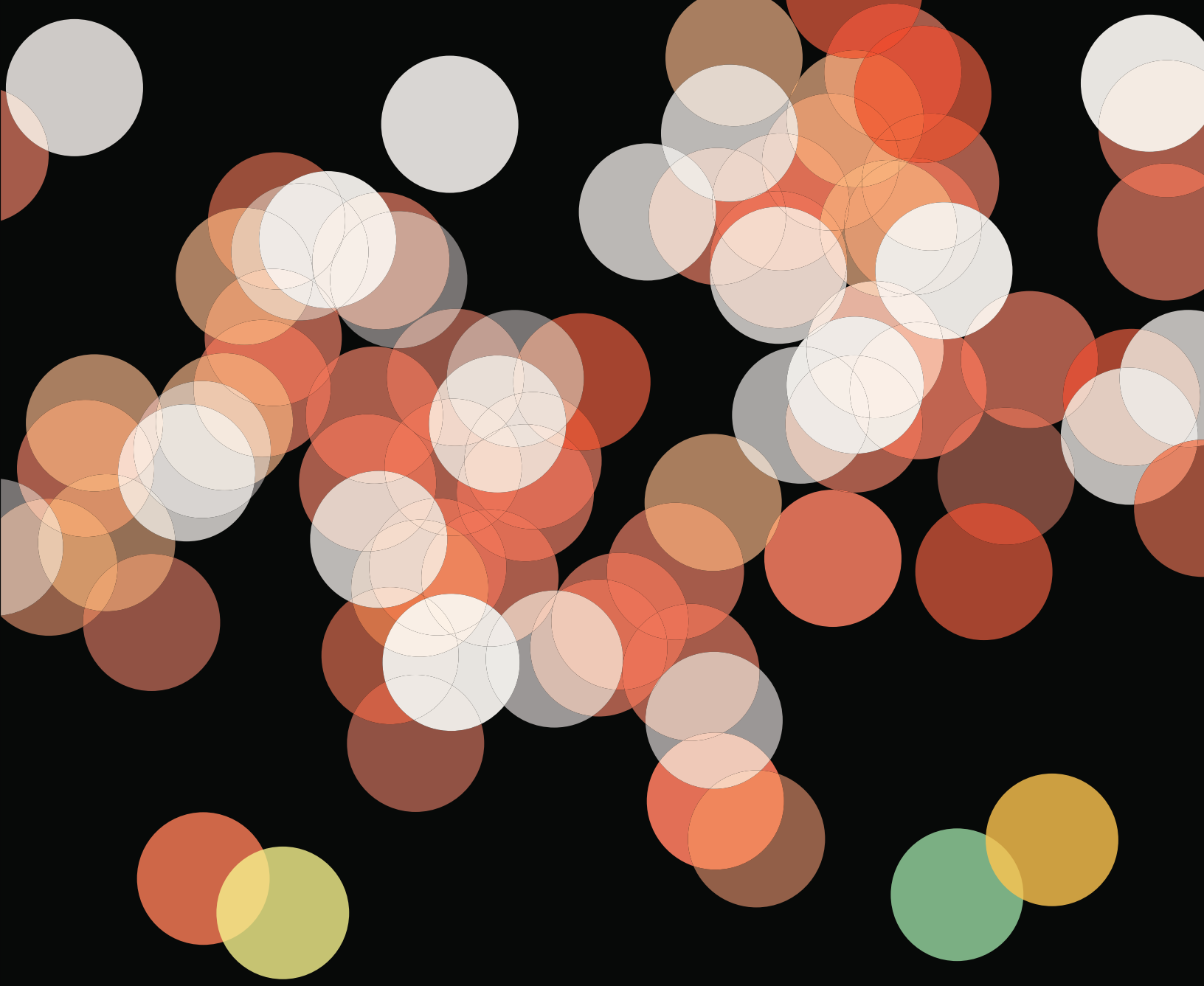

PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

About Philosophy
Robert Paul Wolff
Eleventh Edition

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CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

How Virtual Is Virtual Reality?

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For 2,500 years, philosophers have debated the nature of reality. Is it material, like atoms and molecules, planets and stars? Is it mental, like ideas and feelings, hopes and beliefs? Is it eternal and unchangeable, like God, or fleeting and ever-changing, like our dreams? Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Kant, all have weighed in on this most fundamental of all questions. But not one of the great philosophers of past ages could possibly have imagined that in the twenty-first century, a new candidate would step forward and claim to be real: The virtual world of computer-generated people and things.

