

Lying, Cheating, and Virtual Relationships

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Abstract

The advent of virtual worlds like Second Life and the popularity of MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games) like World of Warcraft, with over 11 million subscribers, have made purely virtual dating more appealing than the online predecessors of chat rooms and dating websites. And not all virtual dating remains virtual as some couples who meet virtually marry irl. Virtual dating offers a host of perks that dating in real life cannot, such as: sexual encounters without fear of disease or pregnancy, anonymity, and, for some, a chance to “cheat” on a partner without ever leaving home. This paper will explore the ethical and prudential aspects of virtual dating, focusing on moral issues like lying and on prudential issues like satisfying urges for different partners within a committed relationship without ever touching another person.

Introduction

Gem and Zupy were married earlier this year in a beautiful ceremony atop a snow-covered mountain with a breathtaking view. They met last year and dated for seven months before officially taking the plunge. Theirs is a fairly common story, except the couple has never been in the same city together or even in the same state. And Gem and Zupy are both married to other people irl (in real life). Their wedding ceremony, and their entire relationship, is virtual, having taken place in the virtual world of *Second Life*. How does virtual dating compare to traditional face-to-face dating? Since they are both legally married to other people, does Gem and Zupy’s virtual relationship and marriage count as cheating or even as polygamy?

Continually improving technology has made virtual dating more attractive than in the past. The advent of social virtual worlds like *Second Life*, and the popularity of other kinds of virtual worlds such as MMORPGs

(massively multiplayer online role-playing games) like the immensely popular *World of Warcraft*, have made purely virtual relationships and dating more appealing than in the past when the available options were online chat rooms and dating websites. And not all virtual dating remains purely virtual as some online relationships later turn into “real-world” relationships. Virtual dating offers a host of perks that dating in real life cannot, such as: sexual encounters without fear of disease or pregnancy, anonymity, and, for some, a chance to “cheat” on a partner without ever leaving home. This paper will explore the ethical and prudential aspects of virtual dating, focusing on moral issues like lying and on prudential issues like satisfying urges for different partners within a committed relationship without ever touching another person.

Dating, Cybersex, and Virtual Worlds

Virtual dating, online relationships, and online sexual encounters (which I will group under the category *cybersex*) can take place in a number of ways and in a number of virtual venues, but perhaps the easiest places for such encounters to take place in are virtual worlds. Virtual dating, online relationships and cybersex are in no way restricted to virtual worlds, however virtual worlds like the popular Second Life and World of Warcraft offer subscribers far more visual stimulation, as well as more potential partners, than most other online venues. Having spent over four years playing World of Warcraft and a few months wandering around some very interesting places in Second Life, I can say that both worlds are far more “social” than one might suspect. While online dating experiences and cybersex encounters surely can vary greatly, a look at these two most popular virtual worlds can offer some insight into purely virtual relationships.

For those who have never encountered a virtual or online world, the idea of dating in one may be strange indeed. But virtual worlds have amassed a huge number of subscribers and their popularity only continues to grow. Linden Lab’s Second Life (SL, for short) and Blizzard’s World of Warcraft (commonly known as WoW) each claim to have more than 12 million subscribers worldwide, and WoW has servers in many different countries.

The difference, in general, between social virtual worlds like SL and MMORPGs like WoW is the general purpose of the worlds: social vs. gaming. Most people initially log on to WoW to play the game, although the social aspect is often significant for subscribers as well. Second Life, on the other hand, is not a game, even though one can find some games to play within the world, and it did not begin its life as a computer game like WoW did, before the online aspect became popular. From personal experience, I can say that if I create a new character in WoW, one whose name is unknown to any of my online friends, I can be online for hours without anyone talking to me. If I don't want to be bothered and ignore anyone who talks to me in chat, probably no one would care. Logging in to SL, on the other hand, as a new avatar (the name given the virtual characters of the subscribers) you will find your virtual self greeted by many other avatars before you even figure out how to walk forward. Other avatars may follow you around and talk to you, even if you try to ignore them. As such, SL is purely intended to be a social enterprise, so to speak, and those who log on should expect the social aspect. Everyone in SL is in the same world, although the world is huge, and individuals can buy virtual space and modify and add to the world itself. WoW, on the other hand, has a large number of servers in many different countries, each is identical and each supports approximately 20K – 50K users.

