SPECTRUM 2008

SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA
SPECTRUM 2008:

A Journal of Student Writing

Now in its twenty-second year, Spectrum honors all Saint Mary's students who take writing seriously, who, in response to course assignments, write essays that are original, thoughtful, and persuasive. This year, we have been especially mindful of the contest's original purpose, and thus are publishing a number of short essays, including two from Freshman Composition courses, which we hope will be inspiring models for beginning student writers. As always, the submissions were of very high quality; it was a pleasure to read so much excellent student writing, and very difficult to make final selections. We thank every student who submitted an essay for consideration.

We owe thanks to others as well. To all the faculty members who continue to inspire their students to write well, and especially those who have encouraged their students to submit essays to the Spectrum contest. To the faculty readers – David DeRose, Rosemary Graham, Carol Lashof, Nick Leither, Hilda Ma, Mari-Anne Rosario, and Anne Smith – for their time and judgment. To Joe and Jamie Mullan – Joe for his help in reproducing our cover photograph, and Jamie for creating our award certificates the past two years. Finally, big thanks to Gail Drexler, for her essential and ever-gracious work to coordinate the contest and produce the journal.

This year the judges have chosen seven impressive essays on topics ranging from virtual worlds to Brazilian dance, from literature to blackjack. Please note that each essay employs the documentation form appropriate to the discipline it represents.

We hope this collection will inspire more excellent writing from its readers. Please place 2008-2009 submissions in the zebra-striped box on the third floor of Dante Hall, or send them by campus mail or as email attachments to Professor Carol Beran (cberan@stmarys-ca.edu). All submissions should include a cover sheet with the author's name, phone number, and email address, and the name of the faculty member and course for which the essay was written.

The cover photograph is the work of Jennifer Weller, a 2008 graduate of the College who majored in Sociology and plans to pursue an Accelerated Nursing Program beginning in January 2009. Many thanks to Jennifer, and to Professor Carla Bossard, who shared her collection of student photographs from her January Term course "Images of Morocco."

For the English Department,

Sandra A. Grayson
Faculty Moderator, Spectrum 2008
Ariana Garcia, "Embracing Blackness: the ramifications of Brazilian notions of race and beauty on Afro-Brazilian women's identities" .................................. 3

January Term: Brazilian Capoeira: From Social Threat to Social Movement
Instructor: Katya Wesolowski

Second Prize

Jovina Chagas, "R U a girl? Identity and Avatars" ............................................. 13

January Term: Second Life, World of Warcraft and the Sims: The Culture and Economy of Virtual Worlds
Instructors: Dana Herrera and Andrés Margitay-Becht

Third Prize

Rebecca Meister, "I know what nobody knows." ........................................... 25

Seminar 123: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Thought
Instructor: Claude-Rheal Malary

Best Freshman Essay

John Woml, "Beating the House: Blackjack or Busted?" .................................. 31

English 5: Argument and Research
Instructor: Carol Beran

Honorable Mention

Kyle Elder, "Student Athlete vs. Student" ..................................................... 39

English 5: Argument and Research
Instructor: Carol Lashof

Mark Freeman, "Who Killed Richard Cory? An Investigation" ....................... 43

English 19: Introduction to Literary Analysis
Instructor: Sandra Grayson

Caroline Grafft, "Two Worlds" ................................................................. 47

English 4: Composition
Instructor: Marilyn Abildskov
Embracing Blackness: 
The ramifications of Brazilian notions of race 
and beauty on Afro-Brazilian women’s identities

By Ariana Garcia

When one thinks of Brazil, among the myriad images the mind conjures, there are almost always gorgeous women. One need only run a search for Brazil on Google to find pictures of feather or bikini clad specimens of this stereotype. What is interesting to note is that more often than not, the “beautiful women” appear to be of very obvious European descent. This is especially telling when one takes into consideration that Brazil has the second largest population of African descent after Nigeria.¹ So where does the Afro-Brazilian woman stand on this beauty spectrum? Sadly, though Brazilian women of African descent are an integral part of the country’s culture, they have been subjected to discrimination on the basis of gender, economic status, and race. As a result, these women have developed negative perceptions of their place in society and their physical appearance, which generate a daily struggle to accept their African heritage.

Like most of the “New World” during the colonization period, Brazil depended largely on the slave trade to reap profit from its sugar plantations and later its mines. Brazil participated in the trade on such a grand scale that visitors in the 1800s said it was rare to see a white face on the streets of Rio de Janeiro.² It was common to see people of mixed race, as miscegenation was a legal and open practice between the Portuguese and the African slaves. In the late nineteenth century as Brazil became alarmed by its “African

¹ The largest sub-Saharan African nation in terms of population.
² In his book, Neither Black nor White, Carl N. Degler (1971) states, “One English visitor to Rio de Janeiro in 1829 remarked that ‘my eye really was so familiarized to black visages that the occurrence of a white face in the streets of some parts of the town, struck me as a novelty’”(4).
problem,” miscegenation was actively encouraged as a way to gradually whiten (a process referred to as *embranquecimento*) the population with each generation of Brazilians.

Although this mixing occurred, it does not mean that the socio-economic status of the African was ever equal to that of his master. Furthermore, once slavery was finally abolished in 1888, the presence of miscegenation along with the absence of anti-black laws, such as the Jim Crow laws in the U.S. and apartheid in South Africa, paved the way for Gilberto Freyre’s theory of “racial democracy” in Brazil. According to Michael Baran (2007), “Freyre’s foundational story… holds that historical mixing has created an ethnically unified population without stark racial divisions or resulting discriminations making Brazil a supposed ‘racial paradise’” (383). Presently, a large number of scholars have deemed the idea of racial democracy a myth, pointing out that it permits the white Brazilian elite to ignore the consequences of both slavery and outdated conceptions of race. The most obvious of these consequences is the large socio-economic disparity between Black and White Brazilians and an absence of opportunities for upward mobility among Afro-Brazilians.

