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Virtual travel and the pleasure peripheries – case study of Second life

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Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the phenomenon of virtual tourism, in its departures from, and similarities to, corporeal tourism, as well as exploring the key drivers for the technological development of the pleasure periphery via the screen. The platform of Second Life (SL) and its 'holiday islands' are used as a case study to explore these issues, in addition to investigating the primacy of the gaze and its relationship with embodiment. The platform of Second Life has been chosen because it is one of the most popular three-dimensional virtual environments (3DVEs) in use globally. As a primarily visual medium, SL is illustrative of the postmodern condition that places visual culture at the centre of meaning, identity and social practice. The interpretation of the visual data is based primarily on the visual representation of the avatars and the spatial features of the virtual environment. Significantly, rather than simply being part of the scenery or being static in view of the landscape, one may participate with others in acting out what it means to be part of the place. Areas that will be explored are the capabilities of the technology in presenting a tourist experience that goes beyond spectatorship to an engaging interactive experience. Also to be considered are what are the visual cues that convey the site as one of pleasure and escape. Of interest is how these sites compare with real-life tourist imagery. In an increasingly screen-based society and time-poor lifestyle we will discuss the benefits and limitations of virtual travel and the greater ability to experiment with gender and sexuality through the creation and embodiment of an avatar. As such, to be examined is the freedom of choice associated with embodiment and space within SL which may be both a form of escapism as well as an active participation in a world that can be seen to exist on the boundary of corporeal and virtual lives.

To illustrate the possibilities and limitations of virtual tourism, as well as issues related to gendered embodiment and sexuality, four SL regions are analysed. These are The Lost Gardens of Apollo (Apollo), Eden: The Seduction (Eden), Greek Gold Lesbian Resort (Greek Gold), and Zeus: Gay Club (Zeus). Apollo¹ is a visually rich island full of complexity and detail. Created by Dane Zander, the region is featured in SL's destination guide, which in part explains its popularity. All avatars, including 'furries' (humanoid-animal avatars), and fantasy creatures are encouraged to visit the region. Eden is a secluded space, set on a beach that holds nightly and weekly events, as well as having surrounds that include a dance club, a large shopping area, and a castle with secluded rooms. According to its welcome note and associated advertising, Eden is a space for "lesbian and bi girls" and is part of a region called 'The Seduction' on SL. Greek Gold is a large discrete island, far bigger than Eden, and is surrounded by a coast which gives the space an island resort feel. Its main features include an entry space where avatars are greeted by a Greek Gold administrator, a large dance club, coastal lookouts, gazebos for private retreats, a number of waterfalls overlooking a river in the central part of the island, a margarita bar and a beach for surfing. The space is inclusive of all women, explicitly stating

¹ Apollo is no longer an active site.

“lesbian, dyke, butch, boi, femme, girl, (and) gay” females (*Eden*, 2011). Zeus Gay Club and Concert Hall is a space located within a region called Gay City Cologne catering predominantly for gay males. It is part of a wider region entitled Gay City Estate that has entertainment as well as residential areas for the LGBTI community. There are no restrictions on who can visit the space, so female avatars can, and do, frequent it. As such, these regions of SL, which can be described as island escapes, because of their idyllic seclusion, provide the visitor with a space to engage in the touristic behaviours of the ‘fun holiday’, which often follow the formula ‘sun, sand, sea and sex’. John Urry describes the ‘fun holiday’ as aimed at individuals looking to engage with sexual encounters with the opposite sex (Urry, 2002: 139). However, in this context of SL the fun holiday, more aptly, also describes queer encounters and significantly the performance of gender in the virtual realm. As Luongo (2002) highlights, travel and tourism is an important factor of gay and lesbian identity development. Travel in SL offers this possibility through the exploration of gender and sexuality in a socially meaningful space. In terms of the virtual world, Nunes (2006) asserts that the spatial nature of the Internet is significant in developing evocative experiences, which complement and contribute to life in the real world (Boellstorf, 2010). Torno (2011: 27) also claims that the ‘real world’ and SL “exert a mutual influence on each other”, whereby ‘real life’ “inspires virtual attitudes and travel behavior”. Furthermore, both virtual and real world travel share the possibilities of providing a relative freedom of expression separated from everyday anxieties.

