theory. Nor is it to champion *SL*. Neither is it our goal to produce an account that faithfully represents participant self-perceptions; as Hebdige [22] explains and demonstrates in his seminal analysis of punk subcultures, such self-perceptions are often based in ideological or unconscious processes that are interpretable and important from a research standpoint but that are not conscious (or important) to participants themselves.

We organize our findings under two main headings:

- **Governance:** Governance characterizes that which individuals are *subjected to*: systems, institutions, practices, laws, technologies, norms, prohibitions, etc.
- **Care of the self.** Care of the self characterizes that which individuals are *subjects of*: their own experiences of, responses to, and choices about how they exist in relation to systems of governance.

### Governance

Individuals are governed by external structures that enable and regulate their social and body habits, behaviors, knowledge practices, etc. Governance systems prescribe norms (e.g., of gender, hygiene, speaking, etc.), prohibitions, taboos, etc. Governance not only prescribes how we behave with others (e.g., laws against murder, turn-taking in conversations, standards of dress, etc.), but also how we govern ourselves, that is, how we form, maintain, and transform our own identities (e.g., confession to purify one’s soul or *t’ai chi ch’uan* to improve the body).

*SL* both as software and as a user culture inherits many of these, often with modifications, and introduces its own; for example, bathing practices take on different forms in a world where bodies don’t sweat or get dirty. *SL* is also (mostly) anonymous, so that behaviors in-world are not easily connected to a person’s real-life identity, which makes many practices that are taboo the physical world—such as harassment and public sexual displays—safer to practice in *SL*. *SL* only minimally simulates physical world

laws, such as gravity, and the aging, injury, or death of the body is not a part of the default system. *SL* offers a robust—and massively extensible—avatar design system, so norms in *SL*'s user culture about highly individuated and aesthetically appealing avatars constitutes a way that *SL* governs one's relationship with oneself. With that background, we turn to our reading of the governance data.

**Anonymity, or, The Apparent Absence of Governance is Still Governance.** One of the most basic issues of governance in *SL* is that participation is mostly anonymous. The system itself provides no indication of anyone's physical world identity, and in fact it is a violation of the Terms of Service to reveal someone's physical world identity against their will. Of course, individuals can and do reveal their identities in-world through a variety of means, but such individuals are in the minority. Thus the system itself and user culture agree: *SL* is primarily an anonymous world. The benefits of such a system are obvious: *SL* is a fantasy environment where users are liberated from the social constraints of everyday life in the physical world. Users can (and do) present and pass themselves off as a different gender, have sex in public, harass others, explore alternative and even extreme lifestyles, and even simulate illegal activities, such as simulated pedophilia (though Linden Labs, who run *SL*, attempted to put a stop that). Thus it may seem that anonymity provides liberation from governance.

Indeed, many participants suggested such a view, for example, participant 73 (female, 50-57), writes, "*We have never met in real life, do not know who we are in real life, and regret nothing about our virtual 'fling.'*" Because of the anonymity of her "fling," she views herself exempt from the traditional consequences of a fling (e.g., regret). She is not at all alone in this line of reasoning: 152 (male, 18-25) writes, "*Although my avatar maintains probably 5 primary relationships and a dozen or so secondary, there are no attachments. After all, its a game.*"

However, although many participants see anonymity as a form of liberation from physical world governance, it is evident that anonymity is in fact its own system of governance. Even in the two quotes just above, the participants view anonymity to grant them license to engage in traditionally prohibited behavior, and license-granting is a form of governance. Participant 100 (female, 34-41) expresses another sense in which anonymity is a form of governance:

*I have shared things with a few close in-world friends that I have not shared with my RL friends, or even husband. Perhaps it is the element of anonymity that allows one to express some of ones deepest thoughts and emotions.*

Here, anonymity is a license to heighten intimacy through the practice of confession to reveal (and also to perform) one's "deepest thoughts and emotions." This participant's interlocutor becomes obligated to take on the role of the confessee, which, understood in its Christian, psychoanalyt-

ic, or friendship formulations, prescribes that the confessee acknowledge and accept the confessor's "deepest thoughts and emotions" and propose changes to attitude or behavior to guide or help the confessor improve her- or himself. Participant 46 (female, 42-49), a social scientist conducting research in *SL*, describes how participant confessions were sometimes *too* intimate for her; for example concerning the confessions of a recently divorced man, she writes:

