

Shrink Rap Radio #157, June 6, 2008, The Psychology of Second Life
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., interviews Wagner James Au
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Susan Argyelan)

Excerpt: *One of the most compelling things about Second Life and other virtual worlds is this effect where you take control of an avatar. That's how you navigate in Second Life and other virtual worlds. You have what's called an avatar, which is from the Sanskrit word for "godly incarnation," and you get to control what it looks like, what gender it's going to be, and really, so that's kind of your way of expressing yourself in Second Life, and that forces people to think about things that they don't generally think about. They're thinking about what would be their ideal version of themselves, or what do they want to show to the world.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Wagner James Au, who is author of the 2008 book, [The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World](#). From April, 2003 to February, 2006, he was a contract writer for Linden Lab, creators of Second Life, primarily hired by the company to cover Second Life as an embedded journalist in an emerging society – its controversies, its personalities, its innovations and ambitions, along with larger themes of identity, social norms, organization, and cultural expression important to online worlds in general. That contractual relationship has ended, but the story continues in his book and his [New World Notes](#) blog. He's been interviewed about his work as the embedded journalist for Second Life by CNN, NPR's All Things Considered, the BBC, the Los Angeles Times, Harvard Business Review, News.com, the San Jose Mercury, the Associated Press, Wired Online, Presstime, and East Bay Express, among other publications. He's spoken on this subject at the [South by Southwest](#) event in Austin, Texas, and twice he's presented at the [State of Play](#) conference, which is sponsored by Yale University and New York Law School. Now, here's the interview.

Dr. Dave: Wagner James Au, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Au: Thank you, Doctor.

Dr. Dave: Well, I'm so glad to have you here because I have just finished reading your wonderful book, *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World*. And you were an embedded journalist in Second Life.

Au: Yes, sir.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. And so maybe we should start off, just in case I have some listeners – it seems unlikely – but just in case there's somebody who might not know what we're talking about, give us the top line on what Second Life is.

Au: Yeah, and actually, I think most people are still at that point of, “I’ve heard of it, but I haven’t heard the whole story.” So, really what Second Life is, it’s an online, 3-D virtual world that is entirely user-created, with building tools. So, what you see is a, looks like a 3-D world, sort of similar to what you’d see in a video game or a computer game like World of Warcraft. But instead of everything being created by the company, everything you see in Second Life – all the buildings and the clothing, the vehicles, all of that – is made by the users of Second Life.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well, that’s a good description. Now, as a journalist, I got the impression that you tried to be as objective as you could and to stand outside the fray, because there were various things going on in that world that could tug you one way or another. Was that hard for you to do?

Au: Yeah, I mean it was difficult in several ways. One of the ways, when I first started out as an embedded journalist, I was a contractor with Linden Lab, the company behind Second Life. They created the software that runs it, and also the servers that run Second Life, and they brought me in as a contract writer to go in, and they told me, “Well, look, explore this place. I think there’s a community of people kind of forming up.” This was in 2003, so I was a contract writer. So, they were paying me – they weren’t paying me to write fluff; they were actually pretty serious about saying, “Go in and write about the controversies and the larger issues that come up with having a user-created world.” So, that was one issue, and then the other issue, of course, is yeah, there’s going to be like any society, there’s going to be conflicts between the users. In Second Life they’re called residents. And so there are conflicts, anything from kind of interpersonal arguments to full-fledged virtual wars, where they’re shooting each other with machine guns and tanks and giant robots, and things like that.

Dr. Dave: Oh, my goodness. Well, there are so many aspects to Second Life and to your book that we could explore, because there are business dimensions, with people carrying on businesses and making money, both in-world and out-of-world, and what all the implications are of that for the future of commerce. There are political dimensions; it’s almost like a little laboratory for politics, and there are sociological dimensions and philanthropic dimensions...

Au: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Dave: But what I want to focus on today is the psychological, because it’s a very psychological place.

Au: Yeah, I think...and that’s one of the most compelling things about Second Life and other virtual worlds is this effect where you take control of an avatar. That’s how you navigate in Second Life and other virtual worlds. You have what’s called an avatar, which is from the Sanskrit world for “godly incarnation,” and you get to control what it looks like, what gender it’s going to be, and really, that’s kind of your way of expressing yourself in Second Life. And that kind of forces people to

