

# Speculative Realms

FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 2010

## The Ham and Egger Review: Indictment of the Real World

**Second Skin** a Film by Juan Carlos Pineiro Escoriza

I received **Second Skin**, a documentary film about online gaming, in the mail from Netflix thinking that I would probably quit half-way through the viewing. After all, though I play PC games, I never got into online gaming. I still refuse to pay for DSL because the deals in my hometown stink to high heaven. And don't even get started on broadband with me.

Ready to dismiss the film in disgust, I was shocked to discover that I was slowly being blown away.

The film is about multiplayer online gaming. The official term is massively multiplayer online role-playing gaming or **MMORPG**. It is a vortex to another world and new realms of human behavior. What the film does is detail those behaviors in an unflinching manner. You watch it expecting it to either excoriate online gaming or sing its praises to the skies. Thankfully, it does neither in any appreciable measure.

Instead, it surveys the field. We get introduced to a gaming addict who is so riveted to his computer he loses his job and he goes to a halfway house to recover. The halfway house is a converted 12-step program run by a lady whose son committed suicide after a long struggle with online gaming. The addict eventually leaves the program in disgust, only to cold-turkey his way back to work and offline sobriety.

His story is interspersed with the stories of couples who have met online playing **EverQuest**. I've heard about online dating. But here, you meet the other person's **avatar** in the course of online play. Their avatar hits it off with your avatar. Flirting flowers up. The next thing you know you're packing your station wagon up to move to Florida and shack up with a chick you've never met face to face but know only as *Princess Mayhem*, or whoever.

Then there are the hard core Gamers who live together. Their living room looks like CTU from **24**: A PC triage. They're miked up and signed-on and they're stocked up on fast food. In fact, the guys go to market and pick up food they can keep close to hand. They've got coolers and two-liter sodas. They're like cybertrucks. It is a long haul. One guy in the film goes three days straight playing online.

Communities develop and they get organized. The **Syndicate**, a community of **MMORPG**ies numbering a staggering 600 (with tens of thousands of applications for membership), is a kind of online-gamer gated community. One member points out that he couldn't hope to have that many friends in the real world.

Online gaming presents new vistas in a lot of areas. For instance, when gaming couples enter into marriage counseling, do they bring their avatars with them? In that case, the therapist gets to bill for four patients. But what do you do when your wife complains that your avatar never experiences erectile dysfunction so why should you? Do you resent and penis-envy your Avatar?

This is also a smorgasbord for **Object Relations** Psychoanalysts. Do avatars become internal psychological objects that from time to time become the psychological locus of control in the Gamer's mind? How do you get the avatar to free associate? It's a program. How can it free associate and not crash the computer? When you get a Gamer on the couch, if you have any hope of discovering who the Gamer's ideal self might be, are you going to have to analyze the avatar? It appears a necessity if depression is defined as warfare between the ideal and the real.

And indeed, that's the question the filmmakers pose: What is it about the real world that is so unrelentingly ugly that people are forced to seek refuge online? In this, Escoriza critiques the wasteland that confronts us in the real world. And it isn't as if the levity of the situation impacts young people alone. Online gaming is demographically quite diverse, although the main group, ages 20-35, are at the age

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where they are encountering the blinding disconnect between the ideal world and the real world.

This age group, though, unlike generations before, is meeting up with a vastly devolved social milieu, literally on the verge of collapse into barbarity. Jobs, if anyone has them, tend to be soul murdering, crushing experiences in existential rejection. Torture and the murder of dissent has replaced justice and due process. There are the people who live in gated communities, the rich, the mainstream media, the Pentagon, the sports superstars, and there is the rest of us.

The people in the gated communities feed us marsh mellow news and spread chocolate over horror.

It isn't just that the real world is depressing and that is the normal way of things, as [Melanie Klein](#) or the [Buddha](#) might contend. The real world is no longer *just* depressing.

It is *mad*.

If there is an object (relations) lesson in Gamer Behavior it might be that people who have come of age since the year 2000 have shown a decline in empathy. (1) This critique would center around the fact that, instead of a human face for a mirror, kids today have the computer screen, or the face of the pixelated avatar, distorted by pixel squares and the affect retardation avatars are subject to by virtue of the difficulty programmers have in detailing human emotion. Avatars are programmatically dehumanized. Consequently, the ability to detect an affect in a human face is dehumanized through the influence of computers and gaming.

Dehumanization is not going to produce happier humans.

Gamers ought not to be blamed for this. They are simply inheriting the deficiency. In fact, it is deficient parenting. There are less turnkey children today than there are online gaming children. If the absent parent is a cause of compassion nullification by virtue of depriving a child of a human face to mirror back to it human affect, thus depriving the child of an opportunity to learn to detect human suffering, it is the absent parent and not the present computer that is at fault.

And it isn't as if programmers aren't aware that this is an important goal in their rendering efforts. Having actors wear sensors to provide digital characters with facial affect will turn out to be the most important innovation in character generation.

But the question remains for the object relations critic: Will succeeding generations have any understanding of human affect at all? Does online gaming retard the Gamer's ability to detect human suffering, in herself and others? Doesn't this accelerate human devolution rather than critique it?

For now, the real world is not a place where people have an honest shot at being who they aspire to be. You can't be a knight or a lady today. You would be laughed at and humiliated. The real world used to be a safe place, even though it has always been depressing. Now, it is an absurd bowl of narcissistic vomit, at least in America, a kind of psychological highway where everybody has road rage, not at all inviting to people who still have a yearning to be human.

Gamers find that yearning is humiliated in the real world. Is that because they have internalized their avatars and recognize no one in the real world who looks like they do on the inside? Whatever their psychological compulsions, they couldn't bring themselves to kill that yearning off. They kept searching and they found that, online, they could be respected and treated like human beings and fulfill aspirations that the real world would butcher in a heartbeat.

In [Second Skin](#), you see the whole ball of wax. Gamers get married and they have babies and they go to the same soul-sucking jobs we all do. Some get fed up with their addiction and the missing time from their lives and they lose weight and re-enter the real world seeking sobriety. Some are so possessed and humiliated by the phenomenon that they kill themselves to be free of it.

You see the weight problems—many Gamers look like the puffy Pixar characters in Wall-E. In fact, if there was ever a tournament in gaming where you were allowed to place bets, the prejudice and the money would be on the heaviest person you could find. The pounds are proportional it seems to the hours spent gaming.

Therefore, [Second Skin](#) is not itself an avatar. It is grounded. It is sober. It is also as subversive a film about the computer age as [The Matrix](#) and is a badly needed document in the critique of the real-world history of humans.

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(1) Maia Szalavitz. Shocker: Empathy Dropped 40% in College Students Since 2000.

### Follow-ups

**Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet** by Sherry Turkle  
(Wikipedia abstract [here](#))

Turkle, Taggart, Kidd, & Daste. **Relational Artifacts and Elders: The Complexities of Cybercompanionship.** (PDF)

**The Bartle Test** (wikipedia entry.)

Take the **Bartle Test** [here](#).

Sherry Turkle. **Who Am We?** *Wired*, 4.01.

Robert D. Hof. **My Virtual Life: A journey into a place in cyberspace where thousands of people have imaginary lives. Some even make a good living. Big advertisers are taking notice**

Dr Richard Bartle. **Interactive Multi-User Computer Games.**

**The Daedalus Project: The Psychology of MMORPGS**

Nick Yee. **The Proteus Effect.**

Posted by Gary Haden at 7:36 AM 

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