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### **Textual Poaching of Digital Texts: Hacking and Griefing as Performative Narratives of *Second Life***

As World Wide Web transforms into Web 2.0 in the era of media convergence and becomes a full-fledged computing platform serving Web applications to end users, users' online activities become distinctly performative in nature, in that they perform activities that allow them to form electronic texts by mobilizing the resources offered by online works. *Second Life*, as an open-source platform that integrates not just building and scripting tools, but also external platforms into its structure, is a rapidly growing *massively multiplayer online game* (MMOG); one such example of a Web 2.0 application that presents a unique environment for content creation and the formation of stories. This game, I argue, elicits *multi-platform narratives* which display variegated textualities spread across diverse media connected via the Internet and produced exclusively by its users. It thus challenges our established notions of text, narrative, and reading. Its textual world of *Second Life*, while not a narrative in and of itself, embodies an acute level of narrativity whose texts and stories are formed according to how its users (or "residents") mobilize *Second Life's* resources as a work. The open-source nature of *Second Life*, as we will see, renders textual poaching an indispensable tool both for content creation and the construction of stories.

While this is true for all residents, my research primarily focuses on hackers, griefers, and goons whose activities poach the textual space of the metaverse on various levels. The open-source environment provided by *Second Life*, which allows it to be built by its users,

presents an optimal playground for hackers who appropriate the programming language of *Second Life*, the *LL* client, through the use of third-party client hacks that render the metaverse a more flexible environment. These hacks, the most famous being the hacks created through the use of the *libsecondlife* client, are in turn appropriated or poached for the purpose of *griefing* by goons and griefers. By employing *second-hand poaching* as their primary tool, goons (who are the members of the *W-Hat* group notorious for their cheeky activities in-world) and griefers (who take pride in making the game less enjoyable for others by playing by different rules) create offensive builds and cause unease in the metaverse. Second-hand poaching, a type of meta-poaching in which acts of poaching are themselves poached, characterizes the production of stories of *Second Life*. These incidents which spawn in-world stories are further developed in unexpected ways on external platforms such as blogs, forums, *IRC* channels,<sup>1</sup> and image databases like *Snapzilla* and *Flickr*,<sup>2</sup> where residents comment on and discuss these events and appropriate them to generate extensions of these stories. Using the arguments made by textual critics such as Anna Gunder and media theorists such as Henry Jenkins, I will argue in my presentation that the activities of these groups become performative acts that alter the textual space to *form* variegated texts and that ultimately elicit *multi-platform narratives* of *Second Life*.

For those who actively participate in online communities, it may seem a bit odd to hear *Second Life* being discussed within the context of textual criticism, as the terminology that this field brings to the table, in particular the words *work*, *text*, and *narrative*, have traditionally been reserved for print literature. Obviously, *Second Life*, and most digital texts for that matter, do not conform to the traditional understanding of *text* defined as the fabric of the words that make up a work, arranged in such a way as to impose a meaning that is stable and, as far as possible, unique. After the advent of digital media that gave birth to

electronic textualities, this traditional understanding, which foregrounds the importance of linguistic codes present in the text over other non-linguistic characteristics, has undergone revision by scholars who take into account the bibliographical codes of the text, including, but not limited to, font size, style, binding, and paper texture. Bibliographical codes are particularly relevant to meaning-making in textualities that emerge in the era of media convergence, where, as Malcolm McCullough notes in *Digital Ground: Architecture, Pervasive Computing, and Environmental Knowing*, the text is no longer seen as confined to the library as a book, but presents a ubiquitous information technology as “it has become possible to move the text between many scales and surfaces” (87). As a result, one is rarely out of sight of the pieces of the text.

Anna Gunder’s discussion of the *text* and its relation to the *work* provides an appropriate model for analyzing the variegated textualities that are created in *Second Life*. Adopting G. Thomas Tanselle’s definition of text as the arrangement of elements, Gunder broadens the definition of the text to include works that do not have sequential dimensions, such as sculpture, cartoons, and pop songs. Understanding the reader’s actions to be most relevant in defining how *text* and *work* interact, Gunder explains in “Forming the Text, Performing the Work,” that *works* are performed as *texts*; in other words, to perform a *work* is to form a *text*. While *works* are initially performed by the author, as she decides on what the *text* will consist of or how the *text* will be stored and presented, some *works* require their reader/user to assist in its being performed. In videogames and hypertexts, for example, the *work* cannot be experienced until the user performs certain tasks, such as clicking, navigating, and, in the case of *Second Life*, building. In Gunder’s model, then, *Second Life* as a *work* is the raw platform that comprises a series of networked computers and the tools that are available for content creation, and its *texts* only emerge as residents perform certain activities that

result in building the textual world known as the metaverse by mobilizing the tools the platform provides.

