The Magic Realism of a Virtual Second Life

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Introduction

Humans are capable of envisaging objects and people that exist in fantastic realms beyond our physical senses. To achieve this we use models, sounds, and images that are provided by media like television, toys, theatre, radio, cinema, and books. This study focuses on computer-generated imagery as a new source of fantastic narrative. In various cultures throughout history, the ability of characters to fly, to create objects, to influence the seasons, and to move the land or seas, is often mythologized as godlike. For instance, the ancient Mayans, Greeks, and Egyptians all depict godlike creatures of flight, who can magically manifest objects and change natural phenomena at will.[1] Virtual 3D spaces extend the imaginative potentials of traditional media forms into the online realm. They provide audiovisual environments where people in diverse geographical locations meet with virtual versions of self and others. These shared, online spaces depict a semi-realistic, artificial world using sophisticated graphics and communication tools. It seems the religious or at least the mythical imagination is still operational in cyberspace. The user in a virtual world is often represented online by a colourful graphic avatar, the digital image of 'self' which is part of the user interface. The avatar allows a user to experience vicarious vision, public visibility, physical motion, and interactivity within the virtual world. The term 'avatar' comes from the Sanskrit for a divine being who has descended to earth.[2] Users of these virtual worlds can simulate godlike feats of creativity, flight, and engineering. How are we to understand the processes of fantasy that makes these virtual worlds so appealing?

Second Life is an interactive, 3D (three dimensional) graphic application; one of the latest generation of "virtual environments" which are available globally to internet users.[3] Users of the Second Life virtual space log on from all over the globe to interact with each other in the virtual space.

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[1] See for example Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976); Roy Willis, *World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[2] Freda Matchett, *Krsna, Lord or Avatara? The Relationship Between Krsna and Visnu: In the Context of the Avatara Myth as Presented by the Harivamśa, the Visnupurana and the Bhagavatapurana* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 15

[3] http://www.secondlife.com. Accessed 23/12/09.

People logged in to Second Life use graphic tools to create and interact with key elements of the virtual world. They may create digital objects such as houses, clothing, and artworks. They may use communications media to send messages, to chat, make movies, and travel to locations within the world.[4] In this way, the virtual world is like a masquerade of 'the real' and also functions as a laboratory for the development of digital, robotic, and artificial intelligence processes that may be commonplace later in our century.

Virtual worlds are becoming places to conduct serious business, to investigate crimes, to invest in brands, interact with products, and to simulate systems before deploying them in the real world.[5] Virtual worlds are also a focus for medical practitioners, biologists, and neuropsychologists, who use interactive technologies for therapy, training, rehabilitation, and research. The evolution of virtual media is most evident in arts and entertainment. Just as the twentieth century formed global audiences for screen culture, the twenty-first offers an addictive labyrinth of pleasures available in a range of 3D graphic formats and interfaces such as X-Box, Wii, and multi-player online games like World of Warcraft or Penguin Hotel, which are referred to as virtual worlds or Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs).

So how are we to understand and define virtual worlds? Virtual reality is defined as that which is not real but which may display qualities of the real.[6] By definition, then, reality is a floating term inside virtual environments. My focus here is on Second Life as a medium for imaginative cultural production. At the same time, I observe Second Life as a text which exhibits elements of the marvellous or the magical, qualities which in earlier so-called 'primitive' cultures may be invested with religious imagination. This study suggests that the virtual world achieves this magical quality, not by focusing on fantasy elements, but on realistic details. I examine Second Life within a discussion of

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[4] Darren Sharp, 'Digital Lifestyles Monitor', (Smart Internet Technology CRC Research Paper, 2007), at
http://www.smartinternet.com.au/ArticleDocuments/121/P07_038_paper.pdf.aspx. Accessed 19/12/09.

[5] Mandy Salomon, 'Business in Second Life: An Introduction' (Smart Internet Technology CRC Research Paper, 2007), at
http://www.smartinternet.com.au/ArticleDocuments/121/Business-in-Second-Life-May-2007.pdf.aspx. Accessed 19/12/09. Damian Schofield, 'Animating and Interacting with Graphical Evidence: Bringing Courtrooms to Life with Virtual Reconstructions', Proceedings of IEEE Conference on Computer Graphics, Imaging and Visualisation (Bangkok, Thailand, 14-16 August. 2007).