Those of us with even the most superficial grasp of the way computers work know that on-screen characters—avatars, they are now called—are simply very complicated strings of zeroes and ones, computer code written in binary notation. The information technology majors among us may even know how those strings of zeroes and ones get translated into fluid, fast-moving images on a computer or television screen (or the screen of a cellphone, for that matter). But that is not the end of it—not by a long sight.

Millions of people worldwide are now spending many, many hours a day living, through their computer identities, in extremely complex virtual worlds initially designed by for-profit companies and launched into cyberspace for the entertainment of their customers. In those worlds, players following the rules of the game create characters who then engage in economic, military, exploratory, even romantic adventures. These characters earn and spend virtual money, buy and rent out virtual vacation homes, form alliances, fight battles, compete in virtual marketplaces, and even contract virtual fatal diseases and virtually die.

All of this takes place—if, indeed, it is appropriate to describe it as "taking place"—in a cyberspace world disconnected from the real world in which the players—not their avatars—live. Or does it? Real people, it seems, pay real American dollars for virtual property "owned" in a game by the avatars of other real people. In this and many other ways, the line between the real and the virtual begins to blur until it becomes very difficult to say just exactly why we should refuse to acknowledge that the virtual is real.

We begin with a long, detailed account of the real and virtual doings of a real person named Ric Hoogestraat and the complaint of his wife, Sue, who fears that her husband has cheated on her by having his avatar marry the avatar of a woman playing the same game. It is easy enough to laugh at poor Mrs. Hoogestraat, but has she been any less abandoned by Ric than she would be if he were having an affair with a real person?

The next piece explores some of the extraordinarily tricky legal, professional, and economic tangles you can get into when you enter a virtual world and make it the focus of your hopes and aspirations.

My guess is that a good many of you are yourselves engaged at some level of commitment in a virtual world game (although I sincerely hope it is not getting in the way of doing your philosophy class assignments!).

Is This Man Cheating On His Wife?

Alexandra Alter

On a scorching July afternoon, as the temperature creeps toward 118 degrees in a quiet suburb east of Phoenix, Ric Hoogestraat sits at his computer with the blinds drawn, smoking a cigarette. While his wife, Sue, watches television in the living room, Mr. Hoogestraat chats online with what appears on the screen to be a tall, slim redhead.

He's never met the woman outside of the computer world of Second Life, a well-chronicled digital fantasyland with more than eight million registered "residents" who get jobs, attend concerts and date other users. He's never so much as spoken to her on the telephone. But their relationship has taken on curiously real dimensions. They own two dogs, pay a mortgage together and spend hours shopping at the mall and taking long motorcycle rides. This May, when Mr. Hoogestraat, 53, needed real-life surgery, the redhead cheered him up with a private island that cost her $120,000 in the virtual world's currency, or about $480 in real-world dollars. Their bond is so strong that three months ago, Mr. Hoogestraat asked Janet Spielman, the 38-year-old Canadian woman who controls the redhead, to become his virtual wife.

The woman he's legally wed to is not amused. "It's really devastating," says Sue Hoogestraat, 58, an export agent for a shipping company, who has been married to Mr. Hoogestraat for seven months. "You try to talk to someone or bring them a drink, and they'll be having sex with a cartoon."

Mr. Hoogestraat plays down his online relationship, assuring his wife that it's only a game. While many busy people can't fathom the idea of taking on another set of commitments, especially imaginary ones, Second Life and other multiplayer games are moving into the mainstream. With some 30 million people now involved world-wide, there is mounting concern that some are squandering, even damaging their real lives by obsessing over their "second" ones. That's always been a concern with videogames, but a field of study suggests that the boundary between virtual worlds and reality may be more porous than experts previously imagined.

Photographer Robbie Cooper and writer Tracy Spaight document virtual worlds around the globe in the book "Alter Ego." They answer questions about the nuances of identity play and the cultural differences of gaming. Also, a slideshow includes photos of subjects depicted in the book and comments from Mr. Cooper.

Nearly 40% of men and 53% of women who play online games said their virtual friends were equal to or better than their real-life friends, according to a survey of 30,000 gamers conducted by Nick Yee, a recent Ph.D. graduate from Stanford University. More than a quarter of gamers said the emotional highlight of the past week occurred in a computer world, according to the survey, which was published in 2006 by Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press's journal Presence.