The properties of the platform of *Second Life*, admittedly, are quite unlike those of most electronic texts, let alone those exhibited by print texts. It shares the characteristics of most electronic textualities in that it has at least two layers of text: one written in code, the *LL* client, and thus is meaningful to machines, and the other coded with culturally meaningful sign systems, known as the metaverse, and is legible to human users. Yet it also embodies another layer of code written in *libsecondlife* which comprises client hacks. Moreover, as *Second Life* seamlessly integrates external platforms, its textual space extends beyond the metaverse to encompass the entire Internet. Ultimately, the open-source approach to content creation not only offers various tools that allow residents to build and script, but renders textual poaching a necessary performative act that results in the production of content and stories. All layers of text are poached to form different texts, and each instance of poaching produces narrative scripts that develop stories in different directions presented through various platforms.

As a Web 2.0 application, *Second Life* elicits a type of transmedial storytelling that David Herman and Henry Jenkins view as the characteristic of narratives in the era of media convergence. To mark the inherently fragmented nature of *Second Life* stories and account for their ad-hoc production, I refer to them as *multi-platform narratives*. Similar to transmedial storytelling delineated by Jenkins, here residents can enter the story by way of any text presented through any platform, and each narrative script develops different parts of the story, thereby necessitating residents to actively seek out the interconnections between various texts and fill in any gaps. Since these stories are not coordinated by a locus of authority and are randomly produced by the residents at the spur of the moment, the

narrative scripts that constitute the whole may be inherently redundant or even contradictory. Any act of consumption can instantly transform into an act of production when residents who find out about daily news from different platforms decide to create extensions to these stories. As such, these acts of production present second-hand poaching wherein residents poach the stories created by other residents who, in turn, had poached the text in different ways.

To illustrate the diverse ways in which *Second Life* is poached and its texts are formed on various platforms, I will use the CopyBot tool. This tool was developed by the libsecondlife developers in November 2006 to test their object awareness code that ensured that the Bots<sup>3</sup> the team created saw objects properly in *Second Life*. Essentially, this Bot duplicated other residents' objects without asking for permission. Although the tool was not a hack nor was it appropriated for griefing purposes, it was perceived to be a copyright infringement and became a considerable source of grief in-world. It briefly threatened the *Second Life* economy as a whole.



**Figure 1** CopyBot protest, *Second Life Herald*



**Figure 2 Stellar Design closes doors temporarily to protest**

Baba Yamamoto, a libsecondlifer whose connections to *W-Hat* are implied by some bloggers, was accused of maliciously releasing this tool for grieving purposes and became the target for reprehension. To prove that this tool was released maliciously by libsecondlife developers, *IRC* chatlogs of Baba and Eddie Stryker, the lead developer of libsecondlife, were posted on various forums as a proof of their ill-intent.<sup>4</sup> Baba, when explaining the events that occurred at the time, stated that his only mistake was to show it “to a bunch of people who were not ready to deal with it.” He observes that the primary reason behind the excessive reaction to the tool was that “[residents] realized that they were not living in a happy protected world.” Within days, CopyBot resulted in boycotts, protests,<sup>5</sup> and, ultimately, various texts that developed the story in unexpected directions in blogs, forums, *machinimas*,<sup>6</sup> and *Snapzilla*, the image database tool that allows residents to post pictures taken in-world to its external Web site.



**Figure 3 GeForce's store flooded by Mario lag bombs, *Second Life Herald***

The program's capability to clone the shape and texture of nearby avatars and objects while mimicking their animations enchanted the residents. Various bloggers such as Hamlet Au and Prokofy Neva, noted citations of multiple instances of the same avatar logged in at the same time at the same place.<sup>7</sup> Moo Money, a well-known *machinima* creator, and a few others took their pictures with the Bot and posted them on *Snapzilla*.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 4 Moo Money makes out with her clone,  
Posted by SuezanneC Baskerville , Snapzilla**

Hamlet Au published a *machinima* entitled “libsecondlife clone demo” to *YouTube* of himself being exponentially cloned in front of the libsecondlife building.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, Eddie Stryker explains that the Bot that Moo, Hamlet, and others used was not CopyBot, but rather an earlier version that he himself was working on prior to CopyBot’s inception. This Bot, unlike the latter one, simultaneously logged in multiple avatars and automatically copied whatever was next to it, whereas CopyBot was a single Bot that copied on command, and, as such, was a more advanced version of the program. In a way, these extensions added to the misrepresentation of the tool, thereby presenting second-hand poaching in which slightly skewed narratives about CopyBot are perpetuated among residents.