think about things that they don't generally think about. Are they thinking about what would be their ideal version of themselves, or what do they want to show to the world? And so it starts there, and then you have again with gender, and how are you going to express yourself in terms of if you want to go in and be romantic? And how are you going to have feelings related to that when it's an avatar you're controlling? It's like a 3-D character that you see right in front of your screen, and you control (it) with the keyboard and the mouse. But the thing is, what seems to happen is there is a transference of identity, where the fact that you're controlling it and you control also what it looks like, it also kind of associates you with it. There's been some really interesting studies from Stanford, especially, about this whole effect, where a guy named [Nick Yee](#) – he was, at the time, a graduate student at Stanford – he did some studies, for example, with body, space, and eye contact in Second Life. And I mentioned this in the book, *The Making of Second Life*, that he noticed that he and his volunteers, that we have the same sense of personal space and eye contact in Second Life that we do in real life. So, your avatar will tend to stay the same distance from other avatars, especially whether they're male or female, that they would in real life. And these are all these unwritten social rules that we have in the real world, and somehow they transfer over to our avatars.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's fascinating. Actually, I've been wanting to get in touch with Nick Yee, because I've interviewed – and actually, a good friend from graduate school was his major professor, I think, as an undergraduate at Swarthmore, I believe it was – Dr. Doug Davis. And so Doug had been telling me about his research, actually, in several conversations, and so it reminded me of that when I ran across your reference to him in the book.

Au: Oh, yeah. I'd be happy to introduce you.

Dr. Dave: I agree with you that identity is a big issue in this space. You know, to prepare for this interview, I decided that I would take the plunge, and so I went into Second Life. (laughs)

Au: Right.

Dr. Dave: And I agonized over, well, what name did I want to have? And what kind of persona did I want to present? What sort of, what did I want my avatar to look like? And so it really does confront one right away with a lot of questions about identity, and what it put me in touch with is, you know, in psychology, sometimes we talk about the persona, which refers to the social mask that we all wear.

Au: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: And in Second Life, that same process is just made more explicit. You're a bit more conscious that you're about to put on a mask, and you really make a conscious decision, "What do I want this mask to be?"

Au: Yeah. Yeah, very much so. And whether you want that mask to be an entirely fanciful/fictional representation, so it's more like a role-playing persona, or whether you want it to be your stand-in. So people have debates whether they want to put, for example, their real-life name and their profile in Second Life. They could say, "Oh, in real life, I'm Dr. Dave," or not. And so I know people in Second Life that I know them only as avatars. And I know this really gorgeous, leggy redhead – she looks like a redhead Nicole Kidman – and she's one of Second Life's prime philosophers; she's really brilliant. I have no idea who she is in real life. She says she's a tech businesswoman in Portugal. Her name's [Gwyneth Llewellyn](#). But really, her avatar is as real to me as many people that I know, especially people that I read about in the news or on the Internet. This is a real person to me.

Dr. Dave: So, she's a real person, and I suppose even your avatar becomes kind of a real person to you; you identify with it.

Au: Yeah, yeah. And I would have... When I first started writing The Making of Second Life, or even when I was reporting for the company, for the blog, New World Notes, I had to figure out how to interact as a reporter. And I first, I think I came in... I mostly was coming in and seeing the fun aspects, the role-playing game aspects, and kind of enjoyed it that way. For example, one of my avatars in the beginning was, I got someone, a resident, to make him look like [Hunter S. Thompson](#).

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Au: So, I had a Hunter S. Thompson avatar, so I had a gun in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other. And I'd go in and I'd interview people, but I'd be swearing, shooting off the gun, drinking, and talking about the hallucinations I'm seeing. And that seemed to help, actually, with reporting, because it put people at ease, and they were more comfortable that I was part of the space, as opposed to standoffish. Like I see a lot of other reporters come in, and they're very, they're not acting like they're part of Second Life. They're acting like it's sort of beneath them, and you can see that in the writing.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. And so that just underscores how important that choice of identity is, that it really is going to have some impact. Because in your book, you, sort of a theme that runs through it are three principles or elements that you identified as characterizing Second Life, and you call those... Well, why don't you take us through those three? I think you know what I'm referring to here.

Au: Yeah, yeah. So, I sat down when I started the book and tried to figure out what are the three principles, or what are the main principles that guide Second Life and make it really potent and so successful as a world? Because it – the growth rate, in terms of people who try it out, and also, to a lesser extent, the amount of people that stay – has been really astounding. So, one of the principles that makes Second Life unique – I think I called it Bebop Reality, because like I said in the beginning, everything in Second Life is user-created, so you have these building tools, so you

