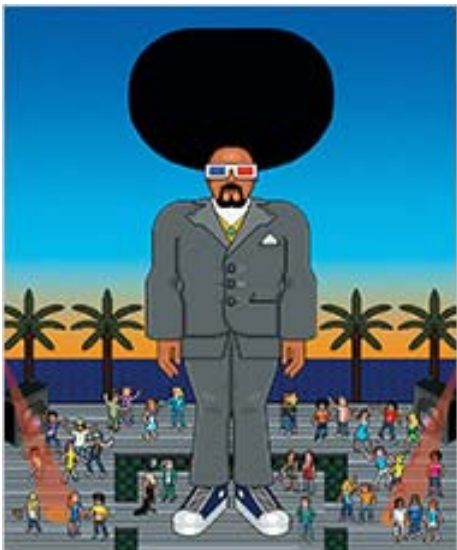


# Portrait of an Artist as an Avatar

By SARA CORBETT  
Published: March 5, 2009

**CERTAINLY, FILTHY FLUNO** is not the first artist to realize that in order to sell his paintings, he needs to sell himself. He does, however, work at it with impressive zeal. Every day he makes new friends and cultivates new contacts, edging himself and his work — a collection of expressionistic oil paintings and vibrant, graffiti-laced pastels — just a little bit farther into a universe that to others might appear huge and indifferent, but as Filthy sees it is stuffed with possibility and also potential customers. To this end, you will often find him wandering around art openings and dance parties, dressed in a spiffy suit and pair of sneakers, trying earnestly to chat up every person in the room.

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Quickhoney

A rendering of Filthy Fluno, where it's (virtually) at.

## Multimedia

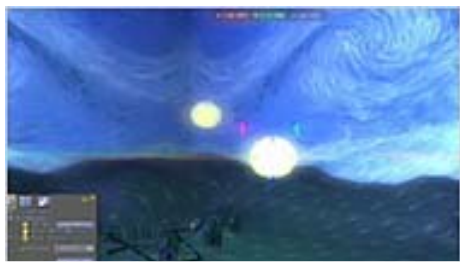


Filthy happens to hang around with a lot of buxom women and men with chiseled jaws, people possessing a kind of Barbie-and-Ken flawlessness. Among them, he is a curious standout, a short black guy with a bulging midsection and an oversize Afro that waves tantalizingly as he speaks. He has a couple of sharp-looking snaggleteeth that poke out of the left side of his mouth, adding to his misfit charm. Even when he is dancing his signature dance — something called the Wet Kitty, a half-comic pantomime in which he hops from one leg to the other while boosting his palms toward the ceiling — he never stops communicating, never for a minute stops angling to make an art sale.

One time a few months ago, I accompanied Filthy to an outdoor dance club and watched as he did the Wet Kitty and simultaneously carried on a long, thoughtful conversation about art and poetry with a woman who, the entire time, was engaged in a gropingly erotic, lip-to-lip slow dance with another man — a tall, flowing-haired

Video

Walking Through 'The Far Away' in Second Life (From YouTube)



Video

'Starry Night' in Second Life (From Blip.tv)

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Allan Penn for The New York Times

**Behind the Art** Jeff Lipsky in his studio with some of his real-world creations.



Artropolis/Todd Tevlin

**Filthy's World** The footloose avatar.

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Fabio-type, who was shirtless and altogether impervious to Filthy's presence. As the discussion continued, as a breeze blew and Fabio's hands wantonly roved, as the music pulsed and the dance-floor lights blinked different colors, the woman shared with Filthy a sentimental poem she'd written called "Falling," but still, she never once broke her gaze with the other guy. Filthy was undeterred. His world is full of such simultaneities. It is, he feels, just a slightly more in-your-face version of multitasking, akin to the way the rest of us may surreptitiously check e-mail while on the phone. In any event, it does not interfere with his optimism. "She seemed a little busy," he conceded, leaving the club. "But there was potential there. She really could be my next customer."