Despite the fact that CopyBot is only an executable program without a physical shape, it is instantiated in various forms across platforms. SuezanneC Baskerville, for example, who jokingly describes the tool as “CopyBot v.01, developed by Xerox PARC in

the 1960's. Later incorporated into the Apple Lisa as a file copy command," posts the image of a Xerox machine that represents the tool on *Snapzilla*.<sup>10</sup>



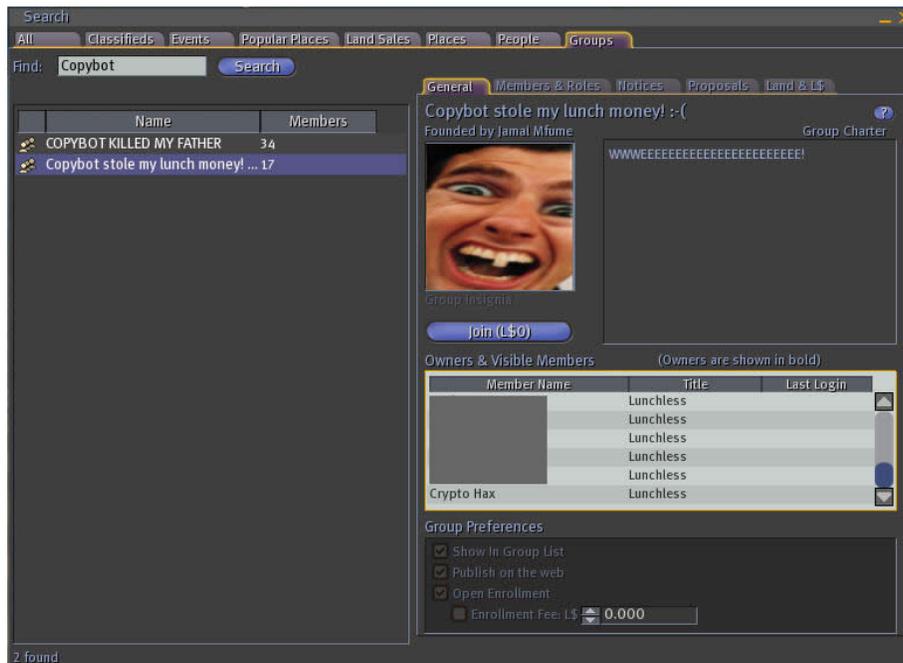
**Figure 5 CopyBot v.01, Posted by SuezanneC Baskerville, *Snapzilla***

The goons' appropriation of this tool, not surprisingly, displays their taste for cheekiness that tests the boundaries of decency. Employing a Xerox machine, like the one that SuezanneC posts on *Snapzilla*, Howie Lament has created the goon version, CopyButt, which, if used, places the avatar on top of it and takes pictures of her butt.



**Figure 6 CopyButt, created by Howie Lament**

In addition to creating spoof objects, goons also created spoof groups that made fun of the exaggerated reactions that the tool elicited, for example, “CopyBot stole my lunch money” and “CopyBot killed my father.”



**Figure 7 CopyBot goon groups**

One of the fashion designers of *Second Life*, Nylon Pinkey, takes a humorous approach to the outrage instigated by the emergence of this tool in a *machinima* movie, “Interview with CopyBot”<sup>11</sup> published in *Grid Review*,<sup>12</sup> a *Second Life* blog that comprises a group of *machinima* artists who report in-world news through *machinimas*. When interviewing CopyBot, who appears in the likeness of Nylon herself, Nylon introduces her as the international superstar who is known by everyone, including Nylon’s ninety-year old grandmother, and asks CopyBot about how she feels about her fame. The tool personified in Nylon’s avatar explains that this fame caused her much hardship as she has been banned from many sims and angry mobs camp outside of her house and want her dead (which refers to the protests outside of the seller’s, GeForce’s, store which was flooded by Mario lag bombs that eventually crashed the sim). Complaining that her family (depicted in a family picture of herself, her husband, and her baby, all in the likeness of Nylon) no longer has any kind of privacy amidst the media attention she has been getting lately, CopyBot feels ambiguous towards her fame. To emphasize the exaggerated reaction that the tool has caused, Nylon explains that CopyBot has been accused of forum closures, search issues, cancer, and fashion stores closing, all but one being an actual consequence of the tool. When complimented on her fashion sense, CopyBot remarks that she has always been influenced by people around her and is planning on opening up her own line of designer clothes called *copy.ink*, a trademark she claims to have copyrighted.