*For me, the discomfort was in the level of intimacy I encountered ... like I had landed right in the middle of this very intimate real life situation and not by choice. What's odd to me is that this person didn't consider or perhaps wasn't aware of the entry way into this (to me) very private situation that the technology enabled.*

Anonymity in *SL* seems to have two, and apparently contradictory, meanings: it liberates users from responsibility (it's "just a game") and/or it actually places users under new codes of social obligation (e.g., confessions).

**Transgressions, or, The (In)scrutability of Conflicting Codes.** Just as in real-life, where the roles of a mother as a parent conflicts with her role as a caregiver on a school outing when her child picks a fight with another child, so systems of governance blend and clash in *SL* experiences. One example of this can be seen in the practice of exploring one's body as a sexual instrument, developing a repertoire of sexual skills and sensibilities, a practice that most people engage in adolescence and which many *SL* users do again to learn about the erotic possibilities of their avatars. Moreover, this seemingly private practice is nonetheless political, because it is often felt to be transgressive and because evidence of its existence is often met with various forms of censure (e.g., mores against masturbation, expressed as derision or spiritual threat). Participant 152 (male, 18-25) summarizes his practice of exploring his virtual body as a sexual instrument playing different repertoires, writing,

*My avatar has had threesomes, foursomes, been bound and flogged (didn't like that too much), tried out most pose balls, been bit by vampires, killed by orcs, harassed by angry lesbians (don't ask), just about anything but gay sex. [Note: pose balls are small balls containing canned animations available in the world; most player-created sexual animations are deployed in-world as poseballs.]*

This quote amounts to a list of avatar sensual experimentations: group sex, animated sex, vampiric blending of sex and pain, death, sexual ostracization, etc. Interestingly, this list contains two items—being bound and flogged and gay sex—that the participant does not like. He is more comfortable with his avatar being violently killed or vampirically corrupted than with his avatar having sex with another male avatar or taking a submissive position in sex. It is hard to overlook the fact that both of these items are excluded from traditional heterosexual constructions of masculinity: the freedoms of *SL* do not liberate him from caring for his avatar's manhood in physical world ways.

Some transgressive explorations of the sexual potential of the avatar go much farther, for example, the practice of “yiffing,” or “furry sex,” which is the practice of cybersex while in the form of animal avatars. Yiffing gestures toward social taboos against bestiality and creates experiences that are, as one participant put it, “quite risqué,” though no actual animals are involved. Participant 195 (female, 58-65) offered this account of her experience as a furry:

*My avatar is a female raccoon and I wear a tux. It was a dj and ball gown affair. There was a white fox at the club - male. He clearly did not realize I was a female until I pointed this out to him. We got very friendly after that, exchanging flirtatious IMs.*

This participant mixed codes (a human *SL* user presenting as an animal, a female wearing a tux, an animal wearing formal human clothing, etc.) to the point that her sexual availability to the male fox was not even perceptible to him—he had to be told verbally. Thus, as a potential intimate partner, she was inscrutable.

A similar problem arises from how *SL* users perceive the virtual body. Participant 167 (male, 18-25) writes, “*The difference is that virtually, you’re at a distance. You’re getting to know someone’s mind faster, but the kinetic/body stuff is totally missing.*” In contrast, participant 136 (female, 50-57) shares a cybersex chat transcript including the following lines, “*I like the feel of your touch too ... the smell of your hair, the warmth of your breath on my lips, the softness of your skin as I caress your shoulders and arms.*” For participant 167, there is a categorical distinction between his physical body and the avatar body he is controlling. In contrast, 136 writes as though she inhabits her avatar body—she makes no distinction between her physical body and her avatar’s—and she expects her partner to do the same. These views are logically incommensurable, and yet they often co-exist within the same accounts.

