

# Digital Adultery, “Meta-Anon Widows,” Real-World Divorce, and the Need for a Virtual Sexual Ethic

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**Abstract.** Ethical issues that have emerged around relationships in virtual worlds can inform the way we approach the ethics of human/robot relationships. A workable ethic would be one that treats marriage as an enduring human institution and, while we value robots as worthy works of our hands, they are inappropriate partners for marital or sexual relationships.

**Keywords:** roboethics.

## 1 Introduction

If we could only invent some kind of digital device that we could transport across the theorized folds of time, say, into the next century to sample or record the effects of what we are striving to create now, that would help us decide if what we are envisioning and working so hard to bring about will actually be life-enhancing or the opposite.

But, the fact of the matter is that we cannot currently do that directly. Indirectly, however, we can seek out simulations, what we might call meta-tests, standing in analogical parallel to some of the goals we strive to accomplish in robotics. And this is what my paper is about: examining such an analogical simulation, to assess the effect of an experiment already in existence in order to speculate upon the probable effects in the real world of the future of what some are now working to accomplish: robot/human sexual relationships.

My simulated test is the effect on human relationships of digital sexual participation in Second Life. Virtual avatars are my analogy to sexbots. My argument is this: Since none of us can tell for certain what will happen in 2050 and beyond, I ask: Do any comparative parallels currently exist that are not merely speculative but demonstrable? Virtual relationships through avatars seem to me to provide an instructive analogy to sexbots in that they introduce artificially created relational partners into people’s lives and, therefore, since we are social creatures, they are often introduced into the networked relationships of families. In numerous documented cases, such liaisons do cause pain for a partner, producing feelings of betrayal and rejection through a loss of attention that affects one’s sense of being valued and having one’s love and caretaking mutually reciprocated. Here is an overview of the information that leads me to this conclusion.

## 2 Relationships in Virtual Worlds

Philip Rosedale and Linden Lab’s Second Life is the most successful of the virtual metaverses inspired by Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, “the novel that taught us to dream about an online digital world that exists in parallel with the corporeal realm,” according to James Wagner Au [1, 2006].<sup>1</sup> Millions of participants are now involved, including members of this conference.

Of central interest to everyone participating is the social networking that is its core appeal. The animated replica one creates for oneself is most often the way that one wishes one could be. As Neal Stephenson explained in *Snow Crash*, “Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you’re ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you’ve just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup” [2].

Interaction hyperspaced with the acquisition of the Swedish company “Enemy Unknown” and its “Avatars United,” a social network to bring “together” users of “multiple worlds and games” [3]. As avatars interacted and formed relationships, the trajectory paralleled that of real life so that these virtual representations began to date, couple up, marry, and have virtual sexual relationships, not necessarily in that order. All of this, of course, was taking place in a virtual, digital, world, but in many cases the impact was being felt in the real one.

### 2.1 Impact on Real-World Relationships

Healthy Place is the Web site of the clinical psychologist who founded the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, Dr. Kimberly Young. It features a set of resources and online communities for sufferers of a variety of psychological maladies from Alzheimer’s to self-injury, but has recently added to its resources on cyberspace and Internet addiction books with titles like *Infidelity Online: An Effective Guide to Rebuild your Relationship after a Cyberaffair*. Dr. Young explained to *The Wall Street Journal* that most of the cases she counsels “involve interactive fantasy role-playing games. ‘They start forming attachments to other players.... They start shutting out their primary relationships’” [4].

What such psychologists and psychiatrists are treating and the courts are now having to litigate are cases like the well-publicized disintegration of the Hoogestraat marriage. While recovering from an illness, the 53-three-year-old husband began spending up to twenty hours a day in the virtual world. Drawing from a background in computer graphics, he accrued several virtual businesses, a staff of twenty-five other people’s avatars, a fortune in virtual money, and a virtual wife, the avatar of a 38-year-old Canadian woman. When his real wife of seven months discovered his virtual wife, she was heartbroken and enrolled in EverQuest Widows, an online support group, serving as a kind of “Meta-anon,” paralleling AI-Anon for abandoned families. Chronicling the story for the August 10, 2007’s *The Wall Street Journal*,

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, Linden Labs commissioned Fisik Baskerville to design a virtual monument to the novel and its author and place 200 of these in various locations in the landscape. Many of us think immediately of the Matrix movies, while others of such predecessors as Lucasfilm’s *Habitat* or the earlier parallel worlds of imaginative fiction back to the realms of the gods in mythology.