Travel and the pleasure periphery

The pleasure periphery is a term initially used by Turner and Ash (1975) to describe the regions of the world that were used post-WWII as places of escape for tourists from rich Western countries. Centred on sun and sex, these destinations were, and still are, utilised as escapes from the everyday for hedonism and indulgence. Behaviour within these spaces can be described as liminoid (liminal without ritual), or “those socially accepted and approved activities which seem to deny or ignore the legitimacy of the institutionalised statuses, roles, norms, values, and rules of everyday, ‘ordinary life’” (Lett, 198: 45). Liminoid behaviour is often characterised by tourist behaviour and experience that, to some degree, inverts the behaviour and experience of the everyday insofar as the tourist space introduces a change in the customary behaviour of the individual and both allows and encourages other forms of identity performance and sexual practice. Or, as described by Selanniemi (2003: 25), “the liminoid destination encourages behaviour that would not normally occur at home”. Sites specifically based on hedonism, sexuality and sexual expression offer readily accessible zones for instant bodily gratification and interactions, including the possibility of sexual liaisons.

Islands can evoke a sense of play and fascination not found elsewhere in society, particularly Western societies (specifically European and North American). According to Sharpley (2004: 23), the features of islands, namely “the sense of distance, exclusivity, separateness, insularity (and) tradition” can be termed an ‘islandness’. This ‘islandness’ elicits a type of behaviour and evokes certain cultural memories that contrast with contemporary life and social expectations. Unlike the rigid spaces of home, work and family, islands allow for an exploration of behaviour:

They are places to which tourists are often attracted by the perceived opportunities for hedonistic or unlicensed playfulness, a fantasy ‘other’ affording opportunities for activities or behaviour constrained by the customs and structures of everyday home life.

Furthermore, there is the notion of utopia that represents an idealised frontier, as well as a search for transcendence. Thomas More’s (1516) modernist conception of utopia has carried over into the contemporary imagination whereby the Greek island, especially in relation to European hedonism, has become synonymous with the word. The civilised, built environment of the Western city-state is

replete with certainty, monotony and reason, which is opposed to the frontier of the utopian environment with its nature, ambiguity and spirituality. Ultimately however, utopia reveals itself primarily as a psychological state to these symbols – its brief temporality holds transcendence as a transient phenomenon catalysed by some bodily sensation of presence. The holiday experience on Eden, Apollo, Greek Gold and Zeus offers the possibility of an elsewhere, away from the assumed drudgery of the everyday.

Second Life and travel

The frontier in the post-modern world has shifted from the tangible period of exploration and imperialist conquest to cyberspace and the infinite possibility of space itself (Marin, 1993: 406). Second Life tourist spaces can be defined as those regions within the platform that re-present holiday spaces of the corporeal, with their primary use for real-time interactions between avatars (embodied representative selves) that feature hedonism and potential sexual liaisons as the primary motivations for visiting the spaces. This search can be categorised as seeking ‘sun lust’ through the screen, which “may be more appropriately reconceptualised as the ever more extensive and intensive search for the exoticism of ‘the pleasure periphery’ (rather than merely a search for better amenities and climate elsewhere)” (Markwick, 2001: 421). The SL spaces investigated for this study (Apollo, Eden, Zeus and Greek Gold) are spaces that represent ‘islandness’ through their appeal to island symbolism and explicit permission of subversive behaviours. This ‘islandness’ is maintained principally in the following ways: the visual imagery of the island itself (its form, structure and environment), behavioural expectations and guidelines (including normative group behaviours), and the cultural expectations associated with a place defined by such visual and behavioural cues. Even in SL itself, there are places designated for certain activities, so by explicitly defining a space through symbolism and behavioural expectations, space creators can define areas specifically as island playgrounds. Not all islands in SL are for such a purpose, as many areas are in island form simply due to their ability to be discrete and separate from other SL spaces, therefore maintaining a sense of exclusivity for a purpose (educational and work spaces for instance).