can build pretty much any 3-D object that you can imagine. Anything from a wind-up watch that you wear on your wrist to a battlestar ship that you can fly around in. And so you have this wide gamut of things you can create, and all this is done dynamically. Because what happens is, Second Life is all streamed across the Internet, and if you add content – if you create objects in Second Life – they appear right before people’s eyes. It looks like your avatar is moving, they’re stretching their hand out, and beams of light appear from your hand, and all of a sudden, building blocks start to appear. And they look like wooden building blocks, but then you can stretch them and give them different textures, shapes. You can add some functionality, because there’s a programming system in Second Life. And that whole effect leads to kind of what I call a 3-D jazz combo, because one person will build something cool, and right on the fly – right there – someone else will build something that kind of goes along with it. So, you’ll see this in what are called the “sandbox areas” in Second Life. That’s where you can have free-form building. So, someone will build, for example, a giant skyscraper, and that looks cool. And then another person will come along and create a giant King Kong statue and then put it on the buildings. All of the sudden you’ve got not just a skyscraper, you’ve got kind of a King Kong tableau. And that happens all the time in Second Life, so that’s why I call it Bebop Reality. It’s sort of seeing reality as this plastic and improvisational space that you and everyone else is part of, and sort of weaving in and out. And that’s why also, if you go into Second Life, you’re not going to see any one particular type of avatar. If you go into World of Warcraft, you’re going to see the elves and gnomes, creatures that fit in the Lord of the Rings fantasy genre. But if you go into Second Life, you’re going to see elves and gnomes and robots and vampires and furry animals and cartoon creatures and works of art. Someone created an avatar that looks like [Duchamp's](#) Nude Descending a Staircase, and another one created a character that looks like a Picasso painting. So, really, it’s anything you can possibly imagine as your identity, talk about identity.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Au: I mean, you can be beyond male and female, or whether you want to be an attractive female or an attractive male, you can, you don’t even have to be human. So that’s part of that whole Bebop Reality effect.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so it’s a collaborative space, and people are doing these jazz riffs, and one of the things that you likened it to that was meaningful for me – I guess because I live in the Bay Area – is the [Burning Man](#) Festival, where people go out in the desert and build these incredibly creative structures only to destroy them at the end, after however long it goes, I guess about a week or so.

Au: Yeah, about a week. Yeah, and I mentioned that in the book, that Burning Man itself was a very strong influence on [Philip Rosedale](#), who was the founder and the CEO for the first five years of Linden Lab when they created Second Life, and he wanted to kind of almost recreate the Burning Man experience, but make it possible for anyone in the world to access it if they had a computer and broadband.

Dr. Dave: Okay, now getting on to your second principle, it really underscores why identity becomes so important, so go ahead and talk about that one.

Au: As far as Impression Society?

Dr. Dave: Yes, exactly.

Au: So, what I'm saying there is, I think Second Life is not a consumerist society or a capitalist society. You know how we describe societies with their leitmotif, and Second Life, I think it's based on impression, and impression in two ways, impression in the sense of creating content and doing things in Second Life that are truly impressive. It's really cool and it shows a lot of creativity and ability with the building tools, and that's the gold standard of people that are recognized as thought leaders in Second Life. And also impression in the sense of longevity, that you show you're here to be part of the community and contribute to it, and keep coming back to it. Because creating accounts in Second Life is free, so there's actually been millions of people who've tried it. And about a million or so actually stay, so it's kind of this, I think the drop-off rate's about 90% for lots of reasons, and it is a very challenging space. And so if you can show that you're there for the long haul and you're willing to get over the learning curve, then that's also a gold standard. And then very similar to Burning Man, with this whole Impression Society, that you show up at Burning Man and you're half naked, and nobody knows who you are, and they don't encourage people to bring corporate trademarks and things like that to Burning Man. And really, it's all about what you can build and what kind of contributions you can bring to the temporary community. So very similar, I think, in Second Life. So that's the second principle, that's the Impression Society. The third principle is what I called Mirrored Flourishing, and that's the sense – and the belief – that is very strong in the Second Life community that what you do as a Second Life avatar should have a direct and generally positive influence on your real life. So, this is very different from a traditional online game like World of Warcraft, where it's exactly the opposite: the more you spend playing a game like World of Warcraft – accomplishing tasks, getting treasure, killing monsters and so on – the assumption is that you're going to be on your computer longer, and you're going to get fatter and you're going to get more anti-social, and you're going to lose ties with the outside world, where in Second Life, there's so many stories. And they become mythical stories or almost folklore to Second Life users, of people in Second Life that have drastically changed their life because of being in Second Life, either because they've started businesses or they've created a circle of friends from around the world that's actually carried over into the real world. And that's kind of the thing; that's almost the expectation that that's going to happen. I write about this in the book. One of the first people I met in Second Life in 2003 was this woman named [Catherine Omega](#). And in Second Life, Catherine Omega's this very glamorous cyberpunk chick who was building a mansion with a cable car, a really beautiful mansion by the sea. And I started talking to her about it, and it turns out she was building it while she was homeless in real life. She was squatting

in an abandoned apartment building, and she got kicked out of her living space. And so she was squatting for a while, but she was smart enough to find an exposed power line to get electricity...