There is a cost difference between SL and WoW as well. One cannot log on to WoW without paying the monthly subscription fees (roughly \$15 a month, although a free short-term trial is possible) and without purchasing the software. SL, on the other hand, can be accessed without purchasing anything, although some subscribers pay real money to have enhanced graphics, in-game money, and more “bling” for their avatars. This makes SL more accessible to the general public since it is free to join and log on.

Both virtual worlds have their own currency. The currencies of WoW and SL can be purchased online – the Linden of SL and virtual gold from WoW. The main difference here is that Blizzard's rules forbid the buying and selling of WoW gold outside of the game, an offense which is punishable, if discovered, by having one's account banned. In contrast, SL encourages its subscribers to buy and sell Lindens outside of and inside of

SL and Linden Labs sells virtual land in SL for real money to individuals, companies, schools, and even countries to be developed and populated.

But what about dating? Independently-run websites exist for both SL and WoW subscribers interested in “hooking up”¹ although the SL sites seem more popular, which is perhaps not surprising given that SL is social rather than game-based. The upshot is that SL is far more popular for dating. SL avatars and the world itself can be significantly modified by users in a manner that WoW does not permit. Although character movement in virtual worlds is of course scripted, SL subscribers can write scripts or buy them for their avatars to allow them to have sex – an aspect utilized by many SL subscribers. Avatars can thus move and gyrate and appear to have sex in ways that WoW toons or characters cannot. There are even whole areas for sexual encounters in SL and specific “mature” zones dedicated to fetishisms and other kinds of sex-related activities like bondage and discipline, S & M, and dominance and submission.

But dating and sex in SL has its critics, even amongst people who admittedly engage in virtual dating and cybersex. One such critic argues that a significant attraction of cybersex, the imagination and creativity of the participants, is compromised in a virtual world like SL, especially since one can use pre-written “canned” lines while engaged in the act. (Welles, 2007)

Real Virtual Couples

Reports in the media of couples who met online, had online relationships, were married online, or found their partners “cheating” online are easy enough to find.² There are even books in print about virtual dating and infidelity. A few stories about virtual couples have received large amounts of publicity, like the story of Dave Barney and Laura Skye (David and Amy Pollard irl). (Cable, 2008) In real life, the couple is an unemployed and rather overweight British pair who met in SL, married in SL and irl, and not long after divorced in both worlds after Amy caught David’s SL avatar in compromising positions with other women. Both Amy and David have moved on, Amy to a beau from WoW and David to a hostess at the club he operates in SL. Comparing Amy and David’s irl personas to their handsome, fit, successful, and trendy online personas has

afforded the media a chance to poke fun at and generalize virtual relationships, making them seem absurdly fake and made-up.

But despite the media's interest appearing to lie solely in exploiting the "freak factor" involved in virtual dating and relationships, a large number of people choose to not only flirt and date virtually but to become sexually and emotionally involved in a purely virtual manner. And the number grows daily. Some people move from virtual dating to a "normal" relationship with a former virtual partner, but many others prefer to keep it virtual. So what's the attraction, you may ask?

The Perks and the Problems of Virtual Dating

There are obvious advantages to virtual dating. First, one can engage in a heavy dose of fantasy if dating virtually. Even those who choose to cyber (engage in cybersex) via webcams where they can actually see their partners can still remain considerably removed from the reality of messy real-world relationships and feel free to role-play. (One cannot help but wonder if virtual daters would choose to go back into the Matrix after being freed if they were promised great bodies, well-endowed organs, and wealth and success...)