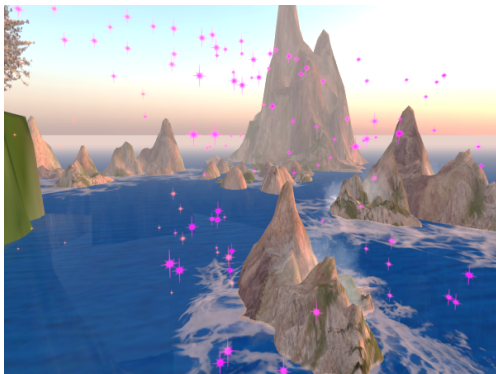


Figure 1: Apollo Coastline

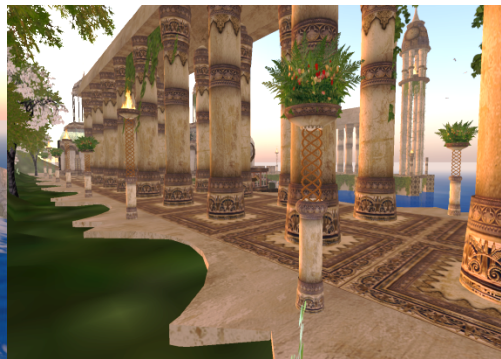


Figure 2: Apollo Harbour

The coastline not only encapsulates ideas of beaches and fun, but also the ancient mythology of the Mediterranean, often representing “the fringe between the known and the, often frighteningly, unknown” (Ryan, 2002: 156). The tourist gaze is elicited whereby the individual is invited to look upon the scene and incorporate the self as part of the historical imaginary, as well as looking at others and being looked upon. The regions of Apollo (an island), Greek Gold (an island), Zeus (an island) and Eden (secluded from the mainland) achieve separation and security from those who are not permitted to gaze upon them – it evokes ‘islandness’ by not being at the margin, but separate from it (Sharpley, 2004: 23). The seclusion and the isolation are achieved differently in the locations. Eden and Greek Gold maintain their exclusivity through gender (only female avatars are allowed),

and Zeus does so through the separation of the space from the rest of the land it is attached to, as well as being marketed, almost singularly, to the gay male demographic. This isolation is critical to a sense of escape: both geographically and spatially, from one's home and typical surroundings, and from the typical interactions and spatial configurations as found in Western cities and suburbia. That the island and coastline are so contrasted with the everyday is paramount to the imaginary; the imaginary must be what the ordinary and everyday is not. As a space of exploration and possibility, the imaginary must project an environment and spaces that encourage different ways of being, particularly in reference to hedonism, romanticism, sexuality and narratives of adventure (historicity and mythology).

The ease of exploration and escape from the everyday is possibly the largest benefit of spaces like SL within the context of tourism. The freedom of choice associated with embodiment and space within SL is both a form of escapism as well as an active participation in a world that can be seen to exist on the boundary of corporeal and virtual lives. In addition to a possible desired self as signified by avatar selection and adornment, there is the promise of desired (often utopian) spaces, which evoke an imagined or idealised realm. As described by Eben Muse, meaning is afforded to a space due to temporal and spatial experience that produces affective states. These states create a relationship with objects within the space that operate as place-markers, or unique identifiers of a particular place, and which hold meaning. Muse (2011: 26) describes this as presence:

Presence is a process that creates a sense of place; place therefore is constantly being defined by experience... The place itself is distinguished from other places in the same landscape less by borders than by placemarkers holding both cognitive and emotive content.