For Afro-Brazilian women the notion of Brazil as a “racial democracy” affects how they perceive their daily reality. Popular belief in this theory has contributed to keeping them in their place as members of the lowest socio-economic class in Brazilian society. Most Afro-Brazilian women live in *favelas* (shanty towns), have very little education, and are often the sole providers of income for their families. As a result of all these factors

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3 Gilberto Freyre published his book *The Masters and The Slaves* (1933) explaining the strengths of Brazilian miscegenation.

4 Florestan Fernandes (1969) claims the effects of the racial democracy are threefold: 1) it created the opinion that the Blacks’ situation is due to incapacity and irresponsibility, 2) it exempted whites from any obligation towards the Blacks’ socio-economic situation, 3) it created the idea that “the Negro has no problems in Brazil” (138-139).

5 The clearest indication of this is the presence of *favelas* (Brazilian shanty towns) most of which are largely populated by Brazilians of African descent.
these women have no alternative but to be employed as domestic workers, cooks, or nannies. According to Cecilia McCallum's essay, "Women out of place? A micro-historical perspective on the black feminist movement in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil," "Some five million women worked as empregadas domésticas (domestic employees) in Brazil in 2001. Their symbolic place is the kitchen, a stereotype reinforced on a daily basis through the mass media" (55). This can be easily compared with earlier depictions in the United States of African-American women as the mammy figure. Both examples hold very strong ties to notions of the Black woman as the slave who served as the domestic and nanny. The correlation then implies that although the Black Brazilian woman has been technically "free" for well over a century, social barriers keep her in a stagnant state of servitude. Regardless of the terms used, there is a very clearly defined line between the ruling class and the subjugated. Most importantly, McCallum points out that most of these women are ashamed of their occupation. While this could be related to slavery or the fact that this job often pays poorly, there is also another layer of meaning. The notion of "gradually whitening" the Brazilian nation prevails even now. In this case, someone who is a domestic worker is directly associated with notions of Blackness. Therefore, within a society where Blackness is considered undesirable and the goal is to progressively "whiten" one's family it is clear that being an empregada is anything but a coveted form of employment.

For the Afro-Brazilian woman living in the favelas, the White is good/Black is bad dichotomy rules much more than her perceptions of job opportunities. Most obvious of all are the effects the notion has when she looks in a mirror. As stated in the beginning of this paper, beauty is an ever-present ideal striven for in Brazilian society. Unfortunately, according to common Brazilian ideals, a beautiful woman has: straight flowing hair, well-
defined and narrow facial features, light-colored eyes, and a light complexion. This concept of beauty has engendered a spectrum of terms for denoting color using terms such as: branca (white), morena (brown), morena clara (light brown), morena escura (dark brown), negra, preta (black, literally “the color black”), escura (dark), clara (light), and mulata (Baran, 2007). Along with these racial categories, there are terms that refer to different combinations of facial features and hair texture: sarara (freckled), nariz chato (flat nosed), cabelo bom (good hair), cabelo duro (coarse hair) (Goldstein, 1999).

It is my experience that Brazil is not the only country with either a developed race spectrum or a very rooted belief in the benefits of miscegenation. In Mexican schools, one is taught that all Mexicans regardless of their exact origins are mestizos (of European and Amerindian descent). Also present in certain areas of Mexico is the belief that whiter is equal to beauty. I describe myself as mestiza as my mother is lighter complexioned and my father is very obviously of Amerindian descent. In terms of color, I do not hesitate to describe myself as morena. As a child, however, I found it very difficult to accept my color as it obviously demonstrated that I was not like my stepfather’s light-skinned, straight-haired, and light-eyed family. This, accompanied with my nickname, “prieta” (lovingly given by my mother), made me dislike my uncontrollable curls and black eyes all the more. To me, it was a direct indication that I did not belong under the “beautiful” classification. Naturally, the only feasible option in my five-year-old mind was to ask my mother if I could somehow lighten my skin by bathing in bleach and if using the shampoo “Golden Locks” would solve my problem.

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6 Alessandra Ambrosio and Gisele Bündchen, two of Victoria’s Secret’s Brazilian top models, are an excellent example of this stereotype.
7 Terms involving the word morena are used as euphemisms to avoid describing oneself as black.
8 Mexico’s attempt to promote national identity through a national ideology.
9 Same meaning as preta: literally the color black.
Similarly, Afro-Brazilian women are constantly faced with the notion that they do not fit the description of beauty in their culture. Kia Lilly Caldwell (2004) directly quotes Zillah Einstein saying, “Racism uses the physicality of bodies to punish, to expunge and isolate certain bodies and construct them as outsiders” (18). In other words, the fact that Black Brazilian women do not fit the beauty stereotype can be seen as a direct form of racism and therefore it allows for an analysis of the negative effects of this racism on the self-worth of the Afro-Brazilian woman. One of Caldwell’s interviewees explains that when she was younger she could not be a school majorette because she “did not fit the standard of beauty to be in front representing the school” (23). While she was never directly told she could not fulfill this role, the reason was evident when a blonde girl was chosen instead, clearly underlining the desirability of one race over another. The unspoken nature of this kind of racism leaves its victims without a tangible injustice they can combat.

Yet another effect of racism towards the Black Brazilian woman is the propagation of outdated associations between sexuality and race. According to Caldwell, “Distinctions between White/Mulata/Black draw upon a virgin/whore dichotomy based on suitability for sex or marriage” (21). She explains that it was believed that white women were suitable for marriage while mulatas were better for fornication and black women were only of use in the kitchen. Based on this concept, the Afro-Brazilian woman experiences discrimination from all sides. One of Goldstein’s examples is Aninha, whose “color and poverty make her an inappropriate choice for Robson, an upwardly mobile black man” (565). That is, Aninha is not a good complement to the lifestyle to which Robson aspires. In this manner, her own people discriminate against her. On the other hand, as being mulata often comes with connotations of sexual liberty, it is common that mixed race
women are put “at risk for sexual harassment, including rape as well as ostracism by other women” (Rebhun, 2004). Simply put, the mulata is often assumed to have compromised sexual morals regardless of her actual demeanor. This makes it harder to ward off advances by men of a higher status, and if she gives way it taints her reputation among people of her own social class.

