

A New Path of Liberation: Choosing to be Disabled on Second Life

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People often feel a need to escape from their real lives. They want to vacation away from the challenges reality forces them to deal with. Virtual worlds are often seen as places where people can escape to because they take away real-life challenges, allowing people to achieve solidarity. "Avatars can give us an alternative, a break from daily hardships, and a space to practice for another try" (Meadows 86). Second Life is a virtual world, in which people can do and be anything they choose. It offers users freedom, equality and control. "The first time any disabled person experiences life within the virtual community of an online world, they are nearly always taken aback by the way that it removes the barriers of patronizing convention so often encountered in real life when trying to form new friendships" (Winder 48). People with disabilities are passionate about Second Life because it provides them with freedom, equality, and control, three things that they are not able to fully acquire in real-life (Boellstorff 137). Nevertheless, their identity is not based on the three liberties they are given.

The equality and freedom of Second Life seem to be the most attractive parts of its virtual community. Disabled people take on judgments and physical limitations nearly everyday. Having a place like Second Life to escape to becomes crucial. They have spent most of their lives feeling small and unworthy, but Second Life granted them freedom, equality, and control that empower them to pursue their real-life goals (CBS A2).

Second Life empowers its disabled users through creating an atmosphere that allows them to interact with people similar to themselves. Second Life is full of communities that offer support, items, training and many other extras for people with disabilities. These communities do not discriminate or judge their members based on the visibility of their impairment. On November 28, 2007, Tracy Smith did a report on the Early Show about Second Life and its gift to the disabled. The gift Second Life was abundantly giving to the disabled community was freedom. Tracy Smith interviewed a woman named Nanci Schenkein, Baccara Rhodes in Second Life. Nanci was an event planner in real-life until she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and was then forced to retire. Nanci turned to Second Life to help her to achieve the things she used to be able to do. Through Second Life, Nanci was able to do much more than most Multiple Sclerosis patients are able to do. She was able to continue a career that she was forced to retire from in real-life, as a result of her illness. Nanci was enslaved by her illness, but Second Life empowered her and allowed her to escape its captivity.



Figure 1. The Wheelies Night Club in Second Life.

Many people on Second Life use places like Wheelies, a Night Club for the disabled community, to meet new people with and without disabilities. Figure 1 shows the users with many different identities interacting with one another despite their differences.

Wheelies is the most advertised place in the disabled community on Second Life. It is a place where people with and without disabilities can hang out, dance, and meet people similar to themselves. The owner of Wheelies is Simon Walsh. He created it to be a place for those with disabilities to have fun and escape from their real-life challenges. His involvement in the disabled community does not end there, he is the owner of Second Ability and Stevens Centre, and he is an Independent Disability Consultant/Trainer in real-life. Simon works with disabled people so much because he himself is disabled as you can see in Figure 2. He has cerebral palsy, a disease that has been affecting his speech, motor control, and behavior since he was born. Simon revealed his disability to the world by creating an avatar on Second Life that virtually displayed his disability. In fact, he said that he uses his wheelchair more on Second Life than he does in real life. His original reason for showing his disability with the virtual world was to save time from informing people of what he calls his “cultural background” as a disabled person. Shortly after creating a disabled avatar, Simon began to appreciate his virtual character for its symbolic representation of himself. “I am a number of things, I am male, I am gay, I use a wheelchair, I am disabled by society. Having a virtual disability is about representing who I am,” says Simon. When asked about the reasons people choose not to show their disabilities virtually and the judgments made about them by other Second Life members Simon said, “Most people who choose not to display their disability on Second Life see their impairment as separate from their inner identity.

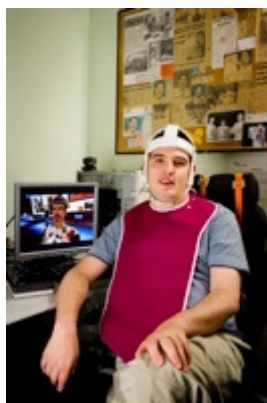


Figure 2. Simon Walsh in reality.

People who become disabled later on in life often use Second Life as a way to return to their original identity.” Many people with virtual disabilities are not disabled in real-life. Some of them use it as a second personality and other just want to see what it is like to be disabled. No matter their reasons, the thing that remains the same is that their “disabled” identity is not a core part of them. It is an additional identity.

Simon had a very interesting point of view about virtual disabilities, but another interviewee, JWheels Carver, was able to present an opposing point of view. JWheels Carver is a resident comedian at The Learning Center Experience on Second Life and a stand-up comedian in real life. His cerebral palsy has limited his abilities in reality, but he has been freed from his wheelchair through Second Life. JWheels uses a wheelchair on Second Life when he is doing stand-up

comedy. Otherwise, he enjoys being able to do things on Second Life that he would never be able to do in his everyday life. "When I do stand up I use a chair. In my everyday Second Life stuff I don't tell people I am in a wheelchair. It's not something I feel I should have to share with everyone. Other than on stage I don't really tell people I am in a wheel chair unless they ask. Second Life is the one place where I don't have to be known as my disability." JWheels feels strongly about his disability not being the basis of who he is. "If you are working in a virtual world you should not have a disability. What you do in real life don't fly in Second Life. You can go to Second Life and be what you always wanted to be. Its an oxymoron if you are in a virtual environment there is no disability everybody is accepting because of their exposure to disabled communities on Second Life." Though, there has been a rapid growth in the disabled community, many people still choose to hide their disability. This is a personal choice they make based on how they identify with their disability.

Disabled persons on Second Life have received freedom, equality, and control from the Second Life community. Yet, their real-life communities refuse to give them such liberties. Simon Walsh and JWheels Carver have different opinions about having virtual disabilities, but they seem to agree that Second Life's gifts of freedom, equality, and control can be enjoyed regardless of the virtual identity a person chooses to have. The identity disabled and non-disabled persons choose to have is based on many different factors, but it is not based on the amount of control, equality, and freedom they feel that they have.

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