The placemarkers that signify these elements arguably produce a consistency of meaning throughout the islands, but also produce an individualised relationship to the specific place itself. It is these placemarkers that have their foundations within mass and popular culture, which elicit the emotional and cognitive responses in an individual operating in the screen environment. These cognitive reactions increase with the fidelity of the experience, in that greater presence is achieved through more accurate re-production of markers within space. Importantly, however, not everything within the virtual environment need be 'real' or 'real'-like; the accuracy lies within the attachment to dominant tropes of meaning, which includes fantastical notions of meaning. For instance, within SL there is the potential to fly. However flying, despite how un-'real' an action it may be, does not detract from the feeling of presence in SL (and arguably may add to it), because it is a common archetype within the fantasy genre. Similarly the fantastical avatars, regions and objects that one encounters within SL, whilst not accurate in view of anything corporeal, are accurate in view of the various popular meanings of a fantasy world.



Figure 3: Apollo's 3D mountains

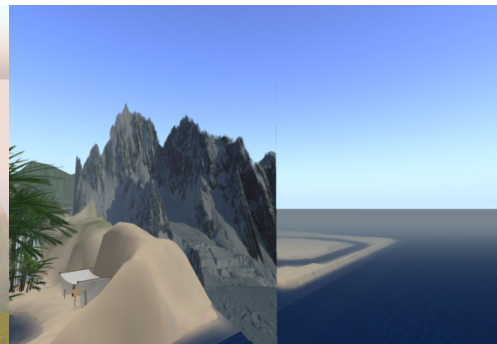


Figure 4: Eden's 2D mountains

Movement in SL can be simultaneously freeing and constricting. The platform allows for the non-human ability to teleport from one location to another instantaneously, as well as flying and the ability to embody various non-human avatars. Constrictions of movement are mostly apparent in the more finite controls of the body. Whilst it is possible to enact a limited number of gestures and movements through the interface controls, for more complex actions users must acquire pose-balls (animations) and/or scripts to animate their avatars. This has ramifications that include the disengagement with an impromptu experience due to having to work out how to move and act within the space. Another major limitation of spatial practice is referred to as 'rezzing', or how the landscape and the objects within it load up onto the screen. When the environment takes a long time to appear (this holds particularly true for the objects and structures in the distance as one moves through the environment), a user may be influenced in the course or direction they take as they travel through the virtual space. So, an object of potential interest in the distance, perhaps worthy of investigation by the user, may not be noticed and thus overlooked. Instances of sudden immobility followed by sudden jerkiness and involuntary movements are also common if the site is experiencing technical difficulties. All of these technical issues can have very adverse effects on the level of presence an individual feels within the world of SL, and can easily detract from the experience of travel and escapism as one's senses are catapulted back to 'reality'.

An individual's technical capability, in terms of the hardware they own and use to access SL, as well as their ability, or their mastery of the environment, has a significant effect on their capacity to experience SL. Individuals whose computers and internet connection have a higher capacity for bandwidth will experience fewer technical problems with the site than those who do not, and those who have spent time mastering the intricacies of the platform are able to circumvent issues with avatar movement much easier than those new to SL. This produces power relations intrinsic to the space, where the agency of an individual to move and perform with their avatar is limited by technical capacity and temporal investment, producing a hierarchy of users.

Sex, gender and sexuality

Whilst the capabilities of the technology may be at times constricting, the ability to embody anyone or anything, and partake in a user-generated fantasy world, can open up a number of possibilities for individuals. Experiences in gender, sex and sexuality are intrinsic to the re-embodied character of creating an avatar (or avatars) for the platform. Often, an idealised identity is created, and as noted by Yee and Balienson (2009) this is often a hyper-gendered expression of identity. Dumitrica and Gaden (2009: 6) state that "[a]s virtual spaces have been popularized, they have been both celebrated as an opportunity for liberation from conventional gender roles and criticized as white-male shaped spaces, filled with pornography, sexualization, and increased commodification". The tourist island spaces on Apollo, Eden, Zeus and Greek Gold to varying degrees adhere to commodified notions of sexuality, whilst also at times subverting standardised norms of gender performance.