Regardless of the negative connotations the image of the mulata carries with it, she is nevertheless considered more beautiful than the Black woman. Rebhun (2004) describes: “Rather than passively accept the statuses thrust on them by conventions of stigma, the people I knew actively sought to manipulate their social standing, using cosmetic products to straighten their hair, proclaiming themselves suntanned rather than dark skinned...” (193). In correlation with embranquecimento, this example serves to demonstrate that Black Brazilian women will go to great lengths to obtain what they consider to be “whiter” features, the most coveted of which seems to be cabelo bom (good hair as opposed to “stiff, nappy hair”). Caldwell used Regina’s response of “The dream of all girls who had cabelo crespo (kinky hair) was to have cabelo liso (straight hair) that swung” (21). One can assume that in straightening one’s hair, or obtaining a smooth, bouncy ponytail, the black girl could claim that she is not negra but morena (not black, but mulata).

The Afro-Brazilian woman’s attempt at elevating herself one rung further up the racial ladder serves two purposes. The first is clearly to satisfy a need to feel more beautiful. The second, in conformity with the goals of embranquecimento, is to find a “whiter” marital partner. In obtaining this, she can improve her socio-economic situation and ensure a better (perhaps easier) life for her future children. Goldstein explains, “Many of the women I came to know through Graça believed that one of their best
opportunities for ‘getting ahead’ was their ability to seduce older, richer, whiter men, whom they referred to as coroa’s (crowns)” (569). She continues to explain that the idea of the coroa’s money in the women’s minds serves as a means of escaping poverty and attaining a better life. Strictly speaking this seems like the stereotypical description of a “gold-digger” (especially the focus on finding older men). However, one must wonder whether the women in this situation have an alternate option. Clearly for them, the only way of escaping their situation does not rest on education, but on finding a helping hand. In this model, an Afro-Brazilian woman’s chance at happiness and survival depends on her ability to seduce a “prince charming.” Unfortunately, as is the case for women everywhere, it is difficult to find that prince charming and the chances become slimmer when the woman is in the position of the pauper rather than the princess.

Clearly, there are many problems with this pattern, the most obvious of which is the damage to the Black woman’s identity in Brazil. Associating blackness with negative connotations makes young women reject the notion that they are black rather than morena (as is evidenced in Baran’s article). More recently, there has been a push in Brazil to adopt a more polarized vision of race relations similar to that of the United States. This new ideology “defines anyone not “purely branco (white) as negro (black)” (Baran, 2004). The hope is that using these polarized definitions will allow Afro-Brazilians to focus on their similarities rather than their differences. In doing so, the Brazilian Black movement wishes to produce the same effect the American movements did. However, these new definitions are entirely different from commonly accepted notions of Brazilian race and contradict cultural identifications that have been present for centuries. In addition, this essentialized way of looking at race contradicts the current racial vocabulary, which is mostly based on physical appearance and distinctive features. The result is a new
definition of race that the women in Baran's study could not relate to.

Another take on this rests with the Black Women's movement, a branch of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU: Unified Negro Movement) in Brazil. In her essay, McCallum highlights the desire of the movement to empower Afro-Brazilian women with a sense of pride in not only their "blackness" but as active members of Brazilian society. In order to do this they promote a message of education and unity as ways of not just escaping but permanently improving their situation. The best example of this is the presence of Black women in prominent positions of society. As McCallum writes, "For a domestic servant, the experience of seeing black women assume positions of leadership, making the language of the 'doctors' their own, was especially intoxicating" (72). Thus, MNU is taking active steps towards empowering Afro-Brazilian women by providing role models and reinforcing a belief in their capability to succeed. In relation to this, one of Caldwell's interviewees stated, "It was very hard for my generation to, not only accept itself as Black, but also to create a space. Because we did not have a model. The models are developing now" (24). The models she speaks of are examples of women that have harnessed and embraced their identity as Afro-Brazilian women to the best of their abilities. Contrary to the simply essentialist take on race, by asking these women to embrace their own Black traits, MNU erases the stigmas previously associated with the term, thereby allowing women to claim a Black identity for themselves.

Undoubtedly, belief in the racial democracy theory has done much to maintain the Afro-Brazilian woman in a state of subjugation. The long presence of slavery in Brazil set the stage for the ongoing social stigmas related to Blackness for centuries to come. The

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10 The MNU arose in the seventies as a political voice for Afro-Brazilians. They seek to unify the black community by urging them to embrace their blackness and use it as a tool for social and political mobility. Specifically, the women's movement wishes to inspire women to reach beyond stereotypical employment.
shame was only exacerbated as conceptions of beauty remained defined by European standards. As a result, the majority of Afro-Brazilian women today find it extremely difficult to identify with their Black roots and would much rather feign "whiter" traits. I myself found it difficult to embrace the physical features that accompany my racial composition. For me it was the encouragement of strong mestiza women that made me confident of the cultural identity I had to share. Similarly, it is up to present Afro-Brazilian women to reverse the stigmas associated with being a black woman in Brazil. This is more easily said than done since, as has been shown, the Afro-Brazilian woman faces opposition and obstacles from many angles. Nonetheless, as evidenced in groups like MNU, progress (even if in small steps) is being made in multiple areas to raise the status of Black women in Brazil.

11 During a visit to my mother's family in the United States, my aunts who are also tan and have curly hair, told me there were people all over the world who coveted the mestiza's natural tan. Upon returning home, I made it a regular habit to tan on our patio for the next couple of weeks. My perception of beauty had completely changed.


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Identity and Avatars

By Jovina Chagas

You can choose your genes. You can be reborn anew with whatever skin, eyes, hair and genitalia you want. You can shape your identity – you can carve your mask. And, most importantly, you can drop one identity and pick up another in a breath. You can have up to fifty skins to slip for $14.99 a month. Welcome to virtual worlds, where you can create yourself and jump into almost endless virtual bodies. Through this mask, this new identity, a completely new set of relationships form. Whatever society previously handed you due to appearances or social status can be reset to levels you construct to your liking. Virtual worlds deliver freedom to forge individual identity through the anonymous mask of an avatar.