Dr. Dave: Amazing!

Au: ...a coffee can to get wireless Internet, and really an amazing hacker girl. And so she was homeless while she was building this mansion. But the thing is, because of her skills as a builder and a scripter, she started getting paid. People started hiring her to do scripting in Second Life, and she started doing it for a living. And that helped her get out of her homeless situation.

Dr. Dave: And there are many similar, wonderful examples of what you call Mirrored Flourishing in the book. When you first introduced that term early on in the book, I didn't quite get it. But as I moved through the book and I saw example after example, it became really clear what you were talking about. That's true for all three of those dynamics.

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: Now, I had known about Second Life for several years, and yet I was reluctant to get involved because I feel so busy in my *first* life.

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: Are the people who hang out there folks with lots of time on their hands or what? Or does it replace maybe television, or other activities? You were sort of touching on that whole thing of getting lost in a video-game type space versus something that has some value.

Au: Well, if you look at the active user base, like the hardcore users, it's about 550,000 right now, and about 1.2 million that are less active. And if you look at the active users, the average usage time, I think it's about 45-50 hours a month, which is really about an hour and a half a day, which is about the same time most people watch television. And the surveys I've seen – I mentioned one from a marketing company that's looking at Second Life behavior – what happens is the majority of people start watching television less. So Second Life has supplanted kind of this passive entertainment, where they put themselves in Second Life. And most people are there to go to parties and socialize and dance, and things like that. You know, meet people, flirt, romance – all of that. So, really what they're doing is putting themselves in an interactive kind of TV show, where they're one of the characters. And they have some authorship and agency about what they're going to do in this unfolding story. And there's always dramas. It's more like a 3-D immersive version of Friends or something, because people are constantly hooking up and having arguments over different love triangles, and things like that, on the social-gamer aspect of it. The other thing is, too, is just a lot of people are doing it for practical uses, so you have right now about 20,000 people that make an income on

some level or another from Second Life. Because this is another thing we should cover, that there's an internal currency called Linden dollars, so you can exchange those Linden dollars for U.S. dollars. And that's how you can have an internal currency, or internal economy, where you're selling fashion; fashion's probably the most popular of the industry's vehicles, games... And the people that sell these things, they can cash out, and they can draw a real income from it. And you have people making upwards of \$5,000 a month. So, for folks like that, it's actually part of their work, so there's that level. And then there's all these applications that people are coming up with for real-world activities. So, there's actually a lot of architects that are using it as a design platform instead of [AutoCAD](#) or something which is non-interactive. They're using it to actually create buildings that are being made in real life. I just talked to a woman who is an architect who has put together a contest that is designing sustainable architecture that is going to be built in China and Hawaii. And she's building it, and the contest is being conducted in Second Life. So you have people doing that. So, it really runs a gamut. I mean, that's kind of a question that happens a lot when... I've talked about it in the media. People assume it's sort of like the Sims, or something like that, where they think, "Well, you're just going in to flirt and socialize as an avatar." And that's a strong part of it, but there's many, many other levels beyond that.

Dr. Dave: Probably most people image pimply-faced teenagers as being the dominant kind of citizen there, but actually, isn't the average age quite a bit older than that?

Au: Yeah, the median age is 32. So I think, yeah, the largest cohort is 32-39. And there's like 18-24 that's fairly strong, but definitely it skews older in comparison to other virtual worlds. Most virtual worlds are really popular with teenagers, or even younger. There's one called Club Penguin, which is for kids, say, 8-10 years old. But yeah, World of Warcraft is kind of, or I'm sorry, World of Warcraft is more skewing college age, where Second Life is what happens when you graduate from all of that. I see games like World of Warcraft sort of like the training wheels for this "metaverse" which Second Life is called. I'll describe this. The metaverse, which is based on a concept from [Neal Stephenson](#), the author of the classic cyberpunk novel, [Snow Crash](#).

Dr. Dave: Yeah, one of my favorite books.

Au: Yeah, awesome book, and sort of the strong influence on Second Life and kind of also a strong influence on the idea that 3-D worlds like Second Life are going to become the next generation of the Internet. And so there's a lot of people that are kind of seeing it that way. There's futurists and so on developing Second Life with that in mind.

Dr. Dave: Okay, let me ask you, what percentage of your own waking life is spent in virtual reality?