The body is both the site of pleasure as well as the centre of meaning. In a world heavily reliant on visual imagery, bodily representation becomes one of the principal means of communication. This parallels strongly with sun-lust or recreational tourist experiences that centre on the body as a site of pleasure and performance. According to Markwick (2001: 424) coastal tourist imagery is "focused on the body", with "images of the body typically embedded within coastal scenes depicting leisure pursuits associated with the sun and fun of mass tourist activities". Eden, Zeus and Greek Gold (which also double as spaces of liminal experience) are examples of a destinations focused on the body typical of coastal resorts. More so than Apollo, which evokes the picturesque and the private,

the other spaces are set up for pleasure, particularly public pleasure. They are spaces “about the body-as-seen, displaying, performing and seducing visitors with skill, charm, strength, sexuality and so on” (Urry, 2002: 156). Pleasure is a display, with the environments set up for sexualised performance. The body in tourist spaces is experienced differently from the body in the home environment; the body is central to experience rather than being passive in the home and work environment. Bodily experience, specifically hedonism, is often acted out through club and beach environments where the body is the centre of display and the performance of one’s body is the basis for interaction. In a study on British youths’ tourist experiences of sun destinations, Diken and Laustsen (2004: 101) contend, “the ‘exceptional’ life of the tourist in Ibiza or Faliraki is not simply external to civilization. Rather, the tourist now occupies a threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, civilization and state of nature become indistinct”. The appeal of this ‘exceptional life’ is a permission to do as one pleases. In Second Life an ‘exceptional life’ may consist of exploring and displaying sexuality to a greater degree than in real life.



Figure 5: Romantic seclusion, Apollo



Figure 6: The Castle, Eden

According to Wearing, Stevenson and Young (2010: 66) “there exists a subversive hegemonic bias towards masculine tourist experiences”, where pleasure is defined as a masculine outcome:

Studies of leisure and tourism experiences of both males and females indicate that sex-specific activities contribute to societal definitions of male and female identity, thus in many ways producing a conformity to gender stereotypes and acting as a restrictive rather than liberating influence on identity (Aitchison, 2001, 2005; Samdahl, 1992). Richter (1995) found that the linking of tourism with sex is rampant in marketing; for instance, souvenirs often promote women as sex objects, and destination attractions remain male-dominated preserves (67).

The male gaze operates in different ways in the four spaces considered. On Apollo, the male gaze is normative: avatars appear gendered, often hyper-gendered, and are often found in heterosexual couplings. Many spaces on the island, such as the chapel or the secluded area of the island (as in Figure 5 above), are used as spaces for romantic liaisons of heterosexual coupled avatars. Similarly Eden, although a female-only space, is regulated by the male gaze even in its overt absence. The hyper-feminised form of many of the female avatars, in conjunction with the heteronormative design and structure of the space being commercially sexualised (Figure 6), signals the covert presence of male desire. On Zeus, this desire is both explicit and celebrated as the gaze changes to include the male body as the object of pleasure. However, on Greek Gold, the gaze is a means of opposition, whereby female gendered and sexual expression can be seen as liberating only in opposition to, and through the absence of, the male gaze.



Figure 7: Advertising board, Zeus



Figure 8: Avatar, Greek Gold

With the exception of Apollo, which is offered as an all-inclusive space to visit, the spaces analysed are specifically designated queer spaces, meaning they are specific sites for alternative sexualities. They are attractive for reasons similar to that of corporeal queer spaces in that they offer safe seclusion for sexual expression outside of normative culture. However, they are somewhat different to urban queer zones and gay ghettos in that they offer a tourist experience: travel to another place removed from the local where one can meet individuals from all over the world in a paradise setting, similar in structure to physical gay travel destinations (that often feature beaches, bars and clubs, as well as secluded zones for sex). As noted by Waitt and Markwell (2006: 117), the nightclub environment is persistent in queer travel discourse due to the sanctuary offered by the secluded environment:

On the mainland the nightclub offers the gay traveller a controlled safe(r) environment, free from potential homophobia on the other side of the boundaries drawn by its doors. Inside, gay tourists are assured a familiar space where they can be themselves. The nightclub provides a place for the enactment of global gay identities through the presence of same-sex attracted people, bars, dance floor, music, gay porn video booths, and back rooms for sex.