Alexandra Alter reported, “[United States] 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” [5].

That is actually what did happen the very next year when British newspapers chronicled the divorce proceedings of Amy Taylor and Dave Pollard, two disabled Brits who had met and married virtually on Second Life and then again in real life. Ms. Taylor sued successfully for divorce “under the basis of ‘unreasonable behavior,’” because of her husband’s continual digital sexual liaisons, after “her lawyer told her that other marriages have also ended over ‘Second Life’ adultery” [6].

This raises the question: Should a virtual sexual relationship between avatars really be considered adultery if conducted by players with other spouses? Some answer in the negative, as did Yurie, a young Japanese wife, whose husband, Koh, fell in love with a virtual girlfriend from Nintendo’s Love Plus dating simulator game. Yurie dismissed “Koh’s virtual indiscretions” with, “[I]f he’s just enjoying it as a game, that’s fine with me” [7]. Here Yurie partially addresses a set of questions posed by Cornell University’s Josh Pothen, who asked, “So, does flirting with or engaging with another virtual character really count as adultery, or is it only part of a game? Would both characters have to be controlled by people for it to be adultery? What if one is controlled by a human and the other is computer-controlled? Does it make a difference that the game is an interactive world instead of a regular video game with levels and an ending?” [6]. A dating-game character is not an avatar of another human, but indeed computer-controlled (and here we might draw the analogy to a sexbot).

However, real-world spouses such as Yurie may reconsider such an easy dismissal in light of the well-publicized case of the 27-year-old Tokyo man who did indeed in real life marry a character from the same Love Plus game before “a priest, an MC, a DJ...friends and family” with “photo slideshows, wedding music and even a bouquet” [7]. As “the first human-to-avatar union,” the human, who goes by his online name Sal 9000, is very serious about the relationship. He told reporters, “I love this character, not a machine....I understand 100 percent that this is a game. I understand very well that I cannot marry her physically or legally,” yet he states he has chosen the character as “better than a human girlfriend.” [8]. “Some people have expressed doubts about my actions, but at the end of the day, this is really just about us as husband and wife. As long as the two of us can go on to create a happy household, I’m sure any misgivings about us will be resolved” [7]. It is as if William Gibson’s novel *Idoru* (1996) had come to life. Internet-addiction expert Hiroshi Ashizaki worries, “Today’s Japanese youth can’t express their true feelings in reality. They can only do it in the virtual world....It’s the reverse of reality that they can only talk about what they feel to a friend in the virtual world” [8].<sup>2</sup>

These are like the “techno-virgins” whom Joe Snell envisions in his article “Impacts of Robotic Sex” who do not have “sex with other humans” but see “robotic sex” as “‘better’ than human sex” [9].

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<sup>2</sup> Among other sites, pictures are available at Pinoytutorial, “Best and Worst” (Nov 25, 2009), “Man Marries a Video Game – First-ever and the Weirdest,” available via <http://pinoytutorial.com/>, 2-3.

## 2.2 Theological Responses

Those who share Dr. Ashizaki’s concern include the Internet’s Judeo-Christian community. While thorough religious response is not yet plentiful, early reactions include a report from Israel, “Rabbinical Court Debates Status of ‘Virtual Sin’ in Jewish Law,” which notes, “At issue is whether a woman can divorce her husband because he committed virtual adultery using a virtual reality entertainment that is readily available over the Global Landscape.” The wife charged, “Insofar as the psychological damage that has been done to me...there is no difference between virtual adultery and the real thing.” Her husband, who runs a religious bookstore, responded that he was playing, among others, a game called “King of Israel,” that allows one to relive episodes in King David’s life, including committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering Uriah. In his words, “Now, in reliving the life of King David, I am not actually committing adultery, nor am I actually plotting anyone’s murder. So, I do not see how my virtual sins, can be compared in nature even to the actual sins of the historic King David, who is considered one of the great Jewish heroes of all time.”