Au: Ahh...it really varies. Ironically, I spent very little time in Second Life while I was writing the book about Second Life. But on average, it goes from between 10-20 hours a week.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Au: So, I'll find stories to write about on my blog. I'll go sometimes for just fun to hang out and explore, but it's really, it can get very overwhelming for me because there's just so much stuff going on that's really fascinating and cool. Really, I go in for 15 minutes, and I'll have three stories that I could write about immediately that are really amazing and I want to tell the world about. So, it's sort of, it feels like diving into this overwhelming storm of creativity.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I'm surprised that there aren't more podcasts about Second Life because your blog is wonderful. It's like an extension of your book.

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: But I did a search, a podcast search, and I found only two podcasts.

Au: There's actually a lot more. Let me see if I can find it...there's a fairly large podcast network of podcasts devoted around Second Life. Actually, you know, Adam...what's that guy?

Dr. Dave: [Adam Curry](#)?

Au: Yeah, Adam Curry discovered Second Life a couple years ago...

Dr. Dave: Yes...

Au: ...so he started doing podcasts from within Second Life, and because he's so popular in the podcast community, that brought in dozens of other podcasters. And they've been doing podcasts from Second Life. So...

Dr. Dave: Okay, well, we'll talk about that more offline. I want to come back to this whole psychological dimension, and I want to run by you kind of a rant that I received from one of my listeners, who I respect. A very bright woman, who is a regular listener and who... I made the mistake of assuming that she would be in Second Life, just because she had sort of an avatar-sounding name for her sort of online identity. And she wrote back to me. She said:

“Oh, no. I'm the anti-denizen. That kind of thing holds absolutely no appeal for me. I'm an art historian because I love materiality. I like textures and surfaces and feeling the world. It took me a long time to wear dishwashing gloves when I was doing dishes because I don't like to feel separated from the dishes and soap and water, and I still cannot wear sunglasses because I feel like I'm in a bubble when I

do. I like actually hanging out with my friends and having drinks and dinner, or walking around in new places and swimming in the ocean. I'm also pretty much a radical leftist – not a liberal, mind you, a leftist. I'm idealistic, and nothing bothers me more than the fact that people are choosing a virtual life that is still predicated on our current destructive economy – an economy, by the way, that drives many people to want to have a virtual life. The whole thing is slipping into simulacra and representation: logos, brands, sound bites, avatars, MySpace pages. And I think it's a problem politically. I think community is meant to happen in the real streets, where you have to deal with people, warts and all, and not just with a carefully tuned avatar whose façade is always facing you. In such a system, resistance is reduced to a performance. It becomes ironic. The whole thing is distressing to me. I guess I took the [red pill](#). Plus, I like being outdoors. I don't even get outside as often as I would like because I'm working so much. I have to say that even if Second Life was perfect, indistinguishable from reality, I would still have issues with it on principle. It may be that we're currently the protagonists in a Cartesian evil-demon simulator, but I don't know it. I do not believe that I could fully engage with anything I knew to be a falseness of the world. I also worry that this is some world we are going towards because our current system is making life on this planet unlivable. If they can just create people who are happy, living in a virtual society, but where they will still exist in a commodity-driven capitalist system, then the environment can go to hell and a certain number of people can continue to labor and live in a replica of the way the world used to be. I know I sound like a conspiracy theorist, but I really do think Second Life is a bad idea all around. It distresses me that you are there, but I hope you're like a teenager who is just experimenting.”

(laughs) I know I just gave you a lot to respond to there...

Au: (laughs) Well, that's a very strong and intelligent sort of, I think a strong and intelligent way of reacting to Second Life without having much direct experience with it. So, there's some very valid points there, but I think they're based largely on kind of a second-hand knowledge of what's going on in Second Life. And I don't want to diminish what she's saying, because there's definitely stuff that I thought about a lot when I write the book and write the blog. That's kind of what makes it worth writing about, is it provokes such a strong reaction from people.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Au: I'd say more than anything, nobody is asserting that Second Life is going to replace the real world. What it really is, is sort of an adjunct to the real world, or to the physical, material world. And so there's kind of that, that's... I take people through the naming of Second Life, where people actually came up with, the company Linden Lab came up with the name Second Life, and there's actually a guy who works at Google now, was the main guy who did that. And the whole concept was not to say, “Well, this is going to be an escape from the real world.” This is going to be just another channel of expression for you as a human being. There's all kinds of things that you present, or you have to present, in the real world