It is unsurprising then that gay spaces in SL often have dance clubs as a primary part of the experience. Clubs not only provide a condensed space for avatars to mingle and view each other closely, they also signify bodily performance, hedonism and, in particular, casual sex. The link between dance clubs and sex is often assumed, particularly in the gay community. This connotation with the gay community arose out of necessity for appropriate meeting places since the 1950s when individuals had to be far more discreet about their sexuality, and has since been replicated consistently in mass cultural representations of gay life. Outside of the club, the beaches, gardens and other zones follow the discursive structure of gay travel media, and can be easily identified as queer. Uses of gay signifiers abound from rainbow flags, to half naked bodies, to advertisements for sexual services and products. This subversive sexual discourse, however, continues to operate “within the structures of white hetero-patriarchy rather than as a critique or a challenge” (124) and continues to reinforce performance and interaction regulated through and by the male gaze. Zeus, for instance, with its reinforcement of commercialisation and its focus on the muscular and assertive male body, affirms the hetero-patriarchy of male dominance and control, signalling a normative representation of form within a matrix of expression that mirrors heterosexual conduct and power.

Unlike gay male tourism, lesbian tourism has been minimally reported and researched, “with very little academic literature exist[ing] about gay women and lesbians in terms of travel and tourism” (Waitt & Markwell, 2006: 33). According to Puar (2003: 938), the gay female statistic is made

invisible by the overarching categorisation of 'gay' that groups male and female homosexuals together, often disguising the disproportionate number of gay male to gay female tourists. Waitt and Markwell (2006: 33) speculate that this may be due to the following factors:

[I]t is likely that lesbians shoulder the burden of raising children more often than do gay men; that their income levels are on average lower than gay men's; and that they also are more susceptible to subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination stemming from both sexism and homophobia than are gay men.

If these factors, speculated upon by Waitt and Markwell, are indeed valid, then the virtual platform may be a way to circumvent these barriers to lesbian tourist experience, given that the limiting factors stated are of a geographical and economic nature. So, if it is not possible for a gay woman to escape the confines of her domestic/work space due to either domestic or financial impasses, or if she is too anxious about travel due to a fear of discrimination, then the virtual platform may provide a means of touring other gay/queer/lesbian spaces outside of those in immediate geographical reach. Spaces such as Eden and Greek Gold, by allowing only female avatars within each region, can be very welcome environments for women who have been harassed, or are fearful of harassment, due to either their gender or sexuality. Although there is the possibility for men to pose as female avatars in order to access the spaces, moderators are able to remove any avatar acting in an unsuitable manner. However, it must be noted that it is still possible for men to access the site if they behave within the guidelines imposed by it, making it impossible to ensure that all avatars are being controlled by corporeally-bodied females.

Given the gendered nature of the environments, it is interesting to analyse the role of the body as presented on Eden within the parameters of tourist discourse. The Eden environment has been constructed for the pleasures of the body, in line with the bodily emphasis seen in coastal resorts such as the Mediterranean holiday island: there are beaches to sunbathe on and passively display the body; there are shops to purchase items to adorn and present the body; there is a nightclub and dance-floor to actively engage in bodily interaction and the active gaze; and there are lounges for more intimate forms of bodily interaction and activity. According to Markwick (2001: 424), "Such imagery draws heavily on the popularly supposed oppositions of work and leisure" where the binary is "played out in the imagery focused on relatively passive forms of leisure such as sunbathing". The replication of the work/leisure binary in a virtual space is consistent with the desire to immerse the self in a space symbolic of pleasure; even if an individual is stuck in their work/home environment, it is possible to 'get away from it all' through the computer. Within Eden, however, what is notable for a female-only and lesbian environment is the replication of heteronormative bodily symbolism that encourages both passive and active forms of looking and being looked at. Here, the tourist gaze becomes centred on bodily performance, akin to that in heterosexual and gay male spaces such as Zeus.