**THE FIRST THING TO UNDERSTAND** about Filthy Fluno is that he is not real, or at least he is not entirely real. He is an avatar — a kind of digital hand puppet living inside the online virtual world Second Life. Filthy is basically no more than a well-dressed bit of data scuttling around the giant, pixelated 3-D movie set that is Second Life. He and his friends can do things like eat food, swill cocktails, go to church, have sex and buy nice-looking Scandinavian furniture, but none of it is real. It is all just a digital swirl, a series of scripted animations and graphically sculptured landscapes that can seem hypervivid and at the same time totally surreal — just the sort of experimental and phantasmagoric place, you might argue, where an artist is likely to thrive.

Introduced in 2003 by a California company called Linden Lab, Second Life is billed as a miniature world, available to anyone with a high-speed Internet connection and a decent graphics card. Avatars communicate with one another through typed instant messages or through computer-enabled voice chat. At its worst, Second Life can seem like a pervy netherworld, full of artificial-looking people in search of anonymous relationships. At its best, it resembles a fully animated social network, a kind of [MySpace](#) where everybody is free to wander in and out of one another's digital territories or to meet up in virtual coffee shops or private homes or, as once happened to me — or I should say, to my avatar, Marshmella Muggins — inside a 3-D version of one of da Vinci's fabled flying machines.

Second Life, which has about 65,000 users logged on at any given time, has created a robust mini-economy,



Jeff Lipsky

His creator's painting "Chola."

driven mostly by avatar-to-avatar transactions. Basic memberships are free, but many Second Life players — or residents, as they're known — exchange sums of real money for virtual money, called Linden dollars, using it to make one-click purchases. Residents employ a simple built-in modeling tool or outside graphics program to construct 3-D objects of all sizes — an avatar hairstyle, an Eames chair, a tropical beach resort or an exact replica of Beijing's Forbidden City — for profit or for a lark, or some combination of both.

The result is a self-contained universe that's highly stylized and unapologetically indulgent. Trees can be purple, or planted upside down; avatars walk, run, fly and abruptly teleport from place to place; and it is common to encounter people wearing not only the obvious spoils of do-it-yourself perfection like DD breasts or diamond pinkie rings but also added flourishes, like dragon wings, tiger tails or top hats that stretch four feet into the virtual sky. What is not possible in real life, it would seem, becomes irresistible in virtual life. "In Second Life, you are art; everybody's an artist," says Richard Minsky, a studio artist based in Hudson, N.Y., and the founder of The ArtWorld Market Report, a magazine focused on virtual art and culture. "That's what's so interesting about the whole thing. It's an art world unto itself."

Filthy Fluno was born into Second Life on May 20, 2006, created — or in game parlance, "rezzed" — by his human counterpart, a Boston-area artist named Jeffrey Lipsky, who says he designed Filthy as an "urban prophet/vampire figure" who is "impossibly short, impossibly thick and with impossibly big hair." Lipsky is 37, a mild-mannered art-school grad with a traditional painterly mien. He can't quite explain why he, a short, white Jewish man, chose a short, snaggletoothed black avatar, except to say that part of the fun of recreating yourself digitally is that every option — switching race, sex or even species — is gloriously open. Compared with Filthy, Lipsky is a touch unglamorous but also a little more real. He has a short, trimmed beard, often smells of turpentine and listens to Iron Maiden as he works. He lives with his wife, Anya, in Tyngsboro, Mass., and until 2007 worked as the executive director of a small arts organization, doing his painting only at night and on weekends in the basement of his suburban condo.

But that was before Filthy Fluno made so many friends and helped sell so much art that Lipsky decided it would be O.K. to quit his day job. Early last year, he managed to borrow an uncared-for couple of rooms above a clothing store in Lowell and converted them into a low-key studio gallery called CounterpART, which also has a twin gallery in Second Life — run by Filthy Fluno and featuring digitally uploaded versions of Lipsky's work.