One of the governing factors of *SL* is that it makes possible a highly open-ended practice of combining and recombining codes of governance, and this sometimes yields intimate practices that have no physical world analogues. Optimistically, such practices contain the potential for *SL* users to invent new ways of being, or of being intimate—a profoundly Foucauldian and arguably also a designerly goal. But such practices can also result in both repugnant behaviors (e.g., virtual pedophilia) and also inscrutable behaviors (such as the tux-wearing female raccoon ready for romance) which can lead to misunderstandings among users that sometimes lead to real—not simulated—emotional pain.

### The Care of the Self

The concept of governance focuses on extant conventions, norms, prohibitions, regulating forces, and so on—all of which exist independently of the individual, and all of which the individual has to reckon with to such a fundamental degree that, according to Foucault, the self is heavily constituted by it. But such a view might seem to deny

individuals any individualism or agency. However, Foucault’s theory proposes a powerful counterweight to the pressures of governance, and that is the possibility of exerting agency via one’s responses to governance, and, more powerfully, the possibility of creatively stylizing such responses to governance over time: Foucault refers to this countervailing practice as “the care of the self.”

Foucault notes that individuals have many forms of agency, even from positions within systems of governance. One can choose to resist or reject governance (albeit often with difficult consequences). One can choose among prescribed alternatives; for example, individuals are supposed to take care of their bodies, but whether they do so through regular bathing, bodybuilding, dieting, yoga, going for walks (and so on) provides quite a bit of room for choice. One can also *stylize* one’s participation in such systems, that is, engage in the contingencies of governance systems in a consistently patterned way. For example, the punk is a stylized self: she or he appropriates certain attitudes toward authority and hegemony (e.g., resistance, contempt), specific fashion practices (e.g., Mohawks, spiked leather clothing), media consumption practices (e.g., punk music)—all from within (in the case of 1970s punks in the UK) the position of a young member of the English working class subject to diverse socioeconomic constraints [22].

Because of the complexities surrounding the care of the self, we will focus on a smaller number of longer quotes, but we nonetheless want to stress that while these may be the best quotes to use from an analytic perspective, nonetheless their sentiments are typical of a great number of responses; we are not choosing complete outliers.

**Governed Agents, or, How Submitting to the Law Brings Pleasure and Meaning.** Many of us intuitively feel that power and governance constrains us, that it alienates us from our true selves. Foucault offers a much more nuanced picture that, while still allowing that power can and does alienate, suggests that power is more systemic, pervasive, and more productive than our intuitive sensibility allows. In the first quote we analyze in this section, participant 163 (female, 50-57) recounts her experience trying out the role of a sex slave in a virtual sadomasochistic community.

*I discovered that I responded to a particular male avatar who was playing the role of a Gorean Master by becoming aroused by the idea of playing the part of his slave. After talking about it and learning more I acted out submitting and being “collared” by my Master. I used animations to make my avatar kneel and assume an arms raised submissive position. We roleplayed the words of my submission and his placing the collar on my neck without too much rehearsal in advance. He removed my clothing and told me I would remain naked until he allowed me clothing again as I had to learn to be accessible and unguarded all the time. He then locked me in a chastity belt... gave me one in inventory that I then had to wear... and gave me to understand that only he had the key and he*

*would use me if and when he chose and not before he chose. The roleplay of being collared was one of the most intimate I have experienced.*

We will analyze this in some detail, but we want to call attention to three key features of this passage: it is framed in terms of knowledge, i.e., what she learned; it is about her voluntarily becoming a sex slave through roleplay; and this process was an intensely “intimate” experience. Stated in another way, being *subjected to* a governance structure (i.e., sexual slavery) has both epistemological and experiential consequences that she is the *subject of*. Epistemologically, she becomes the subject of new self-knowledge, specifically, about her own erotic capabilities as well as what it means to roleplay a sex slave. Experientially, she becomes the subject of a privately felt and very intense experience of intimacy.