How free is this freedom, however? How anonymous is this anonymity? The assumption that virtual worlds are separate spheres from the “real world” is not accurate. Forging a new identity requires a “blank slate” of sorts, which is not possible. Creativity is limited by the coding of the virtual world – a player cannot choose to look like anyone or anything simply because the developers could not create so many 3D models. Creativity is also limited by the coding of the real world – a player chooses one appearance over another, making a choice against other appearances. This choice reflects a set of values the player presses onto the virtual world, and these values are an intricate formation comprised of individual choice, society’s values internalized into individual choice, and societal pressures. When people immigrate into the virtual world, they carry their values with them. It is not a fresh new start. But the freedom players enjoy in forging an avatar
identity is not tarnished by this persistence of values. The key here is the awareness of these values, and the choices made stemming from the awareness.

As virtual worlds, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs) begin with the avatar selection screen. A male player can choose a female avatar just as easily as a female player can choose a male avatar. Players identify personally with these avatars, becoming emotionally passionate and referring to them with the personal pronoun “I” (Castronova 45). Yet these avatars usually look nothing like the players themselves. In virtual worlds, avatar sex does not necessarily reflect player sex. The aesthetics of the character are usually the reason for choosing one avatar over the other, instead. And in these virtual worlds, the social pressures of the offline world regarding gender identification are almost nonexistent. The player’s sex is unimportant, and only can be garnered through stereotypical gender characteristics such as speech patterns, word choice and mannerisms.

Through two MMOs, *Hellgate: London* (HG:L) and *World of Warcraft* (WoW), I evaluated the connection between avatars and player identity, focusing on player sex and avatar sex. Just how deep is the identity commitment a player makes when choosing an avatar? What assumptions do players make about connections between avatar characteristics and player characteristics? What are the values and norms concerning avatar and player sex and gender in the MMO society? Do they reflect the American values and norms, and what does it mean if they are different? These are the questions I focused on in my research. The data came from direct questioning in-game, forums, discussion, guild chat, and participant observation in partying situations.

Both the etic (objective observation) and the emic (subjective observation/ reflection) are important in this research. Just observing that males play females and
females play males may lead to the conclusion that they choose an opposite sex because
they want become the opposite sex, or that they identify more strongly with the opposite
gender. Just as likely is the possible conclusion that male players just want to look at a
scantily-clad female avatar, or females just want to watch a male avatar’s muscles. The
reasons for the avatar choice may not be so shallow. Some classes in HG:L are well-layered
no matter what their sex, such as the Marksman class, and some races in WoW, such as the
Tauren or Dwarves, do not physically reflect any model on an American fashion show
catwalk. Indeed, the reasoning for the choice of a male or female avatar is mostly an emic
perspective. Thus, questions about the avatar choice come from direct questioning.

   However, a combination of emic and etic perspective data was gathered for the
behavior of players toward avatars and players of different sexes. Players’ behavior may
not match what they say they do, and this difference needs to be illuminated and
examined. Players were asked what they assume about the player behind the avatar. The
behavior and communication towards this avatar illuminates this assumption, also.
Players reveal these assumptions through their behavior in parties, guilds, cities, and
trade, either treating others fairly or unfairly, rudely or politely, dismissively or
gregariously. The language used is also important. Discourse analysis reveals rules and
assumptions about other players and situations. Through both emic and etic perspectives,
I can see what social rules the players have constructed in their MMO world, and they
ways in which they enforce and reinforce them. By gathering both sets of data, both the
pitfalls of a purely particularist idealistic emic viewpoint and the simplistic materialistic
etic viewpoint can hopefully be avoided.

   Through comparison of the emic and etic data, the differences are highlighted. The
differences do not prove that players lie or are unaware of their actions. Only the
particulars of the differences, such as special situations and even relationship background concerning the players, complicate this dismissive attitude toward the emic. For example, a male player may be rude toward a female player because she previously stole a piece of gear he wanted when they partied together long ago, and not because of her sex. Trying to pull a complete structure of social rules will not be possible. But the differences will illustrate some unconscious tendencies stemming from social pressures or control.

Knowing the extent to which these social pressures reach, the players’ awareness of them, their complacency with them, and the degree to which the individual can differ from them will reveal two things. First, it will illuminate how much of the offline world’s culture reflects in the virtual realm. Second, it will reveal the culture of the MMO, how the players have constructed their own social rules and values.

There seems to be an amazing variety of avatars in online worlds, which allows a vast amount of freedom. In Hellgate: London, a player can throw fireballs, grow to amazing stature, dye their hair pink and even strap on the skin of the opposite sex. In World of Warcraft, a player can be not only human, but also a ferocious Orc or slender Night Elf, steely Dwarf or decomposing Undead. And like HG: L, WoW offers players the choice between a male and female avatar.

However, this avatar variety blurs over the fact that many avatars have similar basic features, such as the body types of the sexes. In both HG: L and WoW, all males have large upper torsos, and all females have hourglass figures and generous busts. The body size slider in the HG: L character creation menu adjusts height and not weight. In WoW, even aesthetically “grotesque” or “beastly” races such as Orcs, Undead and Tauren fit this body type stamp. Orc males have terrifying muscular stature with well-built upper bodies. Orc females do not share this thick racial trait, and this sexual dimorphism is the
most divergent of all races in WoW. A female Orc resembles a slightly more muscular, green-skinned female human model: thin waist and wide hips. She lacks the male Orc’s severe hump. Even her face is softened: she misses the male Orc’s fang-filled, jutting lower jaw, and instead has a human-proportioned face with a heavy brow ridge. There is no-built in system in the character creation screen to accommodate a player’s creativity in terms of body type. In fact, I have only seen one MMO that has this slider in the character creation screen: Star Wars Galaxies (SWG). This MMO allows a player to create an overweight avatar, with no ill effects towards the skill sets of the profession, or class, of the character.

Essentially, these MMOs provide one body type for male and female avatars in HG:L and WoW for two reasons. First, the developers only coded these two body types. Secondly, players usually choose these two body types. Developers will say that they did not model other body types because players will not choose them or, in WoW’s case, they claim other body types would not look correct in animation (Worldofwarcraft.com). So creativity is constrained by the coding authority on body type. The question here is, why wouldn’t enough players choose a different body type? Do players choose other body types?