[6] Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino, 'A Taxonomy of Mixed Reality Visual Displays', *IEICE Transactions on Information Systems*, vol. E77-D, no. 12, (1994), pp. 1321-1329. William Sherman and Alan Craig, *Understanding Virtual Reality* (Boston: Morgan Kaufman Publishers, 2003).

the magic realist literary genre as outlined by theorist Wendy Faris.[7] Her theory of "magic realism" is useful as a way of explaining the methods of "ordinary enchantment" that new digital and virtual media offer to users.

Faris defines magic realism according to five key characteristics which emerge from her investigation of magic realist fiction.[8] According to Faris, the five key characteristics of magic realism include: the "irreducible" element of magic, detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world, the creation of unsettling doubts around the contradictions between events described, the mergence of different fictional and real realms, and distortion of time, space, and identity. In this paper I use these characteristics as a base from which to observe various aspects of story and character that emerge from new media configurations in the Second Life virtual world. In conclusion, it seems we may understand Second Life as a magic realist metafiction which reflects on the processes of narrative and character within 3D graphic, digital discourse.

Method

This study is important to our understanding of virtual, 3D environments which are playing an increasing role in the sciences, arts and entertainment. Theorists of media and communication agree that 3D virtual environments like Second Life will be as instrumental to twenty-first century art and culture as film and television were to the art and culture of the twentieth century.[9] According to these theorists, we may see persistent virtual worlds like Second Life as the leisure and work places of the future. Considering the increasing popularity of these media forms, it is relevant for us to question the nature of the discourse by focusing on images and texts that are used to structure virtual 3D worlds.

I begin by defining Second Life, then outline Faris' criteria for the magic realist genre. I discuss how these criteria may illuminate our understanding of the new media configurations like Second Life. Faris explores magic realism in contemporary literature and describes the characteristics that define, the techniques that enable, and the cultural issues that traverse the genre. Her primary method is not to study the content of the magic realist text, but to study "how the mode operates as a discourse, irrespective of specific

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[7] Wendy Faris*, The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment: Magical Realism and the Remysticication of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2003).

[8] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 8.

[9] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001); David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, The Cybercultures Reader (New York: Routledge, 2000); Jay Bolter, and Richard Grusin, *Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000); Anna Everett, and John Caldwell (eds), *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

thematic content".[10] I use her approach as a form of textual analysis by which to examine aspects of Second Life. This method corresponds to that of late twentieth century semioticians and structuralists such as Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes.[11] Such theorists pay close attention to the text and to the larger cultural discourse it represents. Semiotic and structuralist methods examine the text as a process of communication and not merely as a static receptacle of content.[12] This perspective allows us to explore Second Life as a multi-disciplinary environment for art, culture, and social networking. Within this larger structuralist framework, I employ Faris' theory in order to question the metaphorical boundaries of virtual culture in Second Life. What is the nature of the 'magic' or fantasy represented in this discourse? Before examining this question, let's further define the nature of the Second Life virtual world.

Definition of Second Life
Virtual worlds like Second Life are complex, multi-layered information platforms which accommodate a number of media, including text, photography, movies, interactive animations, and chat.[13] In Second Life cyberspace, users may choose to design or build their own objects, environments, and characters in the cyberspace world. Rather than consuming the pre-ordained scripts of other authors, they may create their own synthetic scenarios, spaces, and events. This process is allowed by the creativity of users who upload and download information across powerful computer networks.[14] These server networks allow Second Life traffic to exist in real time for hundreds of thousands of users spread around the planet. These computers govern the myriad of activity on myriad 'islands' – domains or sites – of the virtual world. To understand the religious, mythic, magic, or fantasy elements that are present in the Second Life 'virtual' space, let's examine Faris' study of magic realism.

Second Life and Magic Realism
Faris suggests five primary characteristics of the magic realist mode. First, the magic realist text contains an "irreducible element" of magic. Second, the

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[10] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 3.
[11] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotexte, 1983); Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).
[12] Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.
[13] Michael Rymaszewski, James Wagner, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters, Cory Obdrejka, and Benjamin Batstone-Cunningham, *Second Life: The Official Guide* (New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2007), p. 14.
[14] Rymaszewski et al, *Second Life: The Official Guide*, p. 9.

descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world. Third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events. Fourth, the narrative merges different fictional, fantasy, and 'realistic' realms. Finally, the fifth characteristic of magical realism concerns the author's ability to construct a text which disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. Let's observe these five elements as they may exist in the Second Life space.

