Computers

News from Avatar Editors

Dan Hunter

O f the many ways to bifurcate the human population, one is to consider whether you will find the book *The Second Life Herald* compelling or silly. A simple way to decide this for yourself is to consider its opening paragraph:

It was a quiet night at the Alphaville Herald. The newspaper had been put to bed and a man known as Urizenus, its publisher, was as usual the last one in the office. He busied himself closing up shop, tending to fireplaces and cleaning up the messes that had accumulated over the course of the day. It took a few minutes to get Uri’s cats, Cheddar Cheese Cheetah and a tabby named Black, back into their cages. Then he turned out the lights, locked up for the night, and headed home.

The events in that paragraph and much of what follows in the book took place in a virtual world. As any number of breathless news stories have by now explained, these worlds are online spaces where users navigate around a representation of a physical space using their avatar or “toon.” In doing so, they potentially interact with thousands or hundreds of thousands of other users. Although these environments are remarkable technological achievements, for all their sophistication they still demand a huge imaginative leap. They ask the user—and the authors of this book ask the readers—to “be” in the offices of this virtual newspaper. They ask us to take seriously the idea that those sets of scripted pixels that appear on the screen as “cats” aren’t just entries in a database, but really are Urizenus’s pets.

And so how you feel about this book will, in the end, come down to the metaphorical question of whether you think that the events recounted in it actually “took place” inside some world—rather than within the febrile imaginations of the authors and the other users of the computer systems that constitute the two worlds at the core of the book, The Sims Online and Second Life.

Apart from studying virtual worlds for a living, I am among the converted on this question, and I have no problem with the idea that these events are meaningfully real. Some genuinely important moments of my life have occurred within the boundaries of various online worlds. For people like me, who don’t find the opening paragraph slightly ludicrous, the book is one of the best accounts of why these worlds matter now—and will matter even more in the future, as they are put to all manner of uses: scientific experiments, social interactions, work, property investment, sex, and so on. Peter Ludlow (a professor of philosophy and linguistics at the University of Toronto) and Mark Wallace (a freelance journalist) were the editors of the virtual newspapers the Alphaville Herald (in The Sims Online) and the Second Life Herald (in Second Life), and they take these worlds very seriously. The stories that they have collected from their eponymous newspapers—stories of virtual prostitution, asset trading, censorship, and the like—are amusing, often racy, and engaging. Their meditations on some of the interesting questions that emerge from virtual worlds—on issues like what experiences are real, or how we should structure the governance of these worlds—are always thoughtful and frequently insightful.

But for the many who don’t buy the importance of virtual worlds, this book may just be the evidence they need to dismiss them altogether. The book’s dominant theme is a meditation on the injustices that game developers inflict upon users. At times, the narrative comes across as an airless, quasi-Marxist diatribe, with big business (in the form of the developers) crushing the proletariat (in the form of the Heralds’ editors or some aggrieved users whose cases they champion). And the book is written somewhat in the style of the Heralds, that is, a mannered impersonation of a hard-boiled detective/newspaperman circa 1930. For those familiar with Second Life, the authors’ impersonation of J. J. Hunsecker (via Dashiell Hammett, as interpreted by Humphrey Bogart, with a dash of Cary Grant, etc.) will come as no surprise. Second Life is mostly an elaborate drag performance, and the acting out of various elaborations of the self—sexual, physical, emotional, and so on—is about the only thing going for the environment. People sure as hell aren’t there because of the aesthetic appeal of the environment.

[This doesn’t quite explain why Second Life became, briefly, such a hotspot for corporate public relations. Nevertheless, it’s evident that there was more going on there than the simple economics of hype and the fact that Second Life was a relatively cheap way for anxious marketers to head into online spaces that they didn’t really understand. Second Life is all performative surface and doesn’t reflect life in any serious sense (game worlds like World of Warcraft or Everquest are profoundly more mimetic). The thinness of the projections available in Second Life, and the plasticity of the images, has come to appeal to public relations and marketing types. But that is a story for another day.]
that it left virtual ink stains on the hands of the residents of The Sims Online.

However, with luck and some imagination, readers will be able to look past these stylistic tics. They will find the book answers the question of why they should care about virtual worlds. There is life there, and it differs from life in physical spaces. Ludlow and Wallace offer what may be the best overview of the lives that are lived online. There are any number of books explaining how to make money in Second Life or how to “win” in the various game worlds, but until now there were only three seminal works—Edward Castronova’s Synthetic Worlds (1) and Julian Dibbell’s My Tiny Life (2) and Play Money (3)—that managed to help the general reader understand why these new worlds might matter. The Second Life Herald is a worthy addition to this small group and provides a useful, readable guide to the recent past and potential future of online worlds.

References

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PUBLIC HEALTH

Complexities of a Continent

Aship’le G. Abimiku

IV/AIDS, Illness, and African Well-Being links history, cultural exchange, economic exploitation, and diseases across Africa in a very interesting and holistic manner that captivates the reader. The chapters were originally presented at a 2005 conference at the University of Texas at Austin, where editors Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton are, respectively, professor and graduate student in the Department of History. The authors astutely place the havoc caused by HIV in Africa within the broader context of a continent struggling with infectious diseases, high rates of disability, and frequent conflicts that substantially weaken its ability to achieve economic stability or respond appropriately to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

From the very beginning of the book, one senses the interplay between historic events and dwindling public health: the decades of use of bactericidal “chewing sticks”; a missed opportunity in Ghana to educate the community on misconceptions about epilepsy; the compromised health of South African miners and the accompanying poverty, boredom, depression, alcoholism, and prostitution (all ingredients that further fuel infectiousness and hopelessness across the continent). A very fascinating link between social activities and health was forged by the globalization of hajj. Heaton’s chapter on the historical development of the West African pilgrimage scheme (1919–1938) clearly demonstrates how the global health system was compromised by a colonial regime more interested in staying in power than in protecting the health and citizenship of its pilgrims. However, colonization had some positive impact on Africans’ health (for example, the reduction of river blindness and eradication of smallpox).

By presenting Africa’s health issues in the context of its past socioeconomic practices, the book leads readers to envision better health outcomes that could have been based on the best of traditional and westernized Africa. One wonders, for example, how effective the eradication of malaria might have been if indigenous knowledge had been used along with Western medical discoveries. The overreliance on the latter led to overuse and underdosing, respectively, of DDT and chloroquine, which promoted resistant strains. Iruka Okeke’s especially informative chapter on the trends and containment of antimicrobial resistance in Africa offers potential solutions.

Quite appropriately, the editors devote several chapters to the devastation caused by HIV. These include quotes from key individuals such as Kofi Annan, Paul Farmer, Stephen Lewis, and Nobel laureate Joshua Lederberg, who point out that despite multilateral initia-

HIV/AIDS, Illness, and African Well-Being

Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, Eds.


Collaborative effort. Johns Hopkins’s Laura Guay (left) and Makerere University’s Philippa Musoke at their lab building in Kampala, Uganda, the day that the country’s first shipment of nevirapine arrived.