

# The Snuff Of Legends

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Snuff movies exist. Well, sort of, depending on how you define the term. If you don't believe it, read Wikipedia's article on the subject ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff\\_movie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff_movie)). They even have still images.

It also appears that a market exists. 'Flower of Flesh and Blood', the movie that allegedly convinced Charlie Sheen, a man who would be expected to spot a special effect, that it was real enough to call the FBI, is now considered a collectable, and it is claimed that 'Cannibal Holocaust' which landed its director Ruggero Deodato in court to prove that its kill scenes were fake, has grossed over \$200,000,000 worldwide.

I know none of this as I descend the metal steps into the darkness, thinking I'm just entering another building. There is blood on the walls and floor, the first indication that something is terribly wrong. I push past a scarlet curtain and a girl greets me, eager, I find out to my surprise, for me to mutilate, eat and eventually kill her. She will scream and make all the appropriate responses throughout. This is a place where snuff fantasies can be lived out. The only reassurance is that it's not my First Life; it is my Second.

Second Life ([secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com)) is a huge three dimensional world that exists only on computers owned by it's makers, Linden Labs. We're here to study antisocial behaviour in online communities. Consensual mutilation doesn't count so I say my goodbyes and leave. Linden Labs have a very strict code about antisocial behaviour. Their definition includes intolerance, harassment (communicating in a manner that is offensively negative, intimidating or threatening, stalking, verbal abuse), assault (shooting, pushing or shoving another resident in a Safe Area), disclosure (sharing personal information about another resident without consent), indecency in a so called PG zone, and disturbing the peace (use of repetitive sounds, use of undesired advertising etc.) We have witnessed all of these. Perpetrators have been exiled back to their first life or had their account temporarily suspended. One person was banished to a corn field for three days with nothing for company but a tractor and a TV set continuously playing the 1940s film 'Boy In Court'. Second Life even has had it's share of gangsters who set out to crash the computers.

As a platform for research, Second Life is fascinating. Here is a virtual world where users, known as residents, can interact socially and commercially. In appearance it looks as many computer games do – a three dimensional environment where each resident is represented by a avatar, a graphical representation of themselves. Avatars explore by walking, running or flying through their world. They interact with each other mainly by textual conversations (public or private), but also through their avatar's body movements. Avatars can own land on which they can build artefacts which can be anything that can be imagined - houses, cars, a space ship, guns and other weaponry, a swimming pool, virtual pets etc. Second Life is popular: It has over 800,000 residents, a figure that is growing by 20% each month (The Economist, 30/09/2006) and daily sees around 100,000 (real) American dollars change hands between them. Worlds such as this represent extreme versions of the sort of web-based knowledge sharing communities that have been studied in information management literature. We can imagine that these communities will become more 'Second Life-like' in the future. So why might Second Life interaction be more likely to be antisocial than First Life interaction? The superficial answer may be that the real users are anonymous and therefore less inhibited. However, analyses have revealed that anonymous individuals comply more strongly with the situational norm than individuals who are not anonymous. Anonymity does not make an individual lose awareness of their own identity but shifts their awareness away from personal identity to social identity. An individual's social identity is them perceiving themselves as part of a social group. So someone whose awareness is focused on their social identity will take onboard the group's norms and behave in a manner accepted by the group. The implication is that, had my avatar stayed in that dungeon, I would have been more likely to play along than if I had been there as myself. Second Life has a wide variety of residents and locations. Few are as twisted as the place I found myself in.

The project 'Griefing in Online Communities: Causes, Casualties and Coping Strategies' is being conducted by Thomas Chesney, Iain Coyne, Brian Logan and Neil Madden at Nottingham University.