A second attractive perk of online dating is the cost. Anyone with a computer and internet access can engage in a virtual relationship for little to no cost. Going out with your best girl in SL is considerably cheaper than the irl counterpart. But the lower costs of virtual dating aren't just financial. You can extend less of yourself in a virtual relationship and so the emotional costs can be quite lower. I remember an interview with a very attractive young woman on the popular HBO show *Real Sex*, detailing her numerous online relationships and sexual encounters. She argued that a cost/benefit analysis of virtual dating and cybersex vs. their irl counterparts had led her to date exclusively online. Virtual dating is free from most emotional and financial costs, fear of physical abuse, and the chance of contracting STDs and unwanted pregnancy. It also offered her the chance to engage with multiple partners without the baggage of jealousy, messy entanglements, and the ties that an irl relationship carried.

The anonymity aspect of virtual dating and cybersex can clearly be counted as a third appealing perk. Anonymity can free a person to do things they would never dream of doing irl. For those who wish to explore lifestyles that are not socially accepted or are even illegal, virtual dating, online relationships, and cybersex offer them the freedom to explore their desires anonymously. One can only hope that some of these illicit desires can be satisfied virtually, especially if they involve harm to unwilling others. (Of course anonymity can unquestionably have a serious moral component as well, but we'll come to that in the next section.)

A final obvious perk of virtual dating and cybersex over real-life relationships and sex the old-fashioned way is the freedom to disengage. It is considerably easier to walk away from a relationship in which you never have to look your partner in the eye and say "It's over." And there is less fear of being stalked by crazy ex's if they don't have your personal information.

What about problems or potential costs of virtual dating, online relationships, and cybersex, in comparison to the "real deal?" Most of the benefits we have just discussed have another side. The costs of virtual dating may be considerably lower than irl dating, but the satisfaction gained from such relationship may be considerably lower as well. It is fun to role-play, but having a partner who knows you for who you really are carries an immeasurable benefit. One downside of anonymity is that if you never see or speak to the person on the other end of the ravishingly handsome avatar with whom you're flirting or cybering, you have no idea of the gender, age, attractiveness, or mental health of said individual. Although the costs may be lower, the potential payoffs are lower as well. The old adage "nothing ventured, nothing gained" comes to mind.

One prudential question we can ask of virtual marriages in particular, apart from the other aspects of these relationships, is whether a virtual marriage legally counts as polygamy if one or both partners happen to be married irl to someone else. Virtual marriages do not, of course, currently count as "real" in terms of polygamy, however, virtual adultery or infidelity has begun to be cited as a reason for divorce. The divorce laws in the U.S. vary, but I wouldn't be surprised if virtual infidelity was soon counted among the plausible grounds for divorce in some places.

Many relationships end due to infidelity. Virtual relationships seem to some to offer a way to technically remain monogamous, if monogamy and sex are defined in physical terms, while having guilt-free virtual relations with a variety of partners. Have we finally found a way to have the best of both worlds? Can you cheat on your partner without ever touching someone else? This raises related but distinct questions regarding the moral aspects of virtual dating and cyber

Two Ethical Aspects of Virtual Dating: Lying and Cheating

I believe the two most compelling ethical questions arising from virtual dating and virtual relationships are as follows. First, is it permissible to lie to one's virtual partners, given that role-playing and taking on virtual identities which are quite distinct from one's irl persona are generally assumed to be the norm in an online environment? Second, do virtual relationships and cybersex count as cheating, assuming the existence of real-world partners who are unaware of the virtual hanky-panky?

Let's discuss lying first. What can one expect in virtual dating, online relationships, and cybersex in terms of truth-telling? It seems that any reasonable person in a virtual world should expect to doubt the absolute honesty of potential virtual partners. However, anyone who has been in a successful and meaningful relationship would probably say that honesty and communication are integral components of a healthy relationship. Where does this leave virtual dating and online relationships? This is surely a problem if one expects to find a satisfying relationship, in terms of honesty and communication, in a virtual world. And the anonymity that we counted as a perk in the previous section is not without moral implications. Anonymity affords virtual partners certain protections and perks, but it also makes it exceedingly easy to lie. Nonetheless, honest encounters are possible in virtual worlds, if one is careful. Assuming that it is morally problematic to lie to a partner irl, is it wrong to lie to a virtual partner?