The "Irreducible Element" of Magic

According to Faris, the "irreducible element" is something we cannot explain according to the laws of Western empirical discourse.[15] She refers us to Tzvetan Todorov's formulation of the fantastic and to his distinction between the uncanny and the marvellous. Todorov refers to "the uncanny", where an event is explained according to the laws of the natural universe as we know it, and "the marvellous", which requires some alteration of those laws.[16] Faris asserts that the magical events, people, and characteristics depicted in magic realist texts cannot be understood by the reader according to logic or to received belief. This may cause us to ask how "irreducible magic" might exist in Second Life. Each Second Life user is represented in both public and private domains by their colourful graphic avatar. The avatar acts as a kind of camera on the virtual world. Through their avatar, the user can explore all angles within the virtual world onscreen, and experience vicarious flight, miraculous abilities, physical motion, and interactivity with others.

The avatar represents the user inside the world, and at the same time, is the symbol of that user which is visible to all other users. Users can recognize the avatar's graphic shape or form as being an icon for the person logged on at home. Unlike computer games, where characters and images are pre-programmed, the characters in Second Life represent real people, who are logged on in realtime. The avatar represents many aspects of "the uncanny". For example, I am able to change my avatar's shape and hair, her wardrobe, her features, and her skin tone using the tools provided free to all Second Life users. These changes occur in an "uncanny" way (in Todorov's sense) that is clearly related to the laws of nature in the real world. For instance, I can change physical aspects of my real self in real life, but would need days at the beauty parlour, a year at the gym, or even plastic surgery, to achieve the kind of changes that are so easy for my avatar in Second Life.

The uncanny ability to instantly change one's shape and appearance highlight our notions about the formation of the individual. By offering us the

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[15] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 7.
[16] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 17.

ability to transform at will, the Second Life world reflects an uncanny extension of the same abilities as they 'really' exist in the real world. The avatar also operates according to "irreducible" magic. For instance, it is possible for the avatar to perform many seemingly marvellous or even 'godlike' feats of creativity and perception. The avatar can fly and can create objects, either 'building' them using software designed for graphic configurations, or manifesting objects out of thin air by purchase or trade.

Other aspects of transformation are represented magically. Shopping is especially magical in Second Life, a consumer paradise where purchase is instant and carefree. If I buy a new dress for my avatar, it is easy to try this on and then to simply press a button to purchase. Similarly I can purchase an entire new building which will then miraculously erect itself from out of a box. To make these purchases, I transfer funds out of my account of virtual currency which I purchase using credit. There is nothing magical about paying for goods online by credit. What is magical, however, is that the usual procedures of shipping, transport, delivery, and installation, are skipped over in this magical universe where the laws of nature are altered.

Such magic realism may perhaps be dubbed 'magic consumerism', but the marvellous aspects of the exchange are not remarked or reflected upon within the discourse of Second Life in any way. Magic like this is normal in the virtual world, which accords with Faris theory. In magic realist texts, the narrator's acceptance of the magic "acts as a model" for our own acceptance of magic.[17] As Faris points out, irreducible magic is characterized by a completely matter-of-fact approach. Our ability to create is also made uncannily easy and prosaic in Second Life, where all avatars are issued with a free set of geometric building blocks and a library of colours and textures. The user works with the natural laws of perspective, construction and geometry to create highly realistic models and 3D graphic renderings of buildings, natural environments, objects and media texts such as movies, music or photographs.

The avatar can also perform more marvellous and magical acts which directly flout the laws and systems of nature. For instance, the avatar can directly affect the artificial 'nature' that is represented by the Second Life sea and landscape, can change the shape, consistency, and dimensions of that landscape, and change the weather and the seasons at will. I can shift the entire lighting scheme from day to night at the click of a button and move a mountain with only a few minutes work. All of these processes are made possible by Second Life building tools. Further "irreducible" magic is enacted when the avatar teleports without effort from location to location in a flash. No vehicles are required for transport and only basic mapping and navigation skills are

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[17] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 20.

required – simple as clicking a button. The teleportation function is a staple element of science fiction and is based on real scientific principles and research involving sub-atomic theory, laser, and particle acceleration technologies.