In the HG:L forums, a long debate raged over the stereotypical and sexist characteristics of the gendered models. The originator of the thread, BipedalShark, posted that features of her female avatar were greatly exaggerated and unrealistic, including the armor being “modified to make her breasts and bum protrude so much she looks like a Barbie doll,” and despite the layers of heavy armor, she still had high heels (BipedalShark). Responses confirmed her observation, and tempered it with two facts. First, there were the posts that hovered around the same reasoning of “at least they have
yet to go the iron bikini route” (BipedalShark). Then there were counter-observations of the sexual idealism being “a 2 way train and men also suffer for it”; and “what's up with the male characters? I don’t see you women complain about them? How many of your real life male friends look like the hunks in HG:L? All muscles and pumped up?” (BipedalShark) The posters recognized that the coding authority built the models with the ideal body type in mind for both males and female avatars. Their lack of choice over the matter was frustrating but accepted.

In WoW, the player choice trend steers away from “ugly” races’ females. Warcraftrealms.com, a census data website for WoW, records that “out of data from 219,862 character records with gender set,” Troll, Tauren, Dwarf and Orc females comprised less than four percent. Three of these races (Troll, Tauren, and Orc) are on the Horde faction, which has a greater male/female split than the Alliance faction: 77 percent male and 22 percent female to the Alliance’s 65 percent male and 34 percent female (Seryphim). There is a general recognition amongst WoW players that the Horde “prides itself on not being the pretty faction, not necessarily ugly or scary” (Haunau). In another way, players see that WoW coding authorities try to give more useful “racial abilities” (skills available only to an avatar of a certain race) to the “ugly races” - Tauren, undead, gnomes, dwarves, Daenei - so that players will have incentive to pick a rather unaesthetic race. As Jonaleth says in the WoW forums, “I get why they did it, why roll a rotting carcass, why LOOK that ugly unless you had a substantial racial ability to compensate for it.” Jonaleth calls it “a tax on good looks.” No matter if players are choosing the “not pretty” races for pride, or for the built-in incentive, not many are choosing the female gender. This is despite the female of these races having the exact same hourglass figure and large breasts, if a little thicker. So even if Horde players pride themselves on being the
“not pretty” race, comfortable in being ferocious, they do not choose the females as often as the males. Either the females are not ferocious enough, or their hourglass body type is not enticing enough to bypass the sharp teeth and fur. Players are making choices against these females by choosing males and other races.

Therefore, most avatar choice is made on appearance. Despite the skill differences between races or classes, players want to look impressive. This idea also explains why players of both sexes choose females. Using the WoW data as a broad gauge of player sex, it is doubtful that all 47,411 female avatars of the Alliance census pool are female players, just as it is doubtful the 91,094 male avatars are all male players, simply because the game allows players to choose from both (Seryphim). Also, an early 2005 poll conducted by Nick Yee suggested that out of “a self-selected group” of surveyors who play WoW, 84 percent were male (Wilson). Although this figure is probably too high because of the self-selection process, it leans toward the fact that males are choosing female avatars. And most answers I received when asking why a player choose a female - not even asking the player their gender - were along the lines of “I prefer looking at an avatar of a female rather than male” and “I think it boils down to the aesthetical look of a character” (Phoenix Flare).

HG;L players echoed this sentiment; as one Bladesmaster class player told me it was more fun to “dress up” females than males. This is despite the fact that some classes in HG;L do not have the explicit “iron bikini.” The players I knew were female also expressed that female avatars “looked nicer” or “looked cooler,” referring, like the HG;L forums, mostly to the way the armor fit the females more flatteringly than the blocky armor of the males (BipedalShark), and some on WoW referring to the female animations being more interesting (Phoenix Flare). This focus on the look of a character probably stems from the heavily visual aspect of these MMOs. As Bill Roper stated, players want to express
individuality. In a focus group in Korea held with top leaders in the HG:L beta, they expressed a desire for non-functional costumes to wear more than new skills (Roper). It is a game of dress-up, and in virtual worlds the way to express individuality and skill is through visual aesthetics.

The entire process of avatar creation requires both a time investment and an emotional investment by the player. An assumption may easily be made that players craft their avatars to something they want to be. Indeed, virtual worlds do promise wish-fulfillment. If someone wanted to blast demons in endless tunnels in a post-apocalyptic London, dragging around a huge gun, there is HG:L. If someone wanted to slaughter dragons with a glowing staff instead, there is WoW. Dreams of hero status are fulfilled either way. However, avatars are not a direct reflection of the player behind them. Player sex is not reflected in avatar sex. Players do not assume that direct reflection, either, as the social pressures of gender identification are almost nonexistent.

Essentially, cross-dressing with an avatar of the opposite sex is an accepted behavior. The acceptability is expressed best when a WoW forum topic pops up asking “Does anyone think Blizzard will possible add a gender change option into the game. Would be kinda cool to switch genders once in a while...” (Milada). There are few assumptions made by players as to anything concerning the player behind the avatar, but the greatest fault more experienced MMO players see is in assuming a female avatar means a female player. A player named Serrowfael posted a situation on the WoW forum in which as his female troll he was asked by another player if he really was female. Troubled, Serrowfael asked forum users if he should complain, “suck it up? Stick to playing only characters of my gender? What should I do?” Many answers echoed the statement of just ignoring the pestering other player, and the claim that:
What you play and who you are doesn’t matter. For all I know, the guy I’m dueling could be a man, a woman, or a superintelligent houseplant. But all I see is the <race><gender><class> who’s currently trying to shove a large pointy bit of metal into my character’s torso. And that’s what matters. (Serrowfael)

“If people assume you’re female because your character is female that’s their own fault. . . . It shouldn’t make a difference to them anyways” repeats Haunau in response to Serrowfael’s dilemma. In interviewing a WoW guild called Phoenix Flare, one player, Cas, stated, “Look at Val [another guild member]: I never thought to ask if he was a guy in real life. Didn’t matter to me.” (Phoenix Flare). This is because player sex is deemed unimportant. It is so unimportant that many players do not even ask what sex others are in real life.