The passage also bears a number of striking grammatical features. In the first half, she is the subject of all the verbs: “I discovered ... responded ... [was] becoming aroused ... [was] talking and learning about [slavery] ... acted out ... used animations.” It is hard to miss how active she is in doing what it takes to make this happen. But after the midpoint (hinging not coincidentally on a verb with two subjects: “We roleplayed”), her partner is the logical or grammatical subject of nearly all of the verbs: “He removed my clothing ... told me ... allowed me ... I had to ... He then locked ... gave me ... when he chose.” After the line, “we roleplayed,” she has become subjected to the governance system of the roleplay sex slave. Put another way, in the first half, she is not a slave at all (as her strong agency clearly demonstrates); in the second half she has entered into a new subject role, and this entry into subjecthood is emotionally powerful and authentic for her.

We see another striking difference between the two halves: in the first half, she and her avatar are distinct: “I acted out submitting ... I used animations to make my avatar kneel.” But after she enters the subject position of the slave, her body merges with her avatar: “his placing the collar on my neck ... He removed my clothing ... He then locked me in a chastity belt.” This is evidence of her individual or felt subjectivity, which fluidly moves from the subject position of a virtual world user manipulating an avatar to the subject position of a sex slave, a movement facilitated by the highly individuated avatar design practices prevalent in SL’s toolset and user culture. Interestingly, the more immersive position—the one that merges user and avatar into a single indivisible entity—is the one that emerges as a result of placing herself into an external system of governance.

Foucault claims that the care of the self requires the self-conscious knowledge of one’s participation in various forms of external governance. Once aware that one is governed, one can decide what sort of governed subject one wants to be; lacking that awareness at all is to be in a powerless state of alienation. In this example, a woman in her 50s experimentally places herself in an extreme subject

position—it is quite clear that this is an informed and self-conscious decision—and that doing so brings her feelings and experiences that she has never had before. If nothing else, this narrative complicates the emancipatory narratives found in much design research, not, obviously, because of the slavery (which is merely simulated in erotic roleplay sessions), but rather because emancipation is frequently framed in terms of liberation from governance; however, in this example emancipation is better characterized as voluntarily entering into a system of governance on one’s own terms. The issue, then, isn’t governance itself but rather how one has entered into it, and how participation is enacted and experienced by individuals subjected to it.

**Askēsis, or, The Labored and Progressive Consideration of the Self.** One of the central tenets of Foucault’s thought is his rejection of the notion of a pre-given, transcendent, “true” self. Again, our purpose is not to evaluate this notion as philosophy, but to consider pragmatically how it helps us think or what it helps us do. As design researchers, this idea appeals to us because it leaves plenty of room for individuals to change, to grow, and also for themselves to have a say in how they do that. Such moments of self-cultivation seem to be very powerful, and a design approach that seeks to facilitate them has a certain appeal. However, all of this is very abstract. What does it really look like, with actual people using an actual system? In this section, we present two such examples.

First is the example of “Z,” a *SL* user going through a life transition as summarized by participant 144 (male, 50-57):

*The most compelling example [of an intimacy experience] I can recall was when Z revealed to me that she is a transwoman going through her transition. Z had dropped hints that she was a lesbian, involved in a long-term RL relationship, but the revelation of her transgender status was a huge statement of trust in me. Clearly, Z had ... been testing my tolerance for deviance from the norm and for discretion. I was rather speechless when Z told me; first by the revelation itself, and secondly by the level of trust implied. I have known Z [for 2 years]. During most of that time, I was totally unaware that her avatar’s appearance w/respect to gender did not match her RL appearance. In another way, I am not surprised though, because her avatar matches who she IS inside. And who she is striving to become.*

In a culture where transgender is systemically considered a transgressive form of deviance (and harsh forms of repression remain politically sanctioned), Z’s carefully managed identity performance reveals “the complex interrelationship between desire, sex, and power” [14, p.85]. Z is extremely skilled at using available choices to build up her confidence in the participant and to come out to him. She displays both the social skill to “drop hints” and to “test his tolerance for deviance ... and for discretion” and also the *SL* skill to express “who she IS inside” and “who she is striving to become” through the design and performance of her avatar.