Filthy organizes big groovy art parties with cocktails and live music, which Lipsky, in real life, could never afford. Filthy tends not to know a lot of the real-life details about his virtual friends. It is impossible, for instance, to tell if Mia Kitchensink, the long-legged, titan-blond boutique owner who puts together a lot of parties at Filthy's favorite virtual pub, is 19 years old or 90, whether she's a housewife from St. Louis or a radical Dutch politician, or, because she doesn't use voice chat, whether she is even

female. But her money — their money — is definitely real. Last year, Filthy's virtual friends bought thousands of dollars of Lipsky's real-life art and had it shipped to real-life addresses in places like New York, San Francisco, London and Tokyo.

Before creating and inhabiting Filthy, Jeffrey Lipsky had little luck working his way into the inelastic hierarchy of art dealers, critics and high-end galleries who sparingly turn painters into stars. But transferred to the Internet, elitism is little more than a poor business practice. If the traditional art market is driven by scarcity — with value bestowed upon rare and finite works created by an anointed few — it may be vulnerable to people like Jeffrey Lipsky, who capitalize on technology's propensity for abundance, even if this means spending inglorious hours walking around virtual nightclubs, typing, "Hi, I'm Filthy Fluno and I'm an artist," to strangers, and being willing, as Lipsky is, to sell multiple inkjet copies of his work to those customers who will pay \$50 as opposed to the \$500-\$15,000 he charges for originals. All this has translated into more mainstream respectability: since creating Filthy, Lipsky has participated in gallery shows from California to New York to Portugal.

What happens when a painter from the suburbs starts spending 20 or so hours a week piloting a big-haired urban prophet through the virtual world? Well, for one thing, the old fruit bowl starts looking a lot less interesting. "I used to draw really tight representational pencil and ink pieces," Lipsky told me one fall day when I visited the real version of the CounterpART gallery. "But then I moved into the condo with a basement, which gave me more space, and I got into Second Life. My style began to change." These days, Lipsky's art is bold and bright and only vaguely representational. The paintings and pastel drawings hanging on his gallery walls depict recognizable objects — a guitar, a clock, a human silhouette — but they are most often obscured by layers of competing color or graffiti-style words and loosely geometric thick black lines, which he says represent a connected computer grid.

Lipsky does most of his artwork at night, with Second Life channeled through a cable Internet connection and projected from his laptop onto an empty white wall of the studio. He navigates Filthy to a virtual setting and then spends time examining it, his brush poised before the canvas, not unlike the way a landscape painter might examine a harbor full of sailboats. Except that Filthy's harbors tend to be buzzing, social places like virtual outdoor concerts or parties, or things called "mixed reality events," joint get-togethers held simultaneously in Second Life and real life. Each party is telecast into the other, usually in the form of a projected image on a wall or screen. It's possible to converse across worlds at these events — real people can shout into a Web cam broadcasting into Second Life, and avatars can type responses that can be viewed on a screen at the real-life party, and vice versa — though it's just arduous enough that people seem mostly to stick to their own side of reality. The effect, however, is titillating, like having a futuristic fishbowl set up in one corner of your get-together, teeming with alternative life.

Second Life, and indeed much of virtual technology to date, remains highly flawed. Lag times can be significant, servers crash regularly and it is easy for a newcomer to feel entirely creeped out by the hard-core lovers of fantasy who settled there first. But technology is full of transitional neighborhoods, places where the everyday has not yet

caught up with the promise of someday. And it is usually the most creative and aspirational among us who stake out these places early, namely the artists and the entrepreneurs, but also the pornographers, who have in the past deftly commandeered first-generation versions of other new media — including video cameras, Web sites and chat rooms — bound for the mainstream.

Lipsky is unfazed by the fetishism running rampant in Second Life. More generally he takes a compassionate view of avatars and the people behind them. When a Second Life dominatrix guild commissioned him to do a drawing celebrating the initiation of a new crop of submissive avatars, for example, Lipsky interpreted the scene in pastels, producing a piece that is only obtusely erotic. The resulting work is a strangely compelling deep red canvas featuring an abstract rendering of several human forms and a long, tall arm holding a knobby white heart aloft. According to Lipsky, it now hangs in the real-life home of one of the initiates somewhere in the Midwest. “I thought the ceremony was going to be all kinky and perverted,” Lipsky says, “but it was actually kind of nice — intriguing and loaded with symbolism.”