Why is player sex so unimportant? As Moyna stated before, nothing really matters in virtual worlds except for the player skill at gameplay. The essential knowledge a player needs to know about another player behind the avatar mask is gameplay skill. Everything else is extraneous socializing that can be categorized into the second sphere of an MMO: the elaborate Instant Messaging System of social networking that also occurs. MMOs are gameplay-based, so strict gender-sex agreement is not seriously enforced. The focus is skill or knowledge. Sarah Vital also found this to be true in her thesis analyzing social capital in discussions of an online fansite for the hockey team the Los Angeles Kings.

“[Sasha’s] offline identity isn’t important to others, but rather, her consistent behaviors online allow others to take risks because they can trust her to respond in a given way” (Vital 28). Trust is a system which allows players to depend on each other as far as gameplay or online socializing goes. And MMO players do not expect the trust they have in an avatar and the player’s online persona controlling it to extend to the player’s offline
self. All that matters in short-term relationships online such as parties is the ability to trust the player to play the game effectively.

However, it is not so easy to separate the player from the avatar. As stated before, players bring assumptions and values from the real world into the virtual world. Some of the gender of the player may escape through his or her puppetry of the avatar, either through communication or behavior. We have already seen that avatar sex is not a reliable source of determining player sex. But is avatar behavior a reliable source of determining player sex? Out of five long-lasting parties in HG:L, no player recognized me as female through my avatar’s behavior, and only one player half-asked if I was. A similar experience occurred in WoW. This may be because my language is either neutral or vulgar in MMO communication, and I do not flirt. It also may be because player sex is not important. I could probably say I would lean more towards a male sex identification for Adalann, a HG:L Marksman, just for his vulgarity in party chat, but that would deny the fact I also have used the same amount of vulgarity. Indeed, Tanith, a female player on WoW, related an anecdote on how she was a male Blood-Elf for a long time, and as a friend to another player, (also a male Blood-Elf), she was shocked to receive a protracted time of silence after he learned she was female (Phoenix Flare). The assumption that she was male was unspoken, and he was not given a communicative or behavioral reason to think otherwise. So, through just short-term partying, it can be impossible to determine player sex. Female players do not seem to radiate femininity through words and actions.

A creative constraint on avatars through value judgments by the developers or the individual player choice itself does not produce a virtual world which mimes the values of the real world. Though it seems MMOs push an American female and male ideal body type, virtual worlds resist the sex-gender identification that goes along with this value
package. The butch male avatar may have a female player behind it. A sexy female avatar may mask a male or female player. Players are aware of the values they come into the world with: they recognize that they essentially are virtually cross-dressing. However, the choices stemming from this awareness demonstrate that players feel no "real world" social pressure in choosing a gender mask in virtual worlds. They can play with this identity because it is purely a cosmetic feature and holds no value as to the quality of player. The social pressures inside the virtual worlds relating to gender-sex matching of avatar and player are close to zero.

MMOs are a common culture that is fostered through social networks, a separate entity from offline life even though founded by and populated with players who have grown up in and continue to live in an offline world. This is not a schizophrenic or dissociated identity, because to assume so also assumes people have a static identity. Perhaps with only the postmodern era, which eschews static definitions, can anthropologists accept when a MMO player says he both does not assume female avatars are female players, and that these other players are somehow true to their identities by the quality of gameplay through the avatar.
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"I know what nobody knows"

By Rebecca Meister

"I know what nobody knows
Where it comes and where it goes
I know it's everybody's sin
You've got to lose to know how to win..."

After eighteen years of ordinary and unconscious living, I walked through the familiar, candy-apple-red door of 1611 Ham Hill Road. I was not expecting to see Henry in nothing but his underwear, making every effort to support his six-foot-one-inch, 240-pound frame hunched over the kitchen sink. He was shaking. He looked broken. And we were all alone. I closed my eyes and begged God with all the fervency my spirit could muster for one thing – help – because I was in desperate need, and, as I inched closer to Henry, I persuaded myself to believe that God had actually listened to my prayer. I stood next to him and then I knew the truth. We were all alone.

Henry was fucked up. I knew what he had done. He was abusing the medication that Dr. Cooke had prescribed for pain after the car accident two years prior. Nothing new. What I did not know was why. Then he did me the favor and broke the silence; he knew I could not think of anything to say after seeing the state he was in.

"I lost my job. I'm fucked. I lost, I lost it..."

His eyes were glazed over and his head bobbed as he attempted to look me in the face. He was expecting me to judge him, to hate him, to confirm how pathetic he had let himself become.

"I don't know how to tell Gayle."
And then he began to weep. He began to choke himself with his own guilt and his own shame.

I took his hand. When I was a little girl, my hand was so small next to his that I could only hang on to his thumb. I would hold his thumb every morning as he drove me to school. I would hold it the whole time and never let it go until we arrived at St. Joseph’s and then I would kiss him goodbye and tell him that I loved him. His hand seemed smaller now, next to mine. I took his hand. I put his arm around my shoulders and helped him walk to a chair in the front room. He sat down and I held Henry, as he wept.

When he could not see my face, I gave myself permission to finally feel and a single tear escaped. It was not a tear of anger. It was not of sadness. It was not of empathy. It was a tear of awakening apperception. The final and definite cessation of childhood. And the first breath after a coma. Reality and truth had slapped me in the face and, on that day, I understood that my hero, Henry, my father, was human. And so was I. He was no longer my father and I his daughter. Now, we were two humans, two adults. And this was life.

* * *

Life, the bitch that it sometimes is, will every so often deal its players a lousy hand. It is a gambling game. There is risk involved. There are winners and there are losers who both fall subject to the luck of the draw, and sometimes, life, the dealer, fights dirty. The first question then, is should we even play? Albert Camus said “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” Camus was merely iterating Shakespeare’s same dilemma: “To be or not to be. That is the question.”
If a person chooses to live, then she willingly places herself at the mercy of life, subject to whatever blessings or curses fate decides to bestow.