Rabbi Aaron Levinsky, Israel’s chief rabbi, responded, “King David was a righteous man who repented of his sins. If Mr. Cohen wants to relive the experience of King David he should repent of his sins, abandon these silly entertainments, and devote more time to the study of Torah and religion. I would find Mr. Cohen’s argument more convincing if he could compose a virtual Book of Psalms.” The rabbi added, “I know that Christians, Moslems, and others are wrestling with these same issues.” Princeton Seminary’s Sam Humble contributed the Christian view, “Christ established a new standard, to the effect that hatred in the heart was akin to actual murder. Lust in the heart was akin to actual adultery. On that basis, I believe that these new entertainments...promote lust and violence. Thus, I believe that virtual sin is sin.” I myself would apply that argument to sex with robots.

A dissenting voice is Rhoda Baker’s of the American Civil Liberties Union who cited a Stanford University study that “indicates...committing a virtual murder makes a person less prone to violence,” being “a healthy outlet for violent urges” [10].

I, however, think this parallel breaks down, for example, in pederasty, leading to the outlawing of child pornography in many countries due to its ubiquitous presence in cases of sexual molestation of children. There is a process of desensitization (what 1 Timothy 4:2 in the New Testament calls the “searing” of the conscience) and, like all addictions, an escalation that seeks higher and higher stimulation and appears to cross over to real-life referents, in this case children.

Daniel Williams of College Avenue Church of Christ in Arkansas, who holds a Ph.D. in marriage and family therapy, reports, “In my counseling practice, I have already encountered at least a dozen divorces that began with one partner’s illicit Internet interactions.” He explains, “Sometimes it is the husband who is engaged in these clandestine conversations, but just as often it is the wife” [11].

He, of course, is talking about a computer simulation—but imagine the heightened effect of having never-aging, always compliant, robotic sexual partners in the home. Such a prospect makes me think of the insightful words Isaac Asimov put in the mouth of a developer of a fembot in his short story, “Feminine Intuition”: “If women

start getting the notion that robots may look like women, I can tell you exactly the kind of perverse notions they'll get, and you'll really have hostility on their part....No woman wants to feel replaceable by something with none of her faults [12].<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Blurred Lines

As in so many of his predictions, Isaac Asimov was right in this one. As one woman stated what became the consensus opinion of spouses and partners surveyed in studies reported in the journal *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, “[My husband] does not have an actual human mistress from the Internet, but the Internet pornography is the “mistress” that is coming between us. The idealized images of perfect women make me feel inadequate” [13]. Perhaps the ‘droids of *Star Wars* are more healthy and appropriate for marital wellbeing than *Cherry 2000*.

In documenting such responses, a study by the Arizona Community Physicians, from which the previous quotation was drawn, concluded that the reaction of spouses to cybersex extramarital relationships was “hurt, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, isolation, humiliation, jealousy and anger, as well as loss of self esteem” [13]. In fact, every survey reported in the journal’s special issue on cybersex revealed feelings of betrayal in spouses or partners.

One man interviewed in the poignant BBC *Wonderland Video* “Virtual Adultery and Cyberspace Love” had been in a stable relationship for twenty-four years. When his partner asked him point blank, “Are you having an affair with somebody?” he said, “It’s a computer game. Don’t be silly. It’s computer graphics. What could possibly be going on?” He admits, “I felt awful saying that.” Soon “it got to the point where I had to do something.” He hopes it was the “right thing,” but he left his “life’s partner” and married in real life the woman with whom he had developed an avatarial relationship. As she explained, “Because we started on *Second Life* it felt like this is home. People fall in love and get married, so we did” [14].

In a similar manner, a well-programmed malebot or fembot in the house might well alienate a spouse’s affection, making one feel, as the Arizona Physicians’ survey reported, “unattractive, and even ugly,” “sexually rejected, inadequate, and unable to compete” [13].

Such seductive power of a secondary world is subtle, as would be a relationship with a sexbot. As one woman who traded husband and children for a *Second Life* affair explained, “It kind of hit me before I realized exactly what was happening.” “I just kind of fell into it just as though it was natural. And then, every once in a while, I would say—you know, when I would peak a real emotion...what is this? And what am I going to do with it? Ah, and then—ah, I’m not going to think about it. I’m not going to think about that, because this feels good” [14]. Such seductive power caused Emerald Wynn, another resident of *Second Life*, to avoid all “SL-based romance,”

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<sup>3</sup> National Geographic reports Hiroshi Ishiguro, who developed the female android Repliee Q1, observing, “When a robot looks too much like the real thing, it’s creepy,” Chamberlain, Ted (June 23, 2009), Photo in the News: Ultra-Lifelike Robot Debuts in Japan, [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/06/0610\\_050610\\_robot.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/06/0610_050610_robot.html), 1.

since “to me, love in Second Life is like a sweet, sweet drug. When I’m with a man I adore there, I feel warm and wrapped in affection....Countless scientific studies show that the mind cannot tell the difference between detailed visualization and reality....Think it and think it hard enough and the mind starts to believe it” [1, 9.2009].