"There's a fuzziness that's emerging between the virtual world and the real world," says Edward Castronova, associate professor in the Department of Telecommunications at Indiana University, Bloomington.

A burly man with a long gray ponytail, thick sideburns and a salt-and-pepper handlebar mustache, Mr. Hoogestraat looks like the cross between a techie and the Grateful Dead fan that he is. He drives a motorcycle and wears faded black Harley-Davidson T-shirts around the house. A former college computer graphics teacher, Mr. Hoogestraat was never much of a game enthusiast before he discovered Second Life. But since February, he's been spending six hours a night and often 14 hours at a stretch on weekends as Dutch Hoorenbeek, his six-foot-nine, muscular, motorcycle-riding cyber-self. The character looks like a younger, physically enhanced version of him: a biker with a long black ponytail, strong jaw and thick handlebar mustache.

In the virtual world, he's a successful entrepreneur with a net worth of about $1.5 million in the site's currency, the linden, which can be earned or purchased through Second Life's Web site at a rate of about 250 lindens per U.S. dollar. He owns a mall, a private beach club, a dance club and a strip club. He has 25 employees, online persons known as avatars who are operated by other players, including a security guard, a mall concierge, a manager and assistant manager, and the "exotic dancers" at his club. He designs bikinis and lingerie, and sells them through his chain store, Red Headed Lovers.

"Here, you're in total control," he says, moving his avatar through the mall using the arrow keys on his keyboard.

Virtual worlds like Second Life have fast become a testing ground for the limits of relationships, both online and off. In the game, cyber sex, marriage and divorce are common. Avatars have sued one another,

as well as the site's parent company, Linden Lab, in real-life courts for in-game grievances such as copyright infringement and property disputes. The site now has more than eight million registered "residents," up from 100,000 in January 2006, though the number of active users is closer to 450,000, according to Linden Lab's most recent data. A typical "gamer" spends 20 to 40 hours a week in a virtual world.

Academics have only recently begun to intensively study the social dynamics of virtual worlds, but some say they are astonished by how closely virtual relationships mirror real life. "People respond to interactive technology on social and emotional levels much more than we ever thought," says Byron Reeves, a professor of communication at Stanford University. "People feel bad when something bad happens to their avatar, and they feel quite good when something good happens."

On a neurological level, players may not distinguish between virtual and real-life relationships, recent studies suggest. In an experiment conducted at the University of Washington's Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, test subjects were hooked up to neuroimaging machines while they played a simple computer game in which they moved colored discs to form a pattern. When told that they were playing with a person rather than a computer, participants showed increased activity in areas of the brain that govern social interaction.

Other experiments show that people socializing in virtual worlds remain sensitive to subtle cues like eye contact. In one study, participants moved their avatars back if another character stood too close, even though the space violation was merely virtual, says Jeremy Bailenson, director of Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, which was created five years ago to study social behavior in virtual worlds. "Our brains are not specialized for 21st-century media," says Prof. Reeves. "There's no switch that says, 'Process this differently because it's on a screen.'"

On a Saturday afternoon in July, Mr. Hoogestraat decides to go to the beach. He lights a cigarette and enters Second Life, one of 42,752 people logged on at the time. Immediately, he gets an instant message from Tenaj Jackalope, his Second Life wife, saying she'll be right there.

They meet at their home, a three-story, modern-looking building on a grassy bluff overlooking the ocean, then head to his beach club by teleporting, or instantly moving to a new screen by typing in a location. A full-blown dance party is under way. A dozen avatars, digital representations of other live players, gyrate on the sand, twisting their hips and waving their arms. Several dance topless and some are fully nude. Dutch gets pelted with instant messages.

"What took you so long, Dutch?" a dancer asks.

"Howdy, Boss Man," an avatar named Whiskey Girl says.

Before discovering Second Life, Mr. Hoogestraat had bounced between places and jobs, working as an elementary schoolteacher and a ski instructor, teaching computer graphics and spending two years on the road selling herbs and essential oils at Renaissance fairs. Along the way, he picked up a bachelor's degree in education from Arizona State University and took graduate courses in education and instructional technology at the University of Wyoming and the University of Arizona. He currently works as a call-center operator for Vangent Inc., a large corporation that outsources calls for the government and private companies. He makes $14 an hour.