Lipsky’s best pieces mirror the high-speed incongruity and heady lack of limits found not just inside Second Life but also at large in a furiously clicking, wildly connected 21st-century world. His use of voluptuous colors, unbalanced composition and busy, layered images suggests both the bursting, overcapitalized nature of information technology today as well as the artist’s deeper faith in the authenticity of the human relationships behind it. Perhaps predictably, his most loyal fans tend to come from the tech sector. Two of Lipsky’s artworks hang in the [I.B.M.](#) Almaden Research Center in San Jose, Calif. Another is in the California offices of Linden Lab. “It’s a frontier,” Lipsky told me, describing the virtual world, “and artists have always documented frontiers.”

**FILTHY AND MARSHMELLA**, my avatar, have done some flying around together. We have teleported into art galleries and bars and shopping malls, and we once took a pleasant boat ride around Artropolis, the virtual island Lipsky bought for \$1,500 in 2007 and has since subdivided into rental spaces for 15 other artists, which helps cover his own virtual operating expenses. (Linden Lab charges him another \$200 monthly in service fees.) Filthy, I have learned, has the patience of a saint. He has waited implacably while I made common navigational newbie mistakes, like tumbling off cliffs and flying into treetops or disappearing, for long stretches of time, under the surface of the sea. One night when my hair inexplicably fell off and I was feeling bald and vulnerable, Filthy made what could be seen as the ultimate thoughtful gesture by offering me a giant hot pink Afro from his inventory.

People who spend a lot of time in virtual worlds will tell you that, despite the veneer of escape and anonymity provided by an avatar, virtual experiences nonetheless provoke emotions that are deeply felt, which may explain my mortification at losing my virtual hair and also why Filthy’s Warholian love of the high life — “I was sitting in a hot tub last night with a few friends,” he will say blithely, describing just another night in Second Life — has translated to real-dollar art sales. Filthy operates as a kind of marketing magnet, a cult personality with a product behind it, and in this case, the product — Jeffrey Lipsky’s art — acts as a real-world bridge between a humdrum

everyday existence and a more fantastical virtual life. And given its relative sophistication, it's perhaps a better alternative to a giant portrait of your big-busted, doe-eyed avatar dressed in her best leather bustier hanging on the office wall.

As the Internet continues to speed up and become more personalized, as our screen experiences become more immersive, some experts predict that the whole idea of having an avatar may soon seem less weird and more in keeping with all the other ways we already represent ourselves digitally, through our e-mail addresses and blogs, our [Facebook](#), Flickr and [Twitter](#) accounts. Consider too that millions of children already have virtual lives, navigating avatars through online sites like [Disney's Club Penguin](#) or Nickelodeon's Nicktropolis. Chances are, they don't find it weird at all.

While Second Life's limitations have caused a number of early investors — mainly corporations who bought virtual property as a potential marketing tool — to pull out, there is still plenty of speculative hovering around virtual worlds. I.B.M., Coke and [Toyota](#) continue to maintain ties to Second Life. [Harvard](#), [M.I.T.](#) and Vassar are among the many universities that have opened some form of virtual campus. The payoff has not been immediate, but immediate is not the point. The thinking about virtual worlds tends to run along the same vaguely hopeful lines expressed by [Carl Bildt](#), foreign minister of Sweden, which in 2007 became the first nation to open an embassy in Second Life. "We didn't know 10 years ago that any of this was possible," Bildt announced to the gathered crowd of avatars and real people at the embassy's virtual ribbon-cutting ceremony, "Where it takes us 5 to 10 years from now, nobody knows."