In a similar way, our imagination, with the aid of cleverly designed software, could impute humanity to robots at the expense of the true human with whom we are one flesh. Here I think of the wise words of Le Trung, creator of the femdroid Aiko, “But one thing I will never be able to give her is true emotion or a soul” [15].

## 4 Implications for Human-Robot Relationships

In light of all this, to me, it seems clear that, in regard to virtual relationships in Second Life, an ethic of consequence should adopt Rabbi Levinsky’s repulsion to dwelling virtually on misdeeds and apply Jesus’ words about imaginative lust to virtual lust. The view that virtual sex can be pornographic and lethal to one’s spiritual health and to one’s relationships in the real world, including one’s marriage, seems to me indisputable, given the results. So we should conduct ourselves as ethically in the fantasy realm as we do in the real realm.

And, I believe, such information is useful when formulating ethical guidelines for human/robot relationships. Granted, robotics is still in an incipient stage, but, as robotechnology is developing, increasing capabilities are making robots more and more an integral part of human society. This is a good thing. But, as they develop, David Levy, in his thoroughly researched and perceptive book *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*, suggests robots will develop to the point that they will become sexual partners of humans. As you can see, that, I believe, would not necessarily be a good thing. In a recently published article, “Should the imago Dei Be Extended to Robots? Love and Sex with Robots, the Future of Marriage, and the Christian Concept of Personhood,” available in the free online *Africanus Journal*, [16]<sup>4</sup> I consider this question theologically and ethically, exploring various claims about the benefits of developing sexbots as relational partners or even spouses.

Now, should the predictions prove correct and actual robotic sexual partners be introduced into real homes, perhaps in some cases alongside the additional continued presence of virtual partners, what might that mean for our understanding of marriage, faithfulness, adultery, as these issues affect our human relationships, and what kind of adaptive responses will people be suggesting we all make? Here are some possibilities.

### 4.1 Dispense with Marriage Entirely

Abandon the home as the central, structural unit of society, relegate sex to bonding, entertainment, or exercise, genetically engineer children, and rear them in same-sex

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<sup>4</sup> Along with being free on the Internet, hard copies of this issue are available at a nominal fee by emailing [cumebokstore@gordonconwell.edu](mailto:cumebokstore@gordonconwell.edu), [books@gordonconwell.edu](mailto:books@gordonconwell.edu), or telephoning CUME bookstore at 617-427-7293 #6207.

dormitories. Such utopian—or dystopian—communities have been envisioned for years. I do not see conservative Judeo-Christian believers embracing this option as a solution.

## 4.2 Redefine Marriage by Emphasizing Polygamy

This is a biblical reality and, at present, an option in, for example, some African countries where the AIDS crisis has led governments to encourage stable Christian males to take on widowed wives as additional spouses to provide for them, then proceed to educate women, particularly, to adopt a mindset where such behavior is considered normal.

A simple review of the Sarai/Hagar, Rachel/Leah, Hannah/Peninnah conflicts in the Hebrew Bible would, of course, dispel the myth of the happy harem. In my experience as editor of an egalitarian journal, I hear horrendous accounts of polygamy's role in the oppression of women and the validation of patriarchal society. That is why some African churches have chosen to reinstitute the early church's order of widows (see Acts 6:1, 1 Timothy 5:1–17), collectively providing for indigent women who then devote themselves to the ministry of the churches rather than returning to the abuses of polygamy.

## 4.3 Promote an “Apocalyptic AI” Future

Such a future would involve “outspoken members of the academic community studying the interactions between religion and science,” as Robert Geraci states, with what these consider to be a “properly formulated theology,” wherein “the image of God means that we form loving relationships with others,” suggesting that “the goal of robotics should be the creation of new partners in creation,” since “several computer scientists have proposed that the intelligent robots of the future will have religious sentiments” and “some scientists argue that robots will even join humanity in our traditional religious practices and beliefs” [17]. David Levy explains what this would look like: “Whatever the social norms of the prospective owners and their culture, a robot will be able to satisfy them. Similarly with religion, the details and intensity of which can be chosen and changed at will—whether you're looking for an atheist, an occasional church-goer, or a devout member of any religion, you have only to specify your wishes when placing your order at the robot shop” [9]. In this vision, a robot would be like a sophisticated “Chatty Cathy” doll, parroting back to us our faith, as an animated sex and religion doll.