Mr. Hoogestraat learned about Second Life in February, while watching a morning news segment. His mother had just been hospitalized with pancreatic cancer—she died two weeks later—and he wanted a distraction. He was fascinated by the virtual world's free-wheeling, Vegas-like atmosphere. With his computer graphics background, he quickly learned how to build furniture and design clothing. He upgraded his avatar, buying defined stomach muscles, a furry chest and special hair that sways when he walks. Other, missing anatomy was also available for purchase. Before long, Mr. Hoogestraat was spending most nights and weekends acting out his avatar's life.

When Mr. Hoogestraat was diagnosed with diabetes and a failing gall bladder a few months ago, he was home-bound for five weeks. Some days, he played from a quarter to six in the morning until two in the morning, eating in front of the computer and pausing only for bathroom breaks.

During one marathon session, Mr. Hoogestraat met Tenaj (Janet spelled backward) while shopping. They became fast friends, then partners.

A week later, he asked her to move into the small apartment he rented in Phantom Island, an area of Second Life. In May, they married in a small ceremony in a garden overlooking a pond. She wore a strapless white dress that she bought at a Second Life yard sale and he wore a tuxedo. Thirty of their avatar friends attended.

"There's a huge trust between us," says Ms. Spielman, a divorced mother of two who works in office

sales in Calgary, Alberta, and began logging on to Second Life in January. "We'll tell each other everything."

That intimacy hasn't spilled into real life. They never speak and have no plans to meet. Aside from the details they share over Second Life instant messages, each knows little about the other beyond what's posted on their brief online user profiles.

Mr. Hoogestraat's real-life wife is losing patience with her husband's second life. "It's sad; it's a waste of human life," says Mrs. Hoogestraat, who is dark-haired and heavy-set with smooth, pale skin. "Everybody has their hobbies, but when it's from six in the morning until two in the morning, that's not a hobby, that's your life."

Tenaj Jackalope and Dutch Hoorenbeek married in May.

The real Mrs. Hoogestraat is no stranger to online communities—she met her husband in a computer chat room three years ago. Both were divorced and had adult children from previous marriages, and Mrs. Hoogestraat says she was relieved to find someone educated and adventurous after years of failed relationships. Now, as she pays household bills, cooks, does laundry, takes care of their three dogs and empties ashtrays around the house while her husband spends hours designing outfits for virtual strippers and creating labels for virtual coffee cups, she wonders what happened to the person she married.

One Saturday night in early June, she discovered his cyber wife. He called her over to the computer to show her an outfit he had designed. There, above the image of the redheaded model, it said "Mrs. Hoorenbeek." When she confronted him, he huffily replied that it was just a game.

Two weeks later, Mrs. Hoogestraat joined an online support group for spouses of obsessive online gamers called EverQuest Widows, named after another popular online fantasy game that players call Evercrack.

"It's avalanched beyond repair," says Sharra Goddard, 30, Mrs. Hoogestraat's daughter and a sign-language interpreter in Chandler, Ariz. She says she and her two brothers have offered to help their mother move out of the house.

Mrs. Hoogestraat says she's not ready to separate. "I'm not a monster; I can see how it fulfills parts of his life that he can no longer do because of physical limitations, because of his age. His avatar, it's him at 25," she says. "He's a good person. He's just fallen down this rabbit hole."

Mr. Hoogestraat, for his part, doesn't feel he's being unfaithful. "She watches TV, and I do this," he says. "I tried to get her involved so we could play together, but she wasn't interested."

Family-law experts and marital counselors say they're seeing a growing number of marriages dissolve over virtual infidelity. Cyber affairs don't legally count as adultery unless they cross over into the real world, but they may be cited as grounds for divorce and could be a factor in determining alimony and child custody in some states, according to several legal experts, including Jeff Atkinson, professor at the DePaul University College of Law and author of the American Bar Association's "Guide to Marriage, Divorce and Families."

This past June, the American Medical Association called for more psychiatric research on excessive gaming, but backed away from classifying videogame addiction as a formal disorder.

Some gamers say the addictive dangers have been overstated, citing surveys that show most players spend fewer hours online than the average American spends watching television. And unlike television, online games are social. In June, when Mr. Hoogestraat first logged on to Second Life after he had his gall bladder removed, he was greeted with 50 messages from virtual friends asking him how the surgery went.