The intermingling of political power, self-expression, and the careful staging of “coming out” is perceived by the speaker as an enactment of trust and thus intimacy. It is possible in the physical world that Z cannot (or does not want to) “pass” as a woman, but she can in *SL* and does. Stated in more Foucauldian terms, Z’s gender transition mediated through *SL*’s avatar design and performance tools helps her invent new ways of relating to others, and new ways of experiencing her gender, that are neither the same as nor superimposed on existing cultural practices. Her participation in *SL*—in which she presents herself publicly as female and only selectively as trans female—is a choice she has made within the contingency of her situation to work through her transition.

The final example we present is the account of participant 203 (male, 34-41), whose progressive consideration of himself was far less deliberate than Z’s and much more dependent on a surprising situation he put himself in:

*I was very curious about cybering. I hadn't ever done it and ... I decided to give it a shot. I logged in with a female avatar because I figured it would be easier to find a partner... The sex chat itself was also a great deal more pornographic than I expected. It was very much an aggressive male fantasy he was creating. I actually felt a little used and a little dirty (not in a good way).... [He] talked about how he was masturbating IRL which I hadn't expected and freaked me out a little. He offered to exchange pictures which freaked me out even more... On a different level, I was also thinking that maybe I was experiencing a sexual encounter from a female perspective and felt a little ashamed of my usual male sexuality, how maybe it is not as different from this guys as I wish it was. I also surprised at how I adopted (i guess?) a female perspective, tolerating things I didn't want to do in the face of his intensity, suffering a transition from his sexual partner to his sexual object. But to be fair it was also pleasant in a way to be wanted like that. The point I am making is that it was very intense, it felt a little out of control, and I had very mixed feelings about it.*

This account, as with the slave example, is framed by connecting a will to knowledge (“I was curious about cybering”) to voluntary subjection to a system of governance (“I decided to give [cybersex] a shot”). However, with a casualness that would come back to bite him, he also chose to subject himself to the governing conditions of a female sex partner, “because I figured it would be easier to find a partner.” He appears not to have anticipated the consequences of either of these voluntary self-subjections (i.e., to the discursive practice of cybersex or to doing so presenting as a female). The passage details his experiences of and reflections on the consequences of each of these choices.

The first of his voluntary submissions—to the discursive practice of cybersex—surprises him because he and his partner produced a discourse other than what he expected, and also because he had less control over it than he ex-

pected. He realizes that the discursive gender conventions of pornography, along with associated practices of masturbation, serve as source scripts for cybersex discourse, and he has become subjected to those scripts as well. These discoveries are all accompanied by very strong feelings: he expresses a sense of surprise, feeling unclean and even violated: instances include his partner’s description of his physical world masturbation, the partner’s offer to share real-life erotic photos, and (not included in this excerpt) the partner’s unexpected and non-consensual switch to anal intercourse in the text chat.

The second of participant 203’s voluntary submissions—to the governance of the female sex partner—also generates new knowledge, feelings, and reflections. No longer seeing a female avatar merely as a ticket to getting laid, he now perceives what it is like to play the role of the woman in the script of a pornographic male fantasy. It is such an alien experience for him—the lack of control, the sense of “tolerating things I didn’t want to do,” performing sex acts in the face of his partner’s “intensity,” being construed as another’s “sexual object.” All of these aspects of his experience he links together and speculates that it all adds up to having “a sexual encounter from a female perspective.” But this is no abstract speculation, because he turns these discoveries reflexively back on himself: “I felt a little ashamed of my usual male sexuality, how maybe it is not as different from this guys as I wish it was.” He begins to implicate himself in subjecting women to such a script.

In short, by subjecting himself to two systems of governance (those of cybersex and female sex partner), he discovered that he was a subject of a third system of governance—the misogynistic male fantasy—that he had not been so vividly aware of before. This discovery is “intense,” “a little out of control,” and the source of “mixed feelings” and yet also “pleasant in a way”: it was a struggle, but perhaps ultimately a fulfilling one. Foucault characterizes such struggle as an *askēsis*, which is the notion that the assimilation of truth, which connects one to everyday life, leads to a progressive consideration of oneself and demands that one change oneself in response to it. The speaker of this passage, like Z, can be seen to be caught up in an *askēsis*, where new ways of being and relations to others are tried out as strategies of self-cultivation.