Somebody had parked a couple of da Vinci's flying machines on a patch of grass, not far from a couple of shiny rabbit sculptures and a somber-looking black monolith. This was a Second Life site called Brooklyn Is Watching, an unadorned island where virtual artists are invited to drop off their virtual work for scrutiny and discussion by a real-life crew of six or seven artists and critics who meet every Thursday night, salon-style, in front of an enormous flat screen at the Jack the Pelican Presents gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Beer is involved. The first few real-life people to arrive get a spot on a couch, while the rest pull up chairs and start musing aloud on various pieces of virtual art by avatars with names like Ichibot Nishi and Selavy Oh, whose real-life identities — background, sex and nationality — can only be guessed at.

Brooklyn Is Watching is the creation of a 37-year-old painter named Jay Van Buren, a native of Kansas who, like thousands of painters before him, moved to New York in search of an art scene, getting his M.F.A. at Parsons in 1999. And like countless other artists belonging to a tech-savvy generation, he supports himself by designing Web sites. Van Buren says he has dabbled in making art that is purely digital, but like Jeffrey Lipsky, he finds himself more interested in the old-fashioned thrill of using a brush on canvas. He started Brooklyn Is Watching because he thought the art world inside the decidedly populist and unregulated Second Life was interesting but getting too self-congratulatory — too "cheerleady," he says — for its own good, and "it would be cool to bring in the critical analytical eye of the New York art scene, especially the Brooklyn art scene, which is really into new things."

Most of the time, Van Buren and his band of real-life critics are pretty respectful toward the Second Life art, discussing it with full theoretical vigor. "It's totally all over the

map,” Van Buren says, describing the quality of art he encounters. “There are things that people are clearly just randomly putting there — like hey, what would those art critics think of this? And then there are things where the craftsmanship is very high, where someone has great command of the techniques of building things in Second Life, but they have no conceptual depth. And then there’s stuff that is both incredibly beautifully created in terms of techniques and skill and they’re incredibly deep conceptually. That’s what tends to excite us.” The group, he says, can usually distinguish between art created by people with a formal fine-arts background and that made by the scores of experimenting hobbyists on Second Life. With the latter, they try to stay constructive. “For us to say, ‘Oh, this is godawful,’ wouldn’t really be fair,” Van Buren says. “It would be like a bunch of opera critics criticizing [Britney Spears](#).”

It is both easy and also confounding to imagine why an artist might be attracted to the virtual world. A number of artists I spoke with described it as uniquely liberating to work in a 3-D space where every last detail — from color and texture to sound and light — is readily configurable, where pixels are always cheap and in abundance and where laws concerning gravity and other matters of physics simply don’t apply. On the November evening I sat in on a Brooklyn Is Watching session in Williamsburg, Van Buren maneuvered the site’s avatar — an unblinking, disembodied eyeball known as [Monet](#) Destiny, who, in a nod to neighborhood hipsterism, wears a [Brooklyn Dodgers](#) baseball cap — through an elaborate sculpture made of concentric, overlapping metallic loops. The sculpture, from Monet’s point of view, was at least 300 feet wide and maybe twice as tall and sat floating over a piece of ocean. Using a keyboard propped on his lap, Van Buren zoomed in and out of the sculpture’s wiry ribs, not unlike a bird dipping in and out of treetops. In a matter of about three minutes, we’d examined the piece from maybe 20 different perspectives, including from hundreds of feet away and from deep inside its interior. The experience was both rapid and thrilling and unlike anything, in my years of traipsing through museums, galleries and sculpture gardens, I’d done before.

“Art is moving toward the participatory,” the sculpture’s creator, a San Francisco artist named DC Spensley (who in Second Life goes by DanCoyote) told me when I called him later, saying that he creates only virtual art, despite the fact it is impossible at this point to make a living at it. (He works as a freelance creative director.) While he is friendly with Lipsky, he is also somewhat dismissive of his medium, “People have been using the paintbrush for thousands of years,” Spensley told me. “I wouldn’t say that painting is dead, but I would say that it’s been done.” What is important about virtual art, he added, is that it invites the full involvement of the person who comes to see it. “It’s really a revolutionary difference,” he said. “This is why video games are presently eating the motion-picture industry. Because if you like ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark,’ you’re going to like being the main character in ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ even more.”