Still, some antigaming organizations and psychiatrists say the social aspects of such games may be driving up pressure to play for longer stretches. Kimberly Young, a clinical psychologist and founder of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, said the majority of the 200 cases a year she sees for counseling involve interactive fantasy role-playing games. "They start forming attachments to other players," she says. "They start shutting out their primary relationships."

Back in the world of Second Life, Mr. Hoogestraat's avatar and Tenaj have gotten bored at the beach, so they teleport to his office, a second-floor room with a large, tinted window overlooking the stage of the strip club he owns. Tenaj plays with her pug, Jolly Roger, commanding the dog to sit and fetch its toy. Dutch drinks a Corona, Mr. Hoogestraat's beer of choice in real life, and sits at his desk. For a while, Mr. Hoogestraat, sitting at his computer, stares at an image of his avatar sitting at his computer.

The next morning, he's at his computer at 10 A.M., wearing the same black Harley-Davidson T-shirt. It is Sunday. He's been logged on to Second Life for four hours.

Staring purposefully at the screen, he manipulates his avatar, who is shirtless in cut-off denim shorts and flip-flops and renovating the lower level of his mall. "Sunday is my heavy-duty work day," Mr. Hoogestraat explains. Earlier that morning, he evicted 10 shop owners who hadn't paid rent, and signed up four new vendors, including an avatar named Arianna who sells virtual necklaces and women's shoes.

From the kitchen, Mrs. Hoogestraat asks if he wants breakfast. He doesn't answer. She sets a plate of breakfast pockets on the computer console and goes into the living room to watch a dog competition on television. For two hours, he focuses intently on building a coffee shop for the mall. Two other avatars gather to watch as he builds stairs and a counter, using his cursor to resize wooden planks.

At 12:05, he's ready for a break. He changes his avatar into jeans, leather motorcycle chaps and motorcycle gloves, and teleports to a place with a curvy, mountain road. It's one of his favorite places for riding his Harley look-alike. The road is empty. He weaves his motorcycle across the lanes. Sunlight glints off the ocean in the distance.

Mrs. Hoogestraat pauses on her way to the kitchen and glances at the screen.

"You didn't eat your breakfast," she says.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see it there," he responds.

"They probably won't taste any good now," she says, taking the plate.

Over the next five hours, Mr. Hoogestraat stares at the computer screen, barely aware of his physical surroundings. He adds a coffee maker and potted palms to the cafe, goes swimming through a sunken castle off his waterfront property, chats with friends at a biker clubhouse, meets a new store owner at the mall, counsels an avatar friend who had recently split up with her avatar boyfriend, and shows his wife Tenaj the coffee shop he's built.

By 4 P.M., he's been in Second Life for 10 hours, pausing only to go to the bathroom. His wrists and fingers ache from manipulating the mouse to draw logos for his virtual coffee cups. His back hurts. He feels it's worth the effort. "If I work a little harder and make it a little nicer, it's more rewarding," he says.

Sitting alone in the living room in front of the television, Mrs. Hoogestraat says she worries it will be years before her husband realizes that he's traded his real life for a pixilated fantasy existence, one that doesn't include her.

"Basically, the other person is widowed," she says. "This other life is so wonderful; it's better than real life. Nobody gets fat, nobody gets gray. The person that's left can't compete with that."

Real Discrimination against Digital People

Stephen Euin Cobb

"I must have lost almost half of my potential contracts because the companies wouldn't deal with an anonymous avatar." So says Scope Cleaver, a designer and architect inside Second Life. Praised by New York Times Magazine for his design of Princeton University's Diversity Building (the article headline: "Architectural Wonders of the Virtual World," 12/7/2008), his creations have extended his reputation beyond Second Life and across several continents, but even that can't protect him from what appears to be discrimination. "I offered the companies a real world proxy who could sign all the papers, but it didn't seem to help."

Some people see the freedom of anonymity that virtual worlds give them as a nice perk. Others enter virtual worlds to promote their real world selves, or projects, and avoid anonymity for their avatars as much as possible. But for thousands, keeping their avatar's identity separate from their real world identity is a serious philosophic matter. They believe they should strive to be the people they are in their hearts and minds, rather than the person suggested by features of their physical body that are observable on the outside. After all, these external features were forced on them. Ethnicity is the cliché example, but other accidents of birth that either can't be changed—or can't be easily changed—include age, gender, stature, attractiveness, nationality, social class, the accent of their birth language, even regional dialect. None of these were chosen, and they are impossible or difficult to change in the physical world. Calling themselves Digital People, they design avatars that better fit their self image, and then use them to build reputations, personalities and social circles that also better fit them.