that are going to close off opportunities of expression that you would like to bring to the world, but you can't, for various reasons. So there's very much of kind of a utopian aspect to that creation, with the idea being that when we come into the world, we don't have a lot of choice about, for example, our race, our gender, where we live in the real world, our economic status. These are the things that we don't have much opportunity to define, and so the idea of being able to have a place where you can, you can kind of start from scratch and do that, and express some things, is a very powerful part of the Second Life experience. And again, what's fascinating, too, is that you bring what you want and also bring the opportunities that you can't express in the real world into Second Life. But then also what's happening now is it'll go from Second Life into back into the real world. That's the whole Mirrored Flourishing principle I'm talking about, where people are poor, or they're in different walks of life that they would rather get out of. And this is the way of doing that, just because there is this kind of fluid economy, where you can create content in Second Life and that becomes a prototype or a revenue stream in itself. So, I think that's an important principle to think about. The other thing to think about, too, is just how much political activity there is going on in Second Life.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Au: She says she skews to the side of the "left" word. (?) Actually, there's a lot of activists in Second Life – real-world activists – that use Second Life as a political expression platform. And they tend to skew left, so left or Libertarian, let's say. So for example, the Daily Kos community did a, they broadcast their yearly Kos convention in Second Life for people that could not go down – I think they have it in Las Vegas last year? And so they had this as an online community, again, as an adjunct to the real-world activism, and the kind of political convention that they were holding. So, there's a lot of that going on.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Now, one of the things you mentioned was gender-shifting, and I guess there are a lot of people playing with identity in that way. Give us a sense of how much that's going on, and what do you think that's about?

Au: Yeah. The surveys I've seen – again, like marketing surveys, or even academic surveys – it tends to, if I remember right, it's about 15%-20% of people will play with different genders in Second Life, so they're actually men playing women, or vice versa.

Dr. Dave: I got the impression that it was more men playing women than women playing men.

Au: Yeah, it seems to be that way. That's really interesting. I actually know few women that gender-bend, though I know a lot of men (laughs) I think because I've met in the real world, and they're like glamorous babes in Second Life...

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Au: ...and they're a guy. And one of them, he was this gorgeous, like, elf/babe/princess, and then I met him: he's a 6'2" Texan with a mullet. So, um...

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Amazing.

Au: Yeah, there's a lot of ways and reasons they do that. It really, from individual to individual, a lot of people – like you say, mostly guys – they just like enjoying playing with a female character. They just like watching it, interacting with it, and sort of shaping it, and there's a lot of interesting questions you could ask about why they're doing that. You definitely have a feminist spin on it and say, "Well, you're just trying to control women." Or you could say, well, it's just kind of a, it's fun. So, you know, sort of a "playing with dolls" aspect of it. Other people are playing with gender because they're trying to express things that are more difficult to do in the real world. I've actually, just this week, I met someone who is transgender in real life, and she – well, now she - told me she did that because she was having gender issues in the real world and gender confusion, and she started changing her gender in Second Life from a male to a female.

Dr. Dave: And you tell a story, too, in there about somebody who is a woman who is African-American, and chose to be white in Second Life. I guess she tried it both ways and just found that she experienced a lot less discrimination as a white avatar than she did...

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...as a black avatar.

Au: Yeah, well, there's two stories that I mention as far as crossing race. There's one, a woman who had kind of a, she's black in real life, but she had kind of a California blonde-girl avatar. And she was telling me about a lot of the social pressures and hoops that she did not have to jump through, that she usually does in the real world. She told me, "In the real world, I have to make a good impression right away. I have to be very articulate and nice," because otherwise, when she's out in society, people – especially whites – are going to make assumptions if she does not do that. So, she was talking about the freedom of not having to worry about these things. She's just kind of, she's there as herself, kind of paradoxically because she doesn't look like herself. She looks like a blonde girl, although in the real world, she's African-American. So there's that, and then there's also... I wrote about a woman who's white in the real world; she's a blonde girl in the real world. In Second Life, she's tried out being a black woman in Second Life. Sort of look(s) like Venus Williams, the tennis star, and was telling me about the different ways that people started reacting and interacting with her, where she said she – like, her friends – a lot of her friends started getting cold around her; started being standoffish; and started saying strange things like, "Well, when are you going to go back to being

you?” And, so, kind of this thing again, with the whole playing with identity, kind of provoking what, provoking this question of how people react to identity.

Dr. Dave: Yes, there’s another great example of that in the book, where, you know, there are various groups of people, really, that can benefit from being in this other world, because of it... kind of disguising what they look like in real life...

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...and you give the example of people who suffer from certain physical disabilities. Talk about [Wild Cunningham](#).