How is information technology changing the art world? The same way, you might argue, that it is changing everything else. It has put new tools into creative hands: there are artists making complicated impressionistic works using a paint application on their iPhones. There are artists working with G.P.S. mapping tools, hacking video games and creating art made from YouTube clips. Across the free-market souk of the Internet, more and more artists are trafficking in data, even as confusion about value and copyright

proliferates.

And art in return is also changing information technology, by doing what art has done since the beginning, when the Babylonians first painted their palace walls, the Spanish royals first sat for a portrait or Gauguin first laid eyes on the South Pacific — by pushing the limits of our perception. I understood this most clearly visiting the Second Life work of an avatar named AM Radio, a thin, reedy guy who wears a thin, reedy top hat and in real life is a 33-year-old media designer who wishes to keep his exact circumstances private but who will say that he has an art degree and also a full-time job at I.B.M.

AM Radio's most-visited work is called "[The Far Away](#)." From a distance, it looks like an accomplished landscape painting, a [Wyeth](#)-like rendering of a farmer's wheat field in late-day light, with tall dun-colored grass, a rickety-looking windmill and an out-of-place locomotive steam engine seeming to rust away at its center. But really it is art that requires exploration. One day I let my avatar go wandering through the waist-high wheat, past unseen chirping crickets and the windmill, which turned lazily in the breeze. Sitting in the grass on one side of the field there was an incongruous dining-room table and towering china cabinet. And upon closer look, on the table was a violin, a bowl of grapes and an artist's sketchbook opened to a page showing a skilled pencil drawing of a woman. As I took in each new facet, some part of my real-world foreground seemed to evaporate, like the smudge on my computer screen and the coffee cup next to it and the car alarm blaring from the street below. The person behind AM Radio told me, when I called him on the phone, that in real life he carries around a traditional sketchbook where he does watercolors and pencil drawings, but that it is not half as rewarding as building a beautifully textured virtual scene and opening it to the avatar masses — even when he sometimes finds them having sex next to his steam engine. "With something like 'The Far Away,' you can invite your friends to go there with you. There was a couple who met on the wheat fields and ended up getting married in real life," he said. "No painting sitting in my sketchbook inside my backpack could have done that. They say we are entering an era of social computing, and here is the work of art being social itself."

**LAST SEPTEMBER**, I met up with Jeffrey Lipsky at the Second Life Community Convention, an annual three-day affair drawing several hundred enthusiasts, held this time at a giant Marriott in Tampa. Everyone at the conference wore a laminated badge showing a large screen-shot depiction of his or her avatar along with the avatar's name on it. If you looked at the real faces, the event would appear no different from a gathering of dentists or comic-book collectors, but the badges that went with them — showing a collection of perfect noses and funky hair styles, improbably strong jaws and wasp waists — suggested a different, more hopeful reality. After watching several shrieking reunions take place, I realized that many of the people there were close virtual friends, meeting for the first time in real life.

Lipsky ambled up to the registration desk, dressed in a pair of jeans and a black shirt, an Army green cap perched on his head. He smiled at the sweet-faced, round-bodied woman in her 50s bearing a stack of badges and a long list of registrees.

"Hi," Lipsky said. "Filthy Fluno?"

The woman looked up sharply. “Filthy Fluno? Oh, my God, you’re Filthy Fluno!”

It was Mia Kitchensink, the witty peroxide-haired boutique owner who invites Filthy to her parties at the Irish pub. The woman moved out from behind the registration desk and wrapped Lipsky in an enthusiastic, slightly maternal hug. It didn’t seem to matter then that she wasn’t a leggy starlet-type and he wasn’t a black hipster artist. It didn’t seem to matter that this was not some self-created paradise but rather a Marriott in Tampa, stuffed full of real people with wide hips and bald spots. Really, they just seemed like regular friends.

