Monday, January 10, 2005

MAN AND MAN ON WOMAN ON WOMAN

So there's this guy who's a guy in real life but a girl in Second Life, even though in real life he's into girls, and then there's this other guy who's also a guy into girls in real life, and he was playing a guy in Second Life for awhile, but then decided to be a girl instead, and then like two months ago, guess what: the first guy met the second guy, and they fell in love, so now they're a couple-- even though they're really two guys into girls.

In other words, you know, just another romance in Second Life.

"We haven't really been too sexual," Jade Lily clarifies for me. "We're like two people who are becoming very close. It's like I have no concept of gender in Second Life... so the only way i can think to qualify my heterosexuality is my attraction to a female figure."

So I stopped awhile to chat with Jade Lily and Torley Torgeson, the female figure in Jade's life. As it happens, I knew Torley when he was a slim young dude in flowing neon clothes who hauled his keyboard around everywhere, and though a relative newcomer, quickly charmed Second Life's citizenry with his quirky, mad creative charm. (His ongoing journal is one of the strongest Second Life blogs out there-- especially if you're a fan of giant watermelons and sleeping in dumpsters.) Shortly after taking the in-world by storm, however, Torley abandoned his keyboard attachment for the most part, and his gender. And in deference to his wishes-- and what else can you defer to, when identity is so malleable?-- I'm going to abandon the male pronoun when I mention Torley from now on, too.

"Jade's the type of person who I felt I 'knew' early on," she tells me, "even if I didn't talk that much to her to begin with. It's kinda like... you have your Pokemon cards or pieces of the puzzle and whatever, and you suspect someone else has a bunch of the missing pieces. Well, as time went on, I found this to be true."

"It's just begun," Jade tells me as we sit down in the courtyard of Jade's Second Life library, last November. "But so far, I get along great with Torley." To make things more complex (and what's a Second Life romance without complications?) we're joined at the table by someone who has a real life history with Jade.
"A girl I dated in high school came into Second Life as a guy," Jade explains. "We attempted a relationship, but it didn't really work out. We're just not compatible. That's completely unrelated."

"You see this lil' lady to my right I once dated," says Sage Maracas, a muscular man wearing dark sunglasses, "I created a male avatar better than her's. She gave me a [male avatar] skin and it's been that way ever since. Now every time I go female she gets all pissy... something about spending money on the skin, blah blah blah."

"I thought it would be interesting to have a relationship with a guy in Second Life who was actually a girl in real life," Jade explains, laughing, "and we thought we wanted a relationship at the time."

"You mean in real life?" I ask.

"Something like that," Maracas grunts.

"... [A]nd I think we wanted to salvage that," Ms. Lily continues. "It didn't really work out for either of us, I suppose."

Which brings us back to the relationship which does seem to be working out, at least for the moment, involving the two women nearby who are currently locked in a warm embrace.

"Mmm," murmurs Torley, "it's hard to let go."

I ask them what it feels like, when they see their avatars hug each other.

"It feels like I'm hugging a girl when I hug Torley," Jade answers.

"Same," says Torley.

But since Jade told me earlier that sex isn't the emphasis for the relationship, what about it exactly, I ask them, makes it a "romantic" relationship?

"If I imagine him as a female," Jade answers, "which isn't difficult to do with his new female avatar, I'd say he's an ideal partner for me, personality-wise. What makes it romantic, I think, so far, is the long conversations that we have about who we are, and where we fit in the world. How we think. We ask each other deeply personal questions. Trying to understand one another... I just treat him like a girl, and he treats me that way. And it's fun. We've agreed that it can never leave Second Life." She grins. "SL is the enchantment."

"Do you think you might be bisexual, in real life?"

"I'm not attracted to guys physically," Lily answers flatly. "But I think I could find a guy's personality attractive... I think a lot of people have homosexual tendencies. It doesn't necessarily mean they're gay in real life. In real life, I'm clearly attracted to women. In Second Life, it gets shady. I see my avatar, Jade, and I'm compelled to play a female role.... because it's what she's supposed to do, I guess. I dunno. SL has..."
either taught me a lot about myself, or created more questions. Maybe both."

I warn them that some might judge their relationship negatively, if I write about it, but they're undeterred. "Some people will unfortunately always judge others harshly," Torley Torgeson says. "I've been judged for many things… my techno music politics, my autism, etc. Gotta do what you really believe in."

"Techno music politics', wha?"

"Oh you know, just like rap music has East Coast versus West Coast, it's that way in techno too… with, like, over 300 different styles, it's such a mess." (Torley's a techno musician, hence the keyboard she used to carry, when "she" was a "he".) As for his autism, it's a low grade form known as Asperger's, sometimes known as "the geek syndrome", for the way it's disproportionately afflicted children of Silicon Valley employees, and others with a high tech, mathematical bent.

"Well for me," says Torley, "it comes with a lack of common sense. That's one of the big ones. I tend to miss the obvious, and I have certain compulsions and obsessions. Techno music and neon colors for example. I am NeoN… I am the OneN!" He smiles. "I have great difficulties understanding body language and expressing emotion in some areas." But being in a visual medium like this has been a boon for him. "In the past," he says, "I have been adverse to text-only chat for the reason that it is just words alone, and hard to place them in context. It is a very difficult thing for me to make heads and tails out of that. So I use a lot of emoticons. However, within Second Life, it's multimedia, so it's so wonderful we can show ourselves through NOT ONLY text, but avatars... gestures, animations... I found out about SL so relatively late in the game, but I am thankful to be here."