The other way the distinction between human and robot could be diminished is by assuming the Cartesian theory that the human mind can exist separately from the brain and attempting to convert a human's memory banks to electronic form. Should such an assumption be correct and such a process prove possible and able to retain the spirit, or personality, or “pattern of information” [17], and what Henri Bergson called the *élan vital*, the creative force within us with which we adapt and grow, humans might download our minds either into a Second Life-type avatar and, after our human

bodies die, as in the vision of Vernor Vinge in *True Names* (1981),<sup>5</sup> live forever digitally, or at least as long as the virtual world is maintained, or, in the real world, download our minds into a robot’s mechanical brain in order to prolong our lives as cyborgs.<sup>6</sup> In this robotic version, the hardware or cyborg form, we might argue humans essentially remain ourselves, since, along with a mechanical knee, artificial hip, pacemaker, all common today, we would include a brain, but what makes us ourselves—that which disappears so utterly at death—would remain, within the body. I suggest that after consideration many devout Jews or Christians might accept this development, concluding that God created an original world of raw material and gifted each human with a unique mind and spirit and some of us with the capability to improve all our lives by using that material constructively. But, becoming cyborgs would not make us androids. Our origins would still differ.

In that sense, the nature of the moral universe in which we exist does not change with technology, as G.K. Chesterton counseled through the mouth of his fictional “avatar,” Father Brown:

Reason and justice grip the remotest and the loneliest star...you can imagine any mad botany or geology you please. Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. Think the moon is a blue moon, a single elephantine sapphire. But don’t fancy that all that frantic astronomy would make the smallest difference to the reason and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of pearl, you would still find a notice-board, “Thou shalt not steal.” [18]

Someone else’s spouse, either virtually or in reality, I would add.

#### **4.4 Maintain the Distinctions, but with Respect**

I believe a workable ethic would be one that values the differences between humans and robots and treats marriage as an enduring human institution. While we value robots as worthy works of our hands, made in our human image, as we are in turn made in God’s image, and gifted by us to exist in cooperative relationships, they should not be used in marital or sexual ones. I would draw the same conclusion for participation with an avatar of a machine or even of other humans in digital worlds with whom one is not married in the real world. Technology has not replaced the Ten Commandments, in my estimation, and I do not see why a more sophisticated form of it would.

In conclusion, in the case of extramarital virtual (or, by inference, robotic) sex, particularly, a cross-section of thinkers have already observed it is pain-producing and

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of an image that outlives its human referent as a separate entity, although without self-determination, was explored that same year (1981) in the film, “Looker.” In 2002’s “Simone,” a movie producer appears to fall in love with a composite image, which he has constructed digitally and which has become a simulated star performer in its own right.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Geraci (2010, 32) credits Hans Moravec’s 1978 *Analog* article, “Today’s Computers, Intelligent Machines and Our Future,” with applying this idea to religion: “Nearly all of the Apocalyptic AI advocates agree that human beings will eventually learn to ‘upload’ a human mind into a robot body...a position first advocated by Moravec in *Analog*.”



wrong. I do not think that promoting it technologically would enhance the future of our descendants' inter-human or human/robot relationships.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The need to resolve such issues is important because the future promises to bring us even more complex ones to process. Recently, Philip Rosedale gave more details about his diminished involvement in Second Life in favor of his work in LoveMachine Inc., a new company he organized with Ryan Downe. According to Hikaru Yamamoto, he is "creating a sentient artificial intelligence" to exist "in a virtual world. 'He wants it to live inside Second Life...It will think and dream and everything,'" predicating on the question: "Can 10,000 computers become a person?" Philip Rosedale himself admitted to Wagner James Au, "[T]hat's the general direction we're going" (Au 3.2010, 9). Obviously, humans are facing large ethical issues in the not-too-distant future, in this case in the area of personhood. We need to work together to set cooperative policies as new issues face us.

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