The Second Life Community Convention was, in fact, full of Filthy Fluno’s friends. There was Cylindrian Rutabaga, a real-life folk singer named Grace Buford, who said she makes about \$40 per hour strumming her guitar in her Atlanta living room and streaming it live into Second Life events, where avatars leave money in a virtual tip jar. There was Tuna Oddfellow, who introduced himself as a professional magician in real life and an artist who organizes psychedelic dance parties in Second Life. And there was Richard Minsky, the wiry, fast-talking publisher of the virtual-world art magazine, who proclaimed himself to be a huge fan of Jeffrey Lipsky’s work, calling it an “updated form of biomorphic surrealism” done by an artist with a “post-Basquiat sensibility,” who really, when you look at it, “sort of embodies the history of Western art.”

Is it possible that by simulating an edgy, superconfident art star that you, too, could become one? Is it possible that a guy like Filthy Fluno, by leaning forward into the virtual world, is slowly tugging Jeffrey Lipsky — who says the value of his artwork has more than quadrupled since Filthy entered his life — closer to the same set of dreams? Scientists at Stanford’s Virtual Human Interaction Lab have found that avatars, with their artificial beauty and fantastical lifestyles, may represent more than wishful thinking on the part of the real people who create them; they may actually help bring those wishes to bear. People trying to lose weight are more apt to accomplish their goals when they spend time using a thin avatar. Someone looking to become more self-confident improves more quickly in real life after adopting an avatar that is good-looking. Whatever their shortcomings, virtual worlds are insistently, even defiantly, aspirational places. You could feel it at the Second Life convention. It was there, running beneath the chatter of those who’d come — librarians and pornographers, professors, musicians and wedding planners— that indefatigable hum of possibility.

It was there, too, a few weeks later when I dropped in on Lipsky at his studio in Lowell. He was in high spirits because a few days earlier, almost out of the blue, a D.C.-area woman he met on Second Life bought five of his works for a total of \$17,000 — guaranteeing him another six months or so without needing to look for a day job. Despite his relative successes, Lipsky lived with constant reminders that art is a relentlessly fickle business. He worried that his landlords would soon evict him in favor of a paying tenant. An enormous heating duct had collapsed and lay unrepaired in one corner of the gallery. Before making the most recent sale, Lipsky had even dispatched Filthy to hit up his virtual friends for goodwill donations so that he could fix up the studio with a fresh coat of white paint. Filthy raised nearly \$200 in a couple of hours, and this, along with the brightened walls, buoyed Lipsky. “Amazing, isn’t it?” he said.

“My real-life friends would think I was nuts if I asked them for money.”

If it all worked out for Filthy, maybe it would work out for Lipsky too. I couldn't help thinking this as I watched him set up to begin the day's work, a pastel drawing that Mia Kitchensink had commissioned after the convention, for which she'd pay \$600. Lipsky switched on the laptop and projector and logged onto Second Life. He teleported Filthy to Mia's little boutique store in an open-air shopping mall somewhere deep inside of Second Life. Mia was there waiting, looking young and vibrant in an electric blue minidress. She typed ahello to Filthy. He typed a hello back. Then Mia started to dance, a slow waltz around the pavement outside her store, her long legs flashing. Lipsky pressed a few keys, and Filthy Fluno started up his Wet Kitty dance. It was a very strange way, I thought, to begin what was to be a creative session. But Lipsky, standing before a piece of drawing paper he'd taped to the wall next to the projected scene, didn't see it that way. He held a pastel crayon in one hand and stepped back, peering from screen to paper, lost in concentration. Eyeing a row of bionic yellow sunflowers planted in front of Mia Kitchensink's store, he sketched a loose flower on the paper and then went digging in his pastels for a blue that might measure up to that of the cloudless virtual sky. If there was any strangeness at all, Lipsky didn't seem to feel it, standing there between worlds. He was well past that by now.

*Sara Corbett is a contributing writer for the magazine. She recently wrote about how cellphones might end global poverty.*

A version of this article appeared in print on March 8, 2009, on page MM22 of the New York edition.

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