“Your world, your imagination” is the slogan of Second Life (SL), the multi-user virtual environment and the dominant focus of the research reported in “Living virtually: Researching new worlds” edited by Don Heider. Several authors argue that the slogan perhaps really means “Our world, your life,” due the unique economic and political hegemony exercised by the owner-gods, in spite of the in-world appearance of freedom and control. Such a life, even though virtual, has real life (RL) consequences.

Heider interviewed a friend, Monica, who developed a lovely piece of virtual land with a nice cabin. Someone came along and covered the land next door with giant purple phalluses, wrecking her view. What’s the big deal, he thought, it’s not real is it? But for Monica, who spent considerable time “being there,” it was upsetting. She hired a contractor/programmer to come and digitally remove a picture window in the cabin so the offending view would disappear. Another woman had a six-month relationship with a man. The couple split up because he cheated on her by going out with other virtual women (another author discusses the possibility that some were men playing the role of women). She became upset, eventually took medication for depression, and missed real life work, without ever having met the “man” in person.

The political analysis of Spangler and Morgan assume that a company should not own the virtual world; they envision a day when interoperable avatars (representations of real people) will populate a new democratic virtual commons. Others, such as Zheng, illustrate how actions of the gods of SL impact the economic value of virtual properties, which then are abandoned when the underlying algorithms and rules of communication or transportation are changed, even when the benevolent despots are responding to some collective outcry of paying customer “residents.” One is reminded of small business owners whose corner stores are in the way of an urban renewal project in RL.

The value and meaning that we ascribe to representations is independent of their reality making the experience of “being there” in virtual worlds as real as many other experiences of life.
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