### MOSTLY GRAMMATICAL AVATARS

What are designers or design researchers to make of all this? Batterbee and Koskinen write, “the purpose of paying attention to co-experience is not so much about saying what the future product or system should be like in its details. Rather, it is about providing a more sensitive description of the social phenomena to inform designing technology” [4, p.475]. In other words, the goal is not to produce implications for design but rather to enrich the perspective from which we design. We have sought, through such a sensitive description, to understand human experiences as they have (partly) been designed, where identity, sexuality, sociabil-

ity, pleasure, politics, knowledge acquisition, self-care, and so forth are not analytically isolated from one another but rather viewed from within these entanglements.

The central idea involves an encounter between an individual who is feeling, intending, and performing on the one hand and systems of social governance, of which the software system is one, on the other. Governance structures are like a grammar—a generative rule system—that specifies what can and cannot be said, what should and should not be said. Yet people nonetheless actively use those grammars to create their own social meanings. Some performances merely haven't ever been done before, while others not only haven't been done before but also transgress or invent new grammars that hadn't existed before. For example, a user can design a unique avatar in *SL* without changing the grammar of avatars. But when a user figures out a way to create a “furry”—that is, to subvert the humanoid assumptions built into the avatar design system and disseminate a viable alternative—the system has been expanded to incorporate a whole new avatar design vocabulary.

Compared to most other virtual worlds, *SL*'s avatar design system is vastly more flexible, and that flexibility became a crucial part of its user culture, as witnessed by its thriving virtual fashion industry. Users with default avatars are instantly recognizable as “noobs,” so the social pressure to become an “expert amateur” [28] at least of avatar design in this world is very high. Avatar design in *SL* seems to be a powerful example of what Foucault calls a “technology of the self,” that is, a sanctioned set of tools offered by the system of governance (in this case *SL*) to its subjects for their own self-care. In other words, user's sense of self and their avatar design practices are intertwined, if not in a literal way (i.e., designing an avatar to look just like one's physical world body), then in a deeper sense, as 144 wrote of Z: “her avatar matches who she IS inside.”

Individuals subjected to any grammar of governance can be understood as a “speaker,” or an “avatar,” within that governance, that is, as a personal manifestation within that system, which has certain agencies, constraints, rights, and responsibilities. In other words, not only do *SL* users have *SL* avatars, defined in the technical sense that the system provides, but they also have avatars defined in relation to each system of governance they are subjected to in-world. For example, users have avatars in the gender system of governance: one must be male, female, or (more recently: trans), but in a personally individuated way, not a generic way. Thus, Z, a physical world trans woman, presents in *SL* at times as a woman and at other times as a trans woman. Participant 203, a physical world male, presented as a female in *SL* in order to more easily find a cybersex partner. *SL* users subjected themselves to other systems of governance: to practices of group sex, sexual slavery, and yiffing and in each case they were present as avatars of those social governance systems. They also subjected themselves to systems of verbal practices, in particular anonymized con-

fession (where they became avatar manifestations of the confessor or the confessee) and cybersex chat (where they became avatars of a loosely scripted collaborative verbal performance of cybersex). And, as we have seen, users combine, stylize, and perform these on the fly (e.g., the date-seeking, tux-wearing female raccoon at the ball).

This understanding of avatar is known in the philosophical literature as a *subject* because it is that which is *subjected* to a system of governance and the *subject of* the experiences, agencies, and performances of the individual inhabiting it. Many of these avatars or subjects that we've explored here are provisional roles that *SL* users inhabit for pleasure, to learn and to explore. In some cases, they do so as tourists (i.e., to visit someplace new with the intention of going back home as before), such as the user who said she feels no remorse about her fling. But others never “go back home”; that is, they have changed perceptions of themselves; for example, the male participant who presented in-world as a woman to make it easier to try out cybersex seems to have learned something surprising about himself that demanded his reflection and possible change.