Those who oppose this philosophy feel that Digital People present a false self to the world—a grand and elaborate lie. Bad feeling has accumulated as the result of social pressure and insults experienced by Digital People. Even non-Digital People who mean well have shown remarkable intolerance.

"I won't disclose names," Scope said. "What I'm talking about is pretty sensitive. I'm awaiting feedback for a few jobs right now. Some of these are recognizable corporate names, and it's international: France, Germany, etc."

"Last year I had a German client; about $10,000 USD contract. Lost it because they didn't trust an anonymous avatar."

"Many potential clients are expecting to talk to me on the phone and sign Real Life documents. I tell them that I have two options. One is total anonymity, which sometimes works because I have a pretty solid reputation in Second Life and a recognizable name. The other is I offer a Real Life proxy to sign all papers. Exactly the same as when people do business in Real Life. It's binding. If something goes wrong, they can sue him."

"I can't seem to find a way around it. It's very difficult to tell your client you want to remain anonymous and then say, 'trust me.' They immediately suspect something is wrong. Reputation and photos of past projects is enough for some—it was for the Estonian Embassy, Princeton University and others—but I could have worked for the biggest names in SL if it wasn't for that obstacle."

Digital People who rely less on non-digital people tend to experience something more akin to confusion than discrimination. Extropia DaSilva (a Digital Person who is also a transhumanism activist, essayist and text-based public speaker) explained, "It is not uncommon for people to ask out loud if I have Multiple Personality Disorder after I explain what a digital person is."

Ivanova Shostakovich (a Digital Person who is also a virtual furniture designer and the co-owner, with Peter Stindberg, of a Second Life store called Greene Concept Furniture) emphasizes that discrimination is not limited to the divide between the devoutly anonymous Digital People and those avatars for whom anonymity is unimportant: "Most examples of prejudice I have heard of in Second Life are between different cultural subsets. For me, reality and legitimacy were digital. I was involved in a project that would affect my digital reputation. For him, reality and legitimacy were atomic."

Hers is a valid point. Furries (avatars that resemble natural or cartoon-like animals) still risk frequent harassment in public places; and avatars that resemble children are banned in many SL locations because of fear that some may be the creation of child molesters looking for avatar-on-avatar sex. Small-breasted short women who want their avatar to look like their real body have been subjected to insults and discrimination based on this fear, as have people who wish to relive aspects of their childhood by being an avatar child.

Discrimination today is pretty much universally frowned on. But Digital People's rights are still subject to much debate, even in the most techno-progressive circles. For example, when, in December, 2008, the Order of Cosmic Engineers (a transhumanist organization of physical people that holds meetings in Second Life because its membership is global) accepted into its ruling body not one but three Digital People, there was a passionate debate as to whether the new members could vote. Since Second Life allows anyone to create any number of avatars, without limit, for free, community members voiced concern that someone who exists only as an anonymous avatar could vote twice by creating two avatars. Despite the Order of Cosmic Engineers' respect and admiration for the individuals in question, they decided to make the three Digital People non-voting members.

Scope Cleaver doesn't seem to think things will change soon. "I don't see it improving. There was a chat about this recently in the Metanomics Group (ed: a group in Second Life that discusses business, education, economics, science and policy in the metaverse: meaning all virtual worlds, gaming or not, online and off). [Anonymous avatars] seem to be a hot topic in SL related blogs lately. There sure seems to be a movement toward untangling and shaping how people think about the issue." When asked if the mood was mostly pro or anti, he said, "Anti, especially when it comes to business."

World of Warcraft has seen discrimination too. On June 19, 2007, Wired online reported that some guilds will not let players join unless they use voice chat, because text-only chat "seems shifty."

Sophrosyne Stenvaag is the host of Sophrosyne's Saturday Salon, a series of discussion events in Second Life. Her guests have included, in avatar form, many noteworthy thinkers such as bestselling authors Robert J. Sawyer, David Brin, Charles Stross, Catherine Asaro and Kim Stanley Robinson. Sophrosyne experienced some in-your-face discrimination from within the hallowed halls of academia.

"Last summer I attended a fascinating conference in a digital world," Sophrosyne told me. "There was a lot of interest in keeping the group together afterwards to build a digital community. Two of the three sessions were run by academics with little