Choose life? Life is not fair. This unfortunate fact is, of course, no newsflash; it is one the first life lessons that intelligent and responsible parents teach their children. It is not fair that innocent, good people die every day at the hands of disease, accidents, or murderers. In Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the Misfit cold-heartedly kills an entire family without justification other than the fact that life was not fair to him. He calls himself the Misfit because he cannot make all of his crimes “fit” with all that he has gone through in punishment (92). As a result of his dissatisfaction with life’s injustices towards him, his only consolation is to repay that wrong with more injustice. Killing people that do not deserve to die becomes his only kind of enjoyment; “No pleasure but meanness” is his only relief and his only mode of combat in response to life’s transgressions against him (92).

As tragic as the story is, it throws truth our faces. Bad things happen to good people and there is no way to predict them; there is no way to prepare for them. Life happens without the permission of the living. When it is over, it is gone. And the truth is that we have no way of knowing what happens after death. Some people put their hope in religion, but religion has its uncertainties. The grandmother’s final attempt to thwart her fate was an appeal on the grounds of religion, but the Misfit refutes her appeal by stating his doubts. The Misfit confesses that he cannot confirm nor deny that Jesus was truly the son of God and performed every miracle the Bible credits him with; the Misfit was not present to witness the life of Jesus (92). It is for that very reason that religion requires faith; believers hope and trust in that which cannot be known. The sad part is that the family’s fate would have been much different if only the truth about religion could indeed be
known. The Misfit admits to the grandmother: “It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had been there I would of known . . . and I wouldn’t be like I am now” (93). The point of the story is that we do not know. Therefore, there is no guarantee of heaven and there is no guarantee of hell. We have this one life and it can be stolen at any moment.

The real tragedy of the story is not that the innocent die. The tragedy that O’Connor illustrates is that they did not live; they failed to appreciate the good life and instead found fault with it. Nothing seems to content or please them. The children even complain about the dreariness of the states claiming “Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground . . . and Georgia is a lousy state too” (82). The grandmother is by far the worst, taking every chance she can to criticize everything from her grandchildren to the changing times. Not one of the many judgments she passes is favorable or optimistic. Her life is worthless to her until she realizes that the Misfit is going to take it from her. As soon as she knows her death is imminent, she is desperate to live, but she cannot save herself. The tragedy of the grandmother’s wasted life is the fact that “she would have been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (93). She could have lived a full and beautiful life if only she took the time to realize how precious, but uncertain life is.

Life is not guaranteed and death is a mystery. That means that the only thing left for humanity to do (assuming that we opt out of suicide), is to live fully, richly, and deeply. To love the good times so dearly, that the simple recollection will bring joy in the midst of the bad times. To learn from the hard times so that you will know how just how lucky you are when fortune does smile on you. To find beauty in the simple things. To fall in love your socks. To choose to see the good in people and in situations.
You see, I would be a liar if I said that after seeing my father, my hero, hit rock bottom four years ago, my opinion of him did not become somewhat tainted. What I also cannot deny, however, is the fact that in that incredibly defining moment of my life when my naïve perception of reality and truth was shattered, life graciously opened another door in the midst of my confusion: Maturity. I will not presume to be so arrogant and think I have in any way figured life out or that I am a wise person; I speak to you now from the perspective of a 22-year-old who still has much to learn. I only know that in that moment, I stopped being a child. It was the day that I stopped accepting without question the opinions of other people about how I should live my life, what I should devote my time to, what is right and what is wrong. It was the day I started asking questions. It was the day I became a little stronger, a little braver, a little more daring. That god-awful, painful, and pathetic moment just so happened to be the catalyst that nudged me through the door of possibility. And now, looking back through that same door four years later, I can look at it as a beautiful blessing rather than an ugly wound. Life is not perfect, just as it is not fair. But it is out of life's imperfections that we learn to appreciate the beautiful; imperfections become gateways to endless roads of experiences. Ask the artist, the musician, the philosopher, the writer – the people that we admire and respect – they have something to express, to sing about, to question, to write about, because experience has inspired the action. The same pain that makes us human also teaches us wisdom.

The Misfit was onto something when he said "If only I could know." How different would the history books be if only humanity could have known the fallout of its actions? How different would people live if only humanity could know what happens when we die? From the first moment of conscious human thought, we have wanted to know why we are here. But we cannot know. We have no guarantees, no assurances. If one of us
stumbled upon a true absolute, life's great perplexities would then be rendered dull, and worse, the good and the beautiful would certainly go down in the trading. We have now and nothing more. By a glorious stroke of luck, some of humanity is privileged enough to feel, to hear, to see, to speak, to taste, and to think. Some of humanity manages to tread one step ahead of death. Lucky me and lucky you. We possess life. And that is a damn fine blessing. So I now say to my generation, with every conscious fiber of my being, "My dearest friends, this is what I know right now: turn up the music and let's dance. Pour me a glass of wine and pass the prosciutto. Somebody, kiss me. And let's laugh. Because this moment that I have in my possession is beautiful, and I want to party."

"Sing with me. Sing for the year. Sing for the laughter. Sing for the tears. Sing with me, if it's just for today. 'Cause maybe tomorrow the good Lord will take you away."

-Aerosmith-

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Beating the House: Blackjack, or Busted?

By John Wood

It’s been said that the house always wins. In response to this, gamblers have been trying to find ways to “beat the house”—overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to win at games of chance and take with them the spoils—for millennia. Archaeologists discovered several pairs of dice in a tomb in ancient Egypt. However, they weren’t just any dice—they were loaded, with a tendency to favor twos and fives (Brown). Some have tried to use skill and intellectual prowess to beat the odds and win legally, while others have chosen more clandestine methods. Many have tried, and, so far as is known, no one has succeeded. However, some have come close to taking the whole nine yards. Ultimately, though, this leads to the question of whether it is truly possible to break Vegas. Although some might claim it to be only the impossible boast of a few proud gamblers, the act itself must be possible, owing to the combination of statistics, human wit and cunning, and naturally changing technology, all of which can make the dream of breaking the house achievable.