What do ethicists say about lying in general? Some ethicists argue that lying is always wrong, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences. (James Rachels, 2009) Kantian ethics, for example, argues that lying to a person treats that person as merely a means to an end, or uses them – and that is wrong. (James Rachels, 2009) Undoubtedly, lying is usury. But

what if lying is expected? Is lying morally problematic in virtual dating, virtual relationships, and cybersex if it is generally acknowledged that people are lying about themselves? Let's look at a different ethical theory.

Utilitarian ethics, which focuses on maximizing benefit and avoiding harm, would argue that lying is typically morally problematic because it has the potential to harm others in a significant way. (James Rachels, 2009) Lying, however, is not always wrong on utilitarian grounds. Lying may be justified if the circumstances and consequences warrant not telling the truth. Benefiting others and avoiding harm are central to morality on utilitarian grounds. If virtual partners expect that the individuals with whom they are virtually interacting are likely not being completely truthful, then they are less apt to be harmed. Further, if virtual partners tell tall tales to heighten the sexual experience and the role-playing involved for both partners, and this is expected, then lying in such a scenario wouldn't seem to be problematic on this account.

Notice that the issue of lying, as we've discussed it, differs from the issue of cheating in an important way. The worry in lying is directed towards not harming the person on the other end of the computer connection, whereas the issue of cheating involves possible harm caused to a person outside of the virtual relationship, namely the irl partners of those engaging in virtual dating, virtual relationships, and cybersex. Of course cheating involves a component of lying as well, but the issues involved in lying to one's irl partner can be delineated from lying to virtual partners.

We now turn to the issue of cheating. So what really counts as cheating? It may plausibly count as cheating if one engages in multiple online relationships without informing one's multiple virtual partners, however the cheating I would like to address is cheating on irl partners with virtual partners. Do I have to physical touch another person in order to count as cheating on my husband, for example? (I can't help but be reminded of the amusing debate during the Clinton presidency when pundits debated whether intercourse was required for sex.)

From what I can tell, more women than men think that engaging in online relationships is morally problematic, when one has a partner irl who is unaware of the virtual relationships. Perhaps an important component here is honesty as well; that is, if one's partner irl is aware of and has no

problems with their partner engaging in virtual relationships, it would be harder to argue that cheating occurred. But what about those who engage in online dating, virtual relationships, or cybersex without informing their irl partners?

It is reasonable to assume that virtual dating and cybersex can be damaging to a real-world relationship, especially if lying to one's irl partner plays a role. It is easy enough to find media accounts of husbands and wives who argue that their spouses neglected them for a virtual partner or partners. Even if virtual sex isn't grounds for divorce per se, neglect is.

Cheating is typically much more complex than just sex. And sex may not have to be involved for one to cheat on a partner. If this is the case, then virtual relationships can clearly count as cheating on irl partners. Again, lying or betrayal plays a role. The sense of betrayal involved in cheating is complicated. An irl partner can find their position and their time usurped by a virtual partner, and this usurping can be just as real if the relationship is virtual. Further, the intimacy involved in many virtual relationships can be just as intense as irl. Intimacy with a partner outside of a committed relationship surely seems to be cheating, especially if we take cheating to encompass emotional infidelity. It may reasonably be argued that emotional infidelity is more harmful to a relationship than physical infidelity. For example, just like finding out in the real world that your partner has engaged in "meaningless" sex with a prostitute, finding out that your partner has engaged in "meaningless" cybersex with a virtual partner whose real name is unknown seems to me at least to be less worrisome than finding out that your partner has decided he or she is in love with and desires to commit to and marry someone else, even if it is "only virtual".

Real or Not?

So what can we conclude from our foray into the world of virtual dating, online relationships, and cybersex? Perhaps that these are as real as you allow them to be and that the emotions involved in virtual relationships can be seriously detrimental to irl partners, if you have them. Lying is clearly a worry, as is emotional attachment and emotional infidelity, if one is juggling a virtual partner and an irl partner.

Virtual dating offers a host of perks that irl relationships may not, and virtual dating may be a springboard to an irl relationship, if that's your cup of tea, but use with caution.

NOTES

1. www.avmatch.com and www.datecraft.com, respectively.
2. For examples, see <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1859231,00.html> and <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118670164592393622.html>.

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Biographical Sketch

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