All these stories led to the tool’s being conferred the *Avatar of the Year* award for 2006, where Pixeleen Minstral, *Second Life Herald* reporter, posted a ballad relating CopyBot’s exploits.<sup>13</sup> As seen in all of these different types of stories that are perpetuated across different platforms, this case provides a powerful example of how multi-platform narratives work through second-hand poaching. From posting images and blog comments and creating

spoof objects to making *machinima* movies, residents perpetuate various complementary extensions of these stories depending on their technical skills. These stories distort and poach the original event/story in interesting ways.

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<sup>1</sup> *Internet Relay Chat (IRC)* is a text-based conference system that allows users to communicate synchronously. Users log into a channel on which other users are "chatting" and the conversations are displayed on the screen. Each specific IRC channel begins with a # and is dedicated to a different area of interest.

<sup>2</sup> *Flickr* is an online photo management and application that allows people to make their photos available to everyone and provides a more flexible way of organizing photos.

C.f. Flickr <http://www.flickr.com/>

<sup>3</sup> A bot is a type of computer program that performs automatic tasks.

C.f. Bot <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bots>

<sup>4</sup> Later in various forums and blogs GeForce Go's real identity was discovered and Eddie was accused of offering money to Nimrod to take the blame on himself. Banned

C.f. CopyBot Girl GeForce Girl's Identity Revealed

[http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2006/11/copybot\\_girl\\_ge.html](http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2006/11/copybot_girl_ge.html)

C.f. Founder of libsl offers nimrod Yaffle \$100 to save face

<http://forums.secondcitizen.com/showthread.php?t=5072&highlight=libsl>

Cf. Chat log from #libsl from November 10, 2006 <http://www.sluniverse.com/forums/Topic12867-1-1.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Residents captured the protest as *machinima* and posted it on *YouTube*.

C.f. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFbSXSzGkU&mode=related&search=>

Pixleen Minstral explains the frenzy in *Second Life Herald* as such "Hordes of angry avatars converged on Manitoba sim today after metaverse citizens Prim Revolution and GeForce Go set up shop in-world to sell the copyBot - a tool that allows for easy object copying without regard to the DRM controls. On my first visit the the shop this morning, a relatively brisk business was being done as curious avatars queued up to buy a copyBot - but then were afraid to use it - at least in public. A number of protest signs had been erected just outside the store property, and even entering the sim was difficult given the crush of avatars.

By afternoon, the scene had changed as protesters were much better organized - and even more angry. Protest signs were being handed out to all, and the store was encased in protest prims -- about 4 layers deep. Periodic lag bombings slowed the entire sim to a crawl - then crashed it as it filled with bouncing Mario particles."

C.f. Mass unrest in Maritoba [http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2006/11/mass\\_unrest\\_in\\_.html](http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2006/11/mass_unrest_in_.html)

<sup>6</sup> *Machinima*, a term that refers to *machine cinema* or *machine animation*, is both a collection of associated production techniques and a film genre defined by those techniques. As a production technique, the term concerns the rendering of computer-generated imagery (CGI) using real-time, interactive (game) 3D engines, as opposed to high-end and complex 3D animation software used by professionals.

<sup>7</sup> C.f. Clones Pwnd [http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2006/11/clones\\_pwnd.html](http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2006/11/clones_pwnd.html)

<sup>8</sup> C.f. Moo Money makes out with her clone

<http://www.sluniverse.com/pics/pic.aspx?id=114938&sort=Pictures.PictureID+desc&Name=SuzanneC+Baskerville>

<sup>9</sup> C.f. libsecondlife Clone Demo <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TFGFtRizn0>

<sup>10</sup> CopyBot v.01 <http://www.sluniverse.com/pics/pic.aspx?id=115777&Name=SuzanneC+Baskerville>

<sup>11</sup> C.f. Interview with CopyBot <http://blip.tv/file/113066/>

<sup>12</sup> C.f. Grid Review <http://www.gridreview.com/>

<sup>13</sup> C.f. Avatar of the Year: CopyBot [http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2007/01/avatar\\_of\\_the\\_y.html](http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2007/01/avatar_of_the_y.html)

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