One of the biggest claims against beating Vegas is that it is not possible legally, and therefore it should not be considered possible. This stems from the fact that, in order to have a real chance of beating Vegas, the player has to be able to increase his or her odds of winning. It is a misconception that doing so is illegal in all situations. In fact, not all of such activities are even considered minor felonies. According to Nevada gaming statute Sec. 465.015, cheating is defined as actions done:

\begin{quote}
  to alter the elements of chance, method of selection, or criteria which determine: (a) the result of the game; (b) the amount or frequency of payment in a game; or (c) the value of a wagering instrument approved by
\end{quote}
the State Gaming Control Board for use in connection with a cashless wagering system.

Examples of such activities are “cherry-squeezing” (the manipulation of a slots handle), marking cards, and using a computer to calculate odds (Cabot 388-394).

Essentially, so long as one does not physically tamper with the deck or machine, it is not illegal. This is why activities such as card counting are legal. Thus, casinos cannot throw a person in jail for card counting. However, as casinos are private property, it is perfectly acceptable for the casino to make the player leave, as well as prohibit them from entering. In general, according to Max Rubin, a blackjack expert, “Casinos don’t differentiate between cheaters and card counters” (Breaking). According to federal law, “proprietors of privately-owned places of entertainment and amusement [are] not obligated to serve the general public” (Cabot 293). “Most places are pretty polite about it,” says Jon Hirschtick, a former investor in the MIT Blackjack team. “Some casinos react a little more harshly and verbally abuse the people, and some get even worse” (Breaking). As a general rule nowadays, casinos don’t resort to extreme measures to deal with things like card counters—even if they wanted—because they would lose their gambling license (Mezrich 73). However, there have been several cases of what is known as “back rooming,” most notably a case in 1971, where a person caught cheating at a casino was sent to a back room, beat over the head, threatened with a revolver, and forced to sign a confession stating his intent to defraud. The president and the bodyguard who helped him were arrested and charged with kidnapping, as they had broken a statute stating that casinos were only allowed to detain offenders, not torture them, and only if they had probable cause (Cabot 394). This does present a problem for those who intend to beat the
house using such methods. However, with skill and a bit of acting, this obstacle can be
overcome, and the goal of beating the house put within reach.

For the purpose of simplicity, the main game used as an example will be blackjack,
as the gameplay is relatively simple, in contrast to other card games such as Texas Hold-
'em poker. Realistically speaking, there are certain games which are impossible to use to
beat the house. These are the games of pure chance, such as roulette, craps, and slot
machines. Firstly, it is impossible to increase one's chances of winning in these games
legally—that is, without tampering with the gameplay items. Secondly, even with normal
odds, the odds themselves never change. Every turn in these games is completely
independent of the others. Essentially, even if one happened to roll a three one round in a
game of craps, it would be the same odds of rolling another three the next roll as the
previous one: 1/6 (Hannum 121).

Games of skill, on the other hand, such as blackjack, are on a different level and are
much easier to beat. In these games, the decks are finite; that is, every turn involves
certain cards being permanently taken from the deck, leaving the number of certain cards
unbalanced, changing the ratio of the specific cards, and therefore changing the odds of
certain hands appearing. Concordantly, there is also a basic mathematical best hand. It is
this fundamental fact that can be taken advantage of by card counters. This method does
not guarantee that one will win every round. Rather, it allows the player to place the
optimum bet for that set of hands, allowing the player to lose less and earn more overall
(Breaking). Unfortunately, this method alone has a couple of flaws, which many
opponents say make breaking Vegas impossible. For one thing, the percentage
advantages are so low, that in order to actually make money one would have to take an
enormous bet after making many very low bets in order to weed out the unwanted cards.
This would make the fact that one is card counting very obvious, and the casino would see
be able to discharge the player (Mezrich 40-41). However, it still can be done, with
adequate practice. Additionally, there are certain special tricks which can aid in the card
counting.

As previously mentioned, since blackjack has a finite number of cards, it is possible
to track, at the very least, the number of certain types of cards in the deck. For example, it
is possible, using card counting, to figure out the proportion of high cards to low cards.
The most effective method so far developed is known as the Hi-Lo method, which
involves watching the different cards as they are dealt. The different cards are given a
point value: the 2-6 cards get a value of +1; the ten, face, and ace cards get a value of -1;
and 7-9 cards have a value of zero. This method is convenient because one doesn’t have to
memorize the exact number and suit of cards, but simply the total value of cards. It is a
given that the total points in a standard fifty-two card deck is zero, and when certain cards
are eliminated from the deck, the count become either positive (when there is a surplus of
low cards) or negative (when there is a surplus of high cards) (Mezrich 48). For example,
if a ten is the first card removed from the deck, the count becomes negative one. This may
seem irrelevant at first, but there is a logical reason for this. When there are more high
cards in the deck, the game’s odds become drastically more in favor of the player. This is
because, according to the rules of blackjack, the dealer must hit (or draw another card)
until the value of his cards is greater than or equal to seventeen, or he busts—that is, has a
value of higher than twenty one. The point of the game is not to get the best hand, a
blackjack (two-card) twenty-one, but simply to beat the dealer. Combine this with the
knowledge that the deck is loaded with high cards, and the advantage for the player
dramatically increases. This results because the dealer has a higher chance of busting (going
over 21) and losing, while the players, who by contrast have the option of hitting, can remain at a good value, and an even better chance at getting a twenty, or even a blackjack (Casino 123). Another advantage still is that both parties can get the same values, and split the pot, still leaving the player with a large amount of profit. Throw in the options of doubling down and insurance, and the profit potential is astounding. This is also helped by the fact that, under normal circumstances, the dealer has a 28.36% chance of busting, so that, when the player’s advantage increases, the probability of the dealer busting increases as well (Hannum 127).

Of course, this method of counting is by no means perfect. Even with the statistical advantage, the dealer can still win, and unless the pattern of betting is camouflaged, it is still fairly easy for the player to be noticed by the casino staff and weeded out. However, if done correctly and given the right amount of time, it is possible to gain profit in the hundreds of thousands of dollars in single night, especially when compared to regular gambling, which usually results in total loss rather than profit. Some opponents have also raised doubts on the credibility of this by stating that, in most