In Faris' terms, teleportation represents the "irreducible" aspect of magic realism. It challenges our understanding of natural laws but is treated as a given that is neither out of context nor remarkable. However, in Second Life, some telecommunications are extended radically. The avatar can communicate in an instant with others who may be remote in both the virtual world and in the real world. The avatar's ability to locate, communicate with, and travel to others in the virtual world corresponds with Faris' "irreducible element" of magic realism.[18]

In other narrative traditions, mythical, biblical, religious, or folkloric tales, marvellous activity is treated as godlike or miraculous.[19] Interestingly, some of these godlike attributes are depicted in Second Life as basic capabilities that are common to all avatars. In this way, the miraculous or the magical is thus rendered "ordinary". According to Faris, this rendition of the marvellous as ordinary is a key characteristic of the magic realist genre. In this mode, the narrative world includes magical events which would historically be assigned to characters as godlike powers. Faris points out that magical events also call into question the sensory evidence of ordinary scientific and natural laws. The discourse of the virtual world treats marvellous events and characteristics as if they were completely ordinary; as if they were a regular, fully integrated part of everyday Second Life.

In Second Life this prosaic approach to the marvellous produces an ironic distance between the user and the accepted norms of both the religious and scientific establishment. This irony is most evident in the distance between 'me' and my avatar. The Second Life user is able to act vicariously through the avatar in ways that go beyond the laws of 'real' nature. I can gain a new head of hair, wear robes of gold and silver, reduce or enhance the size of body parts, visit exotic locations, and build my own pleasure dome with little or no effort. In one sense, we have been conditioned to accept the skewed logic of the virtual universe by decades of immersion in photographic materials, television, and cinema viewing.[20]

During the twentieth century, cinema and television audiences learned to 'suspend their disbelief' when confronted with images and scenarios that depart from the 'natural' laws of logic. There is nothing logical about Mr. Ed the talking horse, or science fiction movies depicting aliens on other planets.

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[18] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 7.

[19] Willis, *World Mythology*.

[20] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1977).

When such programs are juxtaposed with realist 'news' and documentary forms, the orders of natural law and logic seem to erode.[21] Similarly, as users in Second Life, we may suspend our disbelief that we are flying as our avatar from island to island in a magic realm. We ignore the clash between the ordinary, the natural, and the supernatural on the level of representation. We accept the rich graphic illusion of reality and do not ponder the conflicting logical codes that they imply. In Second Life, as in all forms of magic realism, we suspend our judgment of what is rational and what is irrational.

Detailed Descriptions of the Phenomenal World
Faris suggests that magic realist texts often detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world. The magic realist author may provide realistic and highly detailed descriptions of a fictional world that resembles the one we live in.[22] When we look closely at the Second Life story world we note the saturated colours and intricate animated movements of a 3D graphic tree or flower. We may experience childlike fascination with the image, reminiscent of the wonder we often lose with age or after a jaded familiarity with other media.

What is the source of this magical fascination? Faris refers to the theory of Roland Barthes and Franz Roh to point out that in magic realist texts, mystery does not descend to the real world from some special other realm, but, rather, is a product of detailed descriptions which signal that mystery hides and vibrates behind the real world that is represented by fiction.[23] Faris' second principle suggests that magic realist texts include a co-mingling of the real and the magical such that magical events are usually grounded in a traditionally realistic manner. Second Life is presented on a 3D graphic platform that is almost photo-realistic. Myriad visual details are represented by graphic constructions that are seductive in their colour and clarity. We've seen that the user can use their avatar to experience vicarious vision, public visibility, physical motion, and interactivity within the virtual world.

In general, Second Life functions according to a geographical metaphor where the virtual space is depicted as a facsimile of the real globe, the Earth itself. Within this metaphor, areas of the Second Life world are envisaged as "islands" in a vast sea. As an avatar flies toward an island, or zooms in to examine the area with their camera, increasing levels of detail become available to vision. There is endless colourful graphic detail around the shape of the land, the colour and type of vegetation, the types of architecture and the attire and genre of avatars inhabiting the space. The central spatial metaphor in

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[21] John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (New York: Methuen, 1980).
[22] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 16.
[23] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 15.

this storyworld is geographic, while the psychological or character metaphors are anthropomorphic. The avatar 'is' the user, and can carry out basic human activities in the virtual world.