Au: Yeah. Yeah, Wild Cunningham is the name of an avatar who is actually controlled by, generally nine people who live in a care center in Massachusetts, who – they’re all profoundly handicapped; there’s generally very little physical movement – they’re in wheelchairs, a lot of paralysis, actually, and what they do is they interact in Second Life as an avatar named Wild Cunningham, and they go places and they say things based on democratic vote. And even Wild Cunningham, the avatar, looks...the look is very unique! He’s like orange and has bizarre hair, and it’s kind of like, because a lot of the people in the center in Massachusetts are white and others are black, so they kind of compromised and made him orange. And that was kind of, that was to be one of the first stories I wrote that was sort of talking about another issue. I estimate there’s about 10% of people on Second Life that are handicapped or physically disabled, or psychologically disabled that kind of use Second Life as a way of interacting with people in the real world.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, just to fully paint the picture here, these people are in wheelchairs and such, and they’re kind of gathered around a computer monitor. And their caretaker is sitting there kind of querying them, “Okay, where do you want your avatar to go now? What do you want your avatar to say?” And she kind of tries to get the consensus of what they want.

Au: Yeah. I mentioned another story. There’s one guy who comes into Second Life and he just stands in one place. He doesn’t move and he just chats with people. He’s just a really good conversationalist, and people enjoy talking with him. We found out later the reason he doesn’t move is he’s totally paralyzed, and he’s typing with his feet.

Dr. Dave: Oh, my goodness.

Au: And that’s how he communicates, so...

Dr. Dave: But this has opened up a whole world for him.

Au: Yeah, yeah. Very much so. So it’s opened up... Again, this is that whole Mirrored Flourishing, that’s opened up not only possibilities of human interaction – just

being able to talk to human people (laughs), see new human faces from all over the world on a regular basis – but also, just that a lot of these folks are really talented in their... they haven't been able to show, for example, their artistic ability, or even just kind of their social ability, as far as being community organizers and leaders, and so they have this opportunity to do that in Second Life.

Dr. Dave: Well, for example, [Asperger syndrome](#) people are in the world there...

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...and are able to flourish there. You tell a story about, I think it's [Tateru Nino](#)?

Au: Yeah, Tateru. And again, this is another typical story. There tends to be a fair amount of people with Asperger's, which, as you know, is kind of a mild form of autism, and they tend to be in Second Life very popular, whereas in the real world, because of their Asperger's, they're kind of anti-social, at least from an outsider's perspective. But in Second Life, where so much of the conversation is based on text and chat, they're able to be better communicators because they don't have to worry, for the first time, about all these invisible social cues as far as facial expressions, body language, that are not as important in Second Life.

Dr. Dave: And Tateru Nino – I'm trying to remember – this person was very accomplished in Second Life.

Au: Yeah, yeah, probably one of the more popular people in Second Life. She actually was (laughs), people built a shrine to her because she would, she was very well known for welcoming new users and helping them get their sea legs, and just being very supportive, very matronly. Kind of a hip Mary Poppins, I think I described her. So again, that's very typical. There's so many people that are like that in Second Life, where they have very strong personalities, and again, they're able to bring out things that people... People, you know, 99% of the people that they meet in the real world have no idea that they have that in them. So that kind of relates to the e-mail you got that you read from the woman. There's all these other avenues to consider that are coming out that, you know, we take for granted, and most of us are fortunate enough to be physically fully abled and able to interact with the whole of society and the outside world. But what about all the people who can't?

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I don't know if this is Tateru who I'm thinking of or another person who you described who was very social and welcoming and outgoing in Second Life...

Au: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...but said, "In real life, I don't have any friends because people are really turned off by the fact that when I'm talking to them, I face the opposite direction."

Au: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So...

Dr. Dave: Well, now we should also talk about the experiment that you kind of led me through yesterday. We went into Second Life and somebody there has developed something to kind of explore the world of schizophrenia.

Au: Yeah. This was developed at [UC Davis](#) Medical. Two doctors, what they did is they took the real-life transcripts of actual schizophrenics, who would describe what their hallucinations look and feel like. And so they took the transcript and they converted a lot of these hallucinations into this demonstration in Second Life. So, for example, there's this one guy that they interviewed, this one schizophrenic who said he stopped shaving. And the reason he stopped shaving is because when he would start shaving and look at himself in the mirror, he'd see a death head. It would look like he was dead. So obviously, kind of drove him insane, or just to have a really strong reaction to it. And so you actually, in this simulation area, which looks like a hospital ward, you go in, and you see that, if you go toward a mirror. And also, signs change their shape, as we saw yesterday, and you also hear voices whispering in your head. And the whole effect is to create as realistic as possible a simulation of what having schizophrenia is like. And there's two intents. One of the intentions the UC Davis guys had for this was to show friends and loved ones of schizophrenics what the experience is like, because they had the impression that people were not grasping what schizophrenia was like. They kind of, a lot of people sort of imagine schizophrenia being like they're hallucinating like in the movies, where you're seeing monsters flying around the room and things like that, where it's a much more subtle experience. And so they want to show what it's like, just so people can be more sympathetic – especially caregivers also, like nurses, who work with schizophrenics. And the other idea they were working with – and I should follow up on this; I know that they were talking about it – was seeing if you can actually help schizophrenics by taking them through this simulation and sort of desensitizing them to the hallucinations, where if they see them represented on a computer screen as opposed to in their head, the hope is that they will be able to be resistant to them and identify them as hallucinations and just disregard them.

