

The Pitfalls Of Online Role-Playing Games

How would you change your life if you could simply flip a switch? If you could start it all over again, what would you do differently? Thousands of people are doing just that — in the virtual sense.

Byork and Alyssa are young, attractive millionaires — married for less than a year. Byork made his fortune in the stock market and has



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retired at the ripe old age of 36. Alyssa, a former runway model, met Byork at a local dance club, and three weeks later, they were engaged. One of the couple's favorite escapes is their opulent island home off the coast of St. Thomas with 360-degree ocean views. When they're not walking barefoot on the beaches or relaxing by the pool, they're likely to be

making love under the stars. Sounds like the ultimate fantasy, doesn't it? Well, that's because it is.

Byork and Alyssa are not real people. They're avatars — digital representations created on a popular virtual reality gaming site, Second Life. Second Life is one of the more popular MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), a 3D virtual world imagined and created by its residents. It has grown explosively and is inhabited by thousands of people around the globe interacting in their own virtual world. It has a functioning economy — you purchase real-estate, meet other avatars date, even marry!

Avatars Byork and Alyssa are piloted by tech-savvy singles on opposite ends of the globe who have never met face to face. Like thousands of other people involved in video gaming, they're glued to their computer screens for 10-hours at a time building their online existences — ignoring their real-life relationships.

In the amazing fantasy worlds of MMORPGS, anything is possible. You can design your avatar to look any way you choose. You can change your race, gender or sexual orientation. . In the virtual

world, we're only limited by our imaginations.

Second-Lifers can go dancing, exchange back rubs with a stranger in a hot-tub and, yes, even have virtual sex. And if your avatar hires a virtual "sex worker" without telling your real-life partner, is it cheating? You bet your avatar it is.

As graphic technology advances, virtual social interactions are blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. More people are so transfixed by the imaginary, they prefer it to their mundane existences.

Phil, 48, hasn't had sex with his real-life wife, Sara, in more than a year. Their marriage has deteriorated into daily squabbles over raising their 9-year-old hyperactive son or whether to have Sara's recently widowed mother move in. Instead of trying to work this out with Sara, Phil has escaped to his computer. He spends hours online living his imaginary existence. Phil's avatar, Frank, is everything he's not — young, muscular and great in bed. Frank never has a problem with his erection, and his lover never turns him down. He's become obsessed with his avatar love, Diane, a cocktail waitress with beautiful red hair and amazing legs. When he's not "in the world," he's thinking about it. . . . He's worried that this "game" has gotten out of hand.

Keeping your real and virtual selves from blurring can be a challenge. MMORPGs require a degree of practiced dissociation — floating above one's avatar like some disembodied puppet-master. But players who stay partially attached may invest their avatars with a level of consciousness or "humanness" that leads to interpersonal confusion. Let's face it. You've created your avatar; so its part of you — your hopes, dreams, needs or desires. If your avatar's romantic advances are rejected, will the real "you" feel disappointed?

The virtual world opens fascinating opportunities for researchers in human behavior to study the self and social interactions. Without clearly delineated social consequences, how will people treat one another in their imaginary environment? Will we dispense with politeness, generosity and other social norms? Some of this

research is already under way. Researcher Nick Yee's findings show that men and women socialize about the same amount in role-playing-games, but women focus on developing supportive "friendships," while men are more interested in more concrete issues.

But I'm equally curious about short- and long-term effects of MMORPGs on real-life relationships. I worry about couples who immerse themselves in isolating activities to fill their emotional voids with virtual "fixes." The same couples, who tell me that they're too busy to share intimacy, manage to sequester themselves for hours at a time to read e-mail, chat online or play MMORPGs. Obviously, something is very wrong with this picture.

The developers of Second Life and other role-playing games know that fantasy is easier and more fun than real-life. In our fantasy world, we are in complete control. We don't have to deal with aging, pregnancy or illness. There is no boredom. If we get tired of anything at all, we can instantly change it or shut down the computer.

So, are online role-playing games harmless? You decide. Like all things, it depends on how they are used. If you're enjoying your virtual world more than real life, or if you prefer your avatar lover to your real-life partner, you may be hooked.

Unless you want to stay lost in space, start a dialogue with your partner. It's not easy to talk about fantasies, but it's worth the risk. If you're both struggling to resolve your feelings and making little headway, it might be time for outside help. The goal is to build bridges from one life to another . . . not to leave the real world behind.

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