There is much lifelike detail surrounding the behaviour of avatars and the conduct of business and pleasure in Second Life. Users may purchase, rent or occupy an island, staking it as their local territory, they can form groups, make movies together, or detail plans for meetings and events that occur "inworld", or, inside the virtual space. We have observed that the avatar can design and build, can buy and sell, or can communicate, with a degree of detail that corresponds uncannily to processes in the real world. There are many detailed animations that allow the avatar to interact with others, engage in action and behaviour that is also highly detailed. The avatar can dance, kiss and embrace a friend, walk the dog, drive a car, or go skiing on virtual snow. We have also observed actions and functions which go beyond realism into the realm of magic or myth. Faris asserts that "in addition to including magical events… or phenomena… magical realist fiction includes intriguing magical details". These details represent a departure from realism and from the mimetic role. Faris suggests that this technique of highly detailed realism provides an important grounding for the creation of magical effect, for our "sense of the magical growing within the real world".[24]

In Second Life, this larger-than-life quality is exploited in the highly detailed, 3D graphic rendering of famous geographic sites. Second Life is crowded with models of well-known, large scale architecture, such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Tower of London, New Yorks's Rockerfeller Centre, or the public square in central Amsterdam. Using real locations and events as settings for virtual action adds 'realism' to the magical nature of the Second Life world. One very highly rated Second Life site is that known as "The Pond" which was created by Australia's telecommunications company, Telstra. As with other popular Second Life sites, famous geographic locations provide the island with its central metaphors. The Pond site is modelled loosely on familiar aspects of Australia. Main features include the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Sydney Opera House, and the Outback territory of the central desert and Uluru.

The virtual desert and Uluru sites are sprinkled with references to bush lore and to indigenous Aboriginal culture. There is a virtual magpie that threatens to peck if one approaches his nest and an ambient soundtrack of indigenous didgeridoo music. The mingling of both European and Aboriginal references in the Pond site is an example of the "cultural hybridity" that Faris asserts is a characteristic of magic realism. She observes that magical realism

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[24] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 15.

often merges ancient or traditional – sometimes indigenous – and modern worlds.[25] By placing Aboriginal references within the Pond site, Second Life designers have integrated and combined elements of the magical indigenous culture with both marvellous and ordinary aspects of nature. According to Faris' theory, such detailed models of real world locations enhance the magic realism of the avatar's journey. It is thrilling to 'fly' over the virtual outback while hearing bush bird songs and ancient music. Visitors to the Pond's outback pub are also fascinated by the abundance of authentic 'Aussie' detail in the tin-roof construction, the outdoor bath, the cake recipes and happy-snaps on the photo board that previous avatars have left behind.

The abundance of realistic details in the Second Life virtual world suggests equivalence between the real and the virtual domains. As Faris points out, such detail adds mystery and intrigue to the magic realist story world, and reminds us that the real world is also full of strange and extraordinary fascination. Magic that is present in the details of the real world is reflected in the details of the virtual world. How does this affect the user of the magic realist storyworld?

Reader's Unsettling Doubts

In her study of magic realist fiction, Faris observes a third quality of magical realism which relates to the reader, the viewer, or, in our case, the "user" or "resident", of the Second Life space. Faris observes that the reader may hesitate before categorizing the depicted event or occurrence as magic. S/he may experience a tension between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts about the logic used to depict them. As a result of the conflicting demands of both magic and logic, "the reader has difficulty marshalling evidence to settle questions about the status of events and characters in such fictions".[26]

Doubt and disbelief are familiar to scholars of fantasy. According to Todorov, the "fantastic" is a quality which exists during a story when a reader hesitates between two conflicting beliefs. Magical realist narratives sometimes raise the possibility of interpreting their narrative as a dream, warning the reader that what they are seeing may be part of a delirium.[27] In this way, the magic realist author plays a game with the reader, making us unsure as to the truth or otherwise of reported marvels. Faris asserts, however, that the reader's investment in the codes of realism is still so strong that hesitation remains, producing a strange combination of irony, acceptance, and scepticism, which is

[25] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 21.

[26] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 6.

[27] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 17.

the reader's experience in magic realism.[28] When my avatar flies to the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, I am happy to 'be' her. Where does this state of happy delusion come from? I am immersed in the medium and distracted from my everyday 'real' cares. I relate to the psychology of the avatar character and allow myself to walk in her shoes. This process is similar to the process of cathartic identification I feel with characters in books and films.[29]

Second Life builds an even more magical, detailed, and compelling storyworld. In Faris' terms, I am transfixed by the "irreducible" quality of the images, which defy the logic of my real world. Most compelling, in Second Life, I am the central character of the comedy/drama through identification with my personal avatar. I live my own story and create my own actions, interactions, and individual fantasies, which are part of a larger, collective vision. Further, I am transfixed by the realism of the image, which is highly detailed and almost photographic in a way that Faris suggests allows a co-mingling of the real and the magical. As Faris points out, "the magic in magical realism is clear and we barely hesitate".[30] Further, it is quite usual for all avatars in Second Life to fly and teleport from location to location without special comment or fanfare. Thus according to Faris' theory, Second Life reads as a magic realist discourse. Magical elements are presented in a very matter-of-fact way. The manner of presentation naturalizes the supernatural in a way that may cause the reader some moments of pleasurable hesitation. However, in the end, the immersive and irreducible magic means I 'am' my avatar and I can fly. This leads us to the fourth characteristic of magic realism, the merging of magic and realist realms.