Dr. Dave: Well, it would be really interesting to see how that turns out. And it reminds me of work that's being done with veterans from Iraq, who...

Au: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...are suffering from PTSD.

Au: Right.

Dr. Dave: And I actually did an [interview with Skip Rizzo](#), a psychologist at USC, who's...

Au: Oh, yeah. That's where they...the project...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, works with virtual environment, you know, sort of surround... You actually talk about some of that work in your book. You describe it as caves (?), where you get into a kind of physical machine with goggles, etc., to really give that 3-D sense. But it would seem that maybe even in Second Life, environments could be constructed to serve that same purpose of desensitizing.

Au: Yeah. I'm not sure if they've done it with soldiers, but definitely there's people working in that space, do things like that.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Well, let's see. There's so much more that we could talk about; I would love to go on and on. I wouldn't do a complete job here, though, if I didn't make some reference to the dark side of human psychology... also shows up. You know, as somewhat of a Jungian, in Jungian psychology we talk about the shadow, and for the yin, there's always the yang. And you refer to utopia at one point...

Au: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: ...but somehow the devil is in the utopia! You have what are called [griefers](#). You want to comment on that?

Au: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, griefers, that's kind of a common reference in online worlds for people who cause grief, really, basically by using the tools of the game or the virtual world, in this case, to frustrate people. So, I mean, it could totally run the gamut from attaching genitals to your head and chasing people around the room to... One interesting way, because what people do in Second Life often is to own land, and you can own property on your land, I mean you can build homes on your land. And so what sometimes will happen is someone will build a really, really ugly house or a really ugly sculpture that is neighboring, so it's right in front of your neighbor's face and they can't avoid it. And so you'll have this thing where people will start building walls so that they don't have to look at their neighbor's ugly house, or whatever. And often, it'll be done intentionally, just trying to frustrate the neighbor or try to get them to sell their property, which actually, Linden Labs just came down with a regulation about that. So, that's one example of grieving, where someone is doing it as a way to gain something, to gain land in this case. But other times they do it as asocial or sociopathic fun.

Dr. Dave: Well, it's just like all those Star Trek episodes, isn't it, that we take our problems with us into space. (laughs) Whether it's outer space or inner space, human nature will be human nature.

Au: Yeah. That's what fascinates me as well. There are these utopian ideas around Second Life, and it was created with a lot of these ideas in mind. But yeah, we take our problems with us; we take our conflicts. I think with the griefers you have a lot

of people that tend to be really young guys who are not totally happy with their real life. And (laughs) the traditional conception is that they live in their parents' basement...

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right.

Au: And so they're not happy with their life, so they're going to take it out on other people and make sure that they're miserable, too. So you got that, and you have people coming in with different real-world political outlooks, and that's going to lead to conflict. So you're going to have all these conflicts that come out that we carry from the real world into Second Life, and that's this really fascinating dynamic. I mean, sometimes it causes conflict. I think it tends to, on balance, lead to better social situations in Second Life, where you'll have people of all kinds of different value systems and political beliefs and so on, and they're able to more or less, on the whole, get along better in Second Life than they would in the real world. But yeah, that's the kind of fascinating tension.

Dr. Dave: Okay, and one of the little... yeah, that's well said. One of the little alleys that we don't have time to go down today – but maybe I will on a future show – is the fact that there are psychologists and psychotherapists and counselors in Second Life, some of whom have hung out a shingle there. (laughs)

Au: Yeah. Yeah, we did a search and found at least one or two, I think, people that represent themselves as accredited psychologists who were offering therapy.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so I might try to chase one or two of them down and interview them...

Au: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...to see what I can find out about what they're up to and what their experience has been. Well, as I say, you have a very wonderfully written book, and one of the things that struck me about your book is, regardless of what happens with Second Life down the line – whether it goes away, or it flourishes, or it takes over the world, (laughs) or takes over the Internet, I think your book is going to be an amazing artifact 50 or 100 years from now. (laughs)

Au: Thank you.

Dr. Dave: If somebody comes back and picks up this book, it's going to be terribly iconic of this particular point in time.

Au: Well, thanks very much, David. I appreciate that.

Dr. Dave: Sure. So, Wagner James Au, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Au: Thank you, sir.