Complicatedly, as our data revealed, the avatar is always already both part of the felt experience of selfhood and also a simulated and separate extension of that experienced self: participant 163 is a user making her *avatar* kneel and raise her arms, but later she *herself* is stripped and placed in a chastity belt. We saw this shift over and over again in the data. And this happened not just in the *SL* avatar in the software sense, but also in all of the avatars we have described. This ambiguity between the avatar as self and as not-self can be really powerful in supporting profoundly creative practices—i.e., those that lead to the invention of new ways of being and relating to others by creating sufficient cover for people to put themselves (and/or their avatars) in extreme situations with (sometimes) profound, moving, and even life-altering results, as in the case of the trans woman who, according to participant 144, both *already is* a woman and *is becoming* a woman. But the ambiguity can also lead to negative experiences, including intimacies forced on others (as we saw both with the social scientist as confessee and the cybersex explorer offered real-life pictures) as well as intimacies violated (e.g., when users relating to each other with one set of norms, say, the commitments implied in monogamy, suddenly switch to another, e.g., by saying that “it's just a game”).

We want to stress once again that the majority of our participants were not impressionable teens, but people who have been married, raised children, worked as professionals for decades, etc. In other words, their creative intimate practices are mature, experienced, and above all *skilled*. *SL* as a system didn't “cause” these intimate practices ex nihilo. But neither were these practices (in their final specificity) “in” the users, as predefined needs, simply waiting for a system that could give them expression. Rather, *SL* provided a particular regulatory infrastructure (e.g., its powerful



avatar design system) in which these individuals could emergently and reflexively deploy themselves as avatar-subjects in new—in many cases extreme—situations, to discover their own limits, to face their own (often taboo) desires, to progressively consider themselves, and to learn new ways of being and relating to others.

### CONCLUSION

We have presented a critical and empirical study of intimacy in *SL*, having analyzed user accounts of their intimate experiences in relation to two high-level modes of subjectification, as theorized by the work of philosopher Michel Foucault: governance and the care of the self. This theory provided us with a conceptual scaffold to help us read this data “sensitively” [4], that is, to insightfully perceive technology-mediated intimacy without abstracting it away from the related concepts of selfhood, embodiment, sociability, politics, and creative self-expression.

As a research field, HCI is taking up notions of creative collectives, appropriation, the expert amateur, everyday design, craft, and cultures of making. As we have demonstrated, the intimate experiences that our participants reported unfolded *within* such practices: for example, designing a compelling *SL* avatar is the work (or craft) of an expert amateur, as are creative practices of virtual confession, gender performance, and cybersex. So intimacy is not a private feeling divorced from such practices but rather one that arises by engaging such practices in a socially connected way. In other words, designing to support social creativity and designing intimate social experiences are not separate problems or HCI specialties, but different faces of the same thing: social creative practices often unfold in intimate experiences; conversely, being intimate with others often demands skilled creativity (e.g., of self-presentation).

Our analysis adds to these discourses additional nuances surrounding the notion of pleasure, because what our participants characterized as pleasurable was often morally ambiguous, emotionally risky, and aesthetically dark. It also suggests additional nuances to design notions of emancipation (often raised in HCI discourses on or about democratization), mainly because our analysis frames emancipation as the stylized subjection to, and not as the release from, systems (or grammars) of governance. It has also demonstrated the inseparability of aesthetics and politics: aesthetic stylizations of the self often entail strong political positions and consequences; these issues cannot be treated as distinct.

The practical difficulty surrounding this work is that perceptive insights and understandings about such experiences demand skills and sensitivities that participants may not have and therefore may not be able to express. Worse, if Batterbee and Koskinen are correct, many designers may lack these skills and sensitivities, too. Our reading, informed by a decades-long engagement with Foucault’s philosophy, is intended as a self-standing study about the ways that agency and constraint, intimacy and sociability, and

governance and the self were experienced with and through social technologies and articulated by our participants. But we also hope that the analytical approach, both in its data collection strategy (based on the phenomenological intimacy research of Register & Henry) and its data analysis strategy (i.e., reading user accounts in relation to subjectivity, comprising systems of governance and practices of self care) serves as a practical resource that other designers can also adapt in their practice as a way of cultivating their sensitivities to the intricacies of technology-mediated social experiences.

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