The Magic Realist Narrative Merges Different Realms.
Fourth in the list of Faris criteria for magical realism is the reader's experience of closeness or merging of two story worlds. Faris suggests that magic realist literature demonstrates the intermittent and uncertain nature of space and time. For instance, we can observe Second Life as part of the real world (on a computer screen in my den). At the same time, we can observe Second Life as part of a magic realist realm in cyberspace. Two worlds, the real and the cyberworld, are merged. We have observed that Second Life represents the merger of realist logic with contradictory forms of the marvellous and magical. Second Life also represents the merger of the individual and collective imaginary realms. The individual logs on to a world that is partly designed and built by the collective of users who are "residents" of that world.

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28 Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 20.
29 Lisa Dethridge, *Writing Your Screenplay* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003), p. 85.
30 Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 19-20.

The magic realist merger of the real with the magical is clearly demonstrated on the user's first entry to the Second Life realm. One of the magical aspects of Second Life concerns the use of rituals that are familiar and ancient in origin. For example, the user enters the virtual space as if entering the 'charmed circle', which is the traditional domain of witches, warlocks and other magicians. In ancient magical ritual, the practitioner of magic will first mark out the territory for ritual immersion – often with a chalk circle – and then invite others into the special space. One enters the magic circle of the Second Life world via a special portal which is represented on the computer desktop by the Second Life logo. This graphic takes the form of a primitive human handprint, raised with palm outward. Here we may observe what Faris would call the merging of the ancient and the indigenous with the futuristic. The blue handprint is like an abstract hieroglyph, reminiscent of an ancient cave daubing or temple painting. At the same time, the luminous blue colour and its location on a computer screen suggest techno-futuristic elements which update the image. We click on this blue handprint logo to open our portal to the Second Life world.

We then 'arrive' at the opening page of the Second Life site, which depicts a colourful and inviting virtual landscape. Before entering this 3D world of artificial nature, we pause momentarily in this holding zone on the periphery of the Second Life realm. Statistics stream onto the page, which inform us as about software updates and show the number of users who are logged on to the world we hope to access. To finally complete the ritual and enter Second Life, one must enter a password and then pause while being transported to the Second Life virtual world, arriving either at one's "home" or at one's last location.

According to Faris, we may read this kind of fantasy journey into the world as characteristically postmodern. The magic realist world suggests there is a magical zone that exists parallel to our reality. The Second Life log-on ritual suggests that this other world penetrates or encroaches upon our world. In this zone, I am a representative of our world who penetrates an outpost of another world to be transformed into a superhuman avatar. Faris asserts that the merger of magic and real worlds precipitates "a confrontation between real-world norms (the laws of nature) and other-worldly, supernatural norms".[31]

There is another merging of worlds that is inherent in the Second Life virtual environment. In prior forms of magic realism represented by paintings, books, and cinema, the text itself was part of our real world. The painting, the book or the video came pre-packaged and pre-produced in a fixed format. The artist painted the canvas, the author generated the characters and plot, just as

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[31] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 21.

the producers of a film built the sets, cast the roles and commissioned the script. Second Life, however, represents the merger of two worlds; that of the producer and that of the consumer. It represents the externalisation of the processes which previously occurred behind-the-scenes in the production of the novel or a movie. In Second Life, the text is not final but exists in a permanent state of flux, emerging from the activity of users who take an active and productive role in generating the story world.

Second Life is not a computer game in which players must function according to rules or pre-determined, goal-driven behaviour. In contrast, the Second Life application is actually a portal or doorway to an active, persistent online space. We call such worlds 'persistent' as they exist on the web in realtime and are not switched on or off like movies or TV, but continue online twenty-four hours a day. According to Faris' principle, Second Life represents the merger of real and virtual. It does so reflecting or simulating the continuous emerging 'now' of the real. We have seen that Second Life represents the convergence of the magic and the real, of the logical and the marvellous, of the individual fantasy and the collective form of 'dream'. It also represents a larger structural merger between traditional media such as print and cinema with new collaborative forms of cultural production. In the Second Life virtual world, the audience has moved from their former role as static consumers of ideas and images into a new productive role as authors and players within a story of their own creation. Let's now investigate what effect these various mergers have on our assumptions about time, space, and identity.