"But Torley has made friends with all of the veterans," Jade points out. "Everyone loves Torley."

Torley Torgeson seems to blush. "Awww... see, now how that happened... that's somewhat of a mystery... awwws, Jadey."

"Let's get a picture of Einstein eating Hamlet," Jade suggests, so we do. Einstein is the giant dragon sitting atop Jade Lily's as-yet unstocked library. ("It'll have resident-produced, Second Life-related articles," she explains. "We have a publishing process and everything. It's pretty involved.") So I squeeze myself in the dragon's teeth, while the two women stand below me hugging on top of an open book, waiting to be read.

**EPILOGUE**

This was all in November, just before the holidays kicked in. So as I prepared to finally write this, I wanted to check back in with the pair. Had they gone back to their male forms, or broke off their relationship in the intervening months? And did they ever want to meet each other in real life? Last I heard, Jade Lily was still offline, but a couple weeks ago, Torley sent me her own update by e-mail:

"Jadey's away right now but she'll be back in a few days," he writes. "I shall let her know [you want to talk with her]! I miss her oodles already… Just a few hours ago, she came on Second Life from a friend's place but I didn't want to see her in-world because I believe 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. As much as I have Jade Withdrawal Syndrome, I'm waiting to
"Eternal" (Avatars run the virtual track for real world cancer relief)

"I Want My SL-TV" (State-financed Swedish artists and rocket-launching fox midget launch metaverse networks)

"Metaverse Becomes Monaco" (A country-country comparison)

"Bartle Be the Scrivener" (MUD pioneer Richard Bartle takes his case for textual preeminence to SL)

"The Longtail of Csven Concord" (Modeling complex futurist theories in SL)

"The Ideal Trailer" (Machinima as documentary film tool)

"Not Sweating the Details" (When "virtual sweatshops" become just another part of the world)

"Sandbox Game" (Giving a second life to their favorite games)

"Day of the Doctorow" (The man, the myth-- the avatar)

"Mr. Frogg's Wild Ride" (Hard luck musician literally sings for his supper)

"The World Inside the World Inside" (VR cave in a VR world)

"Into the Arms of America" (SL as pro-US PR)

"Fated Inner Chomsky" (A "devil's accountant" in SL)

"Evolving Nemo" (Simulating Darwinism underwater)

"Making Love" (The animation of desire)

see her again when the time is right, knowing it will make both of us stronger together…

"It's 3:45 AM approx as I write this, and I am zonked delirious outta my mind. But no better time to do it, 'cuz the thoughts are gonna flow like a ribbon… Jadey's far better at talking about us that I am, I feel, but here goes, in my own words… Jade and I are like opposites in some ways, similar or identical in others. I guess that's kinda obvious but I like to say, in Matrix-y terms, that she balances my equations. She's the order, I'm the chaos. I'm like the crazy explorer nomad type who came into this world to wreak havoc of a friendly type, and she's been structured and disciplined with her SL Public Library project over many months. We both have an intense creative focus and love-- literally and figuratively-- sharing ideas with each other…

"So many of our thoughtlines are similar-- it's difficult to put into words, but when you think of life as a travelling train with various stations along the way, like points on the timeline, Jadey and I are often finishing off each other's sentences or saying the same things in chat. Here's something that may seem small to others but meant a tremendous amount to me. For years, I've said 'Ipsum dolor' when referring to dummy filler text. Now, most people in my experience don't seem to know what that's about. They either go 'What?' or don't say anything at all. But just a few days ago, when I started mentioning it in regards to what the Library terminal would be filled with on a temp basis, Jade said the first part of it, 'lorem ipsum', and I was like WOWWW. It's like she grabs one end, I grab the other, and we meet in the middle…

"I am soo in love with Jade… Simply put, I am happy when I am with her. I have searched my feelings-- and I have a history of finding it hard to let emotion go -- and I have found this to be true, over and over again… Like I like to say:

"she calms my storms
and keeps me warm
i will not fade
her name is Jade.

"… Second Life also needs a better way to hold hands and walk. Hmmm. But even with our technological limitations, we become more human through the astounding self-expressivity here. At least, that's what I'm convinced of. Jade's a good person with a good heart, and that's something that really attracted me to her. She likes to help out, and ohhh myyy I'm just getting some crazy humanist visions of the future right now…

But, I e-mail back, does she want to eventualy meet Jade in real life?

"The answer to this is: ABSOLUTELY, YES! I do because like I said many times over, she's such an exceptional person. Simple as that. The future is a big place so we're just taking it one day at a time, but always open to possibilities. There are certain things that can be faked online, but personality shines through. And she shines so brightly.

"I think I would be very nervous yet very excited to meet him in real life--very human, in other words. Our love is like a superset on top of our offline reality. Second Life is a medium to facilitate and channel it through, to do these things that aren't easily done otherwise (like flying unassisted). It's about exploration of self and others. This is exactly what we're doing. We have become more human through technology, and dropped old social stigmas and unlearned baggage from our pasts.

"At the least, I draw the logical yet emotional conclusion that we'd be best buddies, yet the
love constantly grows. 'Straight' guys playing as 'lesbian' girls. Who not only do this, but do so knowingly with trust and communication, and in the hopes of making each other's lives better, and the lives of those around us too. Or something. Confusing? Yes. As you can see, the labels are really at their shatterpoint...

'Happiness for me, doesn't have to make sense: but I do have to feel happy. And I do.

Hope this answers that.