Figure 9: Avatar, Eden

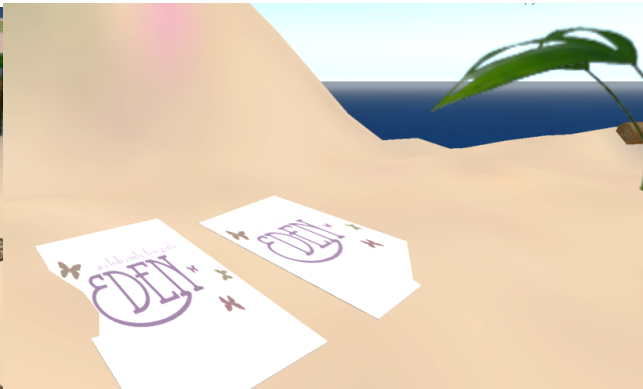


Figure 10: Beach towels, Eden

Whilst it may be possible that individuals hyper-gender their avatars in Eden to ensure that they are seen as female in a female-only environment, it is more probable that such appearances are due to fantasy and desire replicating mass consumption practices; bodily performance is of the desirable fantasy self which is open to eroticisation and the potential for sexual exchange. The self in an environment such as Eden is underpinned by its sexual use-value, with visual signification as the currency of this exchange. Moreover, this hyper-gendered form of femininity is potentially problematic in terms of the possible infiltration by 'males in drag' as well as diluting lesbian performativity to more acceptable and normative performances. Whilst Eden can be viewed as an extension of the heterosexual matrix, Greek Gold is unique as a gendered and sexualised space constructed for the female gaze. Unlike the normatively presented and hypergendered representations of females (and males) on the spaces of Apollo, Zeus and Eden, the representations on Greek Gold are far more diverse with a fluidity of gender expression ascribed to the female subject. Greek Gold presents multifaceted lesbian representations, and so can be seen as an extension of this urbanised queer identity, particularly in relation to the expression of fashion and bodily adornment. The appeal of Greek Gold as an ideal holiday experience for queer females is that, in opposition to mainstream culture, there is both an explicit acceptance, and implicit approval, of masculine and androgynous avatars in this space. Moreover, Greek Gold also offers a space of community and identity actualisation that is both non-threatening and safe. In the absence of the male gaze practices of looking are reconfigured. In the interplay of feminine and masculine-female subject positions power relations are overturned. This diversity and opposition to the established male gaze links the region most readily to ideas of Lesbos and Sparta and to notions of returning to a nostalgic, mythical past in which female desire and female autonomy were foregrounded.

In addition to the possibility for exploration, SL and similar virtual environments can also reframe notions about sex and the body, as well as the relationships we have with our own bodies as well as others' bodies. Some may argue that the Internet and virtual environments are negatively affecting culture in view of the commodification of sex as well as increasing the desire for bodily perfection, and that these are exacerbated in the hedonistic environments of both corporeal and virtual tourist spaces. However, there is also the opportunity to re-imagine many of the issues to do with sex and tourism that are only possible through re-embodiment. Whilst a full discussion is necessary (and outside the scope of this paper), the re-embodied tourist body may engage with sex and experiment with sexuality without many of the possible dangers of physical intimacy, such as sex-work, human trafficking (for sex-work), and STIs. The spaces of Second Life described in this paper also follow the notion of gay travel in the real world as described by Clift, Luongo and Callister (2002: 3) which is a desire to visit "safe gay sites" which is often a "segregation from the heterosexual world". Furthermore, travelling within Second Life offers a freedom to explore identity as well as a freedom from financial and material limitations.

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