Magic Realism Disturbs Received Ideas About Time, Space and Identity.

Faris suggests that in addition to merging different worlds and different worldviews, magical realist fictions may also disturb our "received ideas about time, space and identity".[32] Certainly when visiting any of the large public spaces in Second Life, one is confronted by strange avatars and strange goings-on between winged creatures, angels, gothic and primitive hulks, bestial "furries", spacemen, ballerinas; avatars at work and play, building, buying, dancing, sailing, walking the dog, eating, and drinking as if they were real. Clearly, when logged on to Second Life, there is immense potential to reorder our sense of space and time. I can change my world to suit my mood. I can change the time of day, the weather, my shape, my "look" and my location. I can change my external appearance but also my physical structure; my limbs, my torso, my face, hair and so on. I can also take on characteristics that are not

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[32] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 7.

possible in the real world, and represent myself as a male avatar, an animal, a machine or select from a range of pre-formed identities, including Japanese and Irish folk, vampires, and so on.

I can transform myself in the virtual world by taking on appearances, functions, skills, and actions that help me to re-represent who I am. How? The action in the Second Life mirror causes us to actively question the logic of the real world that is reflected there. The changes I make to my avatar go more than skin deep. In Second Life there is potential for users to express themselves through multiple, merging, and mobile identities. It is possible to have more than one avatar; to invent oneself as a member of the opposite sex or to change languages. I can even impersonate or copy other avatars, or make friends with a "bot" or robot – an artificially intelligent avatar.

All of this transformative action raises ethical questions about the nature of the self in relation to others in the virtual world. It also raises ethical questions that will be new and peculiar to our century concerning our relation to artificial life forms and robots.[33] I may give permission for my avatar identity to be taken over by other beings. This occurs, for instance, if I acquire animation that allows me to walk differently, to dance, or to exhibit special gestures. Thus I can become "animated" and perform dances or other actions around sport, business, or even romance. My human function shifts as a result of immersion as an avatar in the magic realist world. In this way, the traditional construction of 'the individual' is made available for critical revision.

This transformative capacity offers a larger metaphoric or ontological reading of our presentation of self. In Faris' view, magic realism reorients not only our habits of time and space but our sense of identity as well.[34] We have seen that the relationship between user and avatar is laden with irony. For example, there is even an animation in Second Life which allows my avatar to swig vodka from a 3D graphic bottle of Absolut vodka and then to fall about as if drunk. Faris observes that in the magic realist storyworld, our ordinary logic and the empirical project of orderly production and consumption become objects of satire and irony. This is not to say that serious stuff does not happen inside the virtual world. Many users in Second Life report the formation of serious relationships – business, romantic, educational and otherwise – with other users in Second Life. Such relationships are formed online by people who are represented to each other in the form of 3D avatars interacting and sharing information in a virtual world. How are we to understand these relationships?

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[33] Eric Von Hippel, *Democratizing Innovation* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005); Chris Dodds, 'Avatars and the Invisibe Omniscience: The Panoptical Model Within Virtual Worlds' (unpublished M.A. thesis, RMIT University, 2007).

[34] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 25.

Can I really 'know' someone by sharing a simulated version of reality with them? An analysis of human/avatar psychology is beyond the scope of this paper and forms the ground for future research. It is certainly appropriate to the debate amongst transhumanist and bio-conservative philosophers. This debate about the relationship of robots and avatars to humans has great relevance for future research, especially as robotics and other artificial life forms are becoming more prevalent features of mainstream culture.

Conclusion

I applied Wendy Faris' theory of the magic realist literary genre to the online virtual 'world' known as Second Life, and conclude that Second Life manifests all five key elements of magic realist style. Many of the regular activities of the avatar (flight, creation, transformation) seem magical in Faris' sense; marvellous actions in a world that transcends the usual laws of physics. These marvellous, even godlike, acts and deeds are paradoxically treated as normal and ordinary within the magic realist storyworld. We also observe that the user may experience irony or hesitation when noting the disjunction between magic and empirical logic. However, in line with Faris' theory, there is no fuss or fanfare associated with magical events and behaviour in Second Life: they are all seamlessly integrated into the magic realist story world.

We have observed how the merging of logical and magical realms in Second Life is due partly to the highly-wrought, photorealistic, 3D visual detail. The merging of myself with my 3D graphic avatar is symbolic of this merging of worlds. In Second Life, the co-existence of the rational and the irrational produces the delicious irony of virtual experience. This 'virtual mirror effect' means one's real life and one's virtual Second Life often merge and reflect on each other. Immersion in the virtual world produces a heightened awareness of the social niceties and religious taboos that we all take for granted in the real world. Social and cultural norms are reflected here as often artificial and arbitrary.

As Faris points out, the magical realist vision "exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions". When engaged in Second Life, the user experiences a kind of 'virtual mirror effect' through the action of the avatar. According to Faris, the magic realist text provides a kind of two-sided mirror, "situated between two worlds… that space of intersection where a number of magically real fictions exist".[35] This collision of religion, logic, and magic produces an ironic

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[35] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p.21.

distancing effect, where the accepted norms are exposed as arbitrary constructions, just like the constructions within the virtual world.

Second Life also demonstrates Faris' fifth element of magic realist style. It disturbs our accepted notions of location, time, and identity. Faris suggests that the genre may be seen as a metafiction where the storytelling space is opened up to wider potentials. It's clear that Second Life graphics provide users with imaginative license that frees them from the requirements of realism and from its mimetic role. Further, the highly detailed visual world is not created by a single author, nor by a team of dedicated producers, but by an entire population of users. Within the virtual world, the previously passive audience consumer is empowered to be an active creator of character, action, and setting. What we may also note about Second Life is the potential for writers and artists across a range of media to present different visions of reality. Theorists like Faris and the French philosopher Jean Baudrillardwould see this detailed simulation of life as a blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction.[36]

Second Life, then, allows a particularly postmodern confrontation between different ontological levels in the structure of the texts. Magic realism allows an ironic distance from the usual mythic, religious, and scientific worldviews. According to Faris, this distance allows us to negotiate with the magical realist world.[37] In the magic realist realm, a reversal of logical thinking occurs, whereby the supernatural is made ordinary and the natural appears strange. Faris describes a process where, "in the light of disruptions of cause and effect and… of magic recounted with little or no comment, in conjunction with accounts of extraordinary but actual phenomena and events, the real as we know it may seem amazing or even ridiculous".[38]

We have also seen that magic realist forms like Second Life are inspired not only by 'primitive' myth but also by technology. Faris notes that the marriage of high technology with postcolonial awareness may "encourage toleration of the dissonance caused by radically different voices".[39] From a more critical viewpoint, Baudrillard suggests that in the realm of simulation, the boundaries between truth and fiction may allow for distortions of the record such that we become less able to discern the subtle, psycho-social effects of propagating multiple "truths" within our fantasy and real worlds.[40] From an anthropological perspective, the magic realist storytelling space may be akin to

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[36] Baudrillard, *Simulations*.
[37] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 8.
[38] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 11.
[39] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. 169.
[40] Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

the magical thinking of so-called 'primitive' tribal humanity.[41] In her preface, Faris jokes about our "over civilized century" whose attraction to primitive arts allows us a kind of "permissible savagery".[42] It is ironic indeed to consider that we may be using sophisticated digital tools such as computers to regress into primal states of tribal or 'primitive' magical thinking. Perhaps we may thus re-define human imagination as partly a project of deliberately transcending or ignoring empirical rules and logic. We may do so to re-attain the spontaneity of the 'primitive' or the joy of the child, who plays at the joyful integration of image and idea, self and other.

Following this study, I agree with Faris that magic realist narrative stress the magic of fiction rather than the magic in fiction. I also agree that the magic realist text is a kind of metafiction which calls into question the very premises of narrative and fantasy. Perhaps in the light of this, we may define Second Life as a magic realist metafiction which reflects on the processes of narrative and of character within 3D graphic, digital discourse. Faris' helps us understand that when creative vision is enhanced by the "magic" of photo-realistic 3D graphic tools, what we see is what we believe. As the Sanskrit term itself suggests, an avatar in this realm may indeed represent a divine being with superhuman potentials. Baudrillard cautions us however to keep our feet on the ground; to remember that within computer-generated simulations of reality, the location of "truth" and "reality" within the image becomes harder and harder to assess.

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[41] Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind.*
[42] Faris, *The Ordinary Uses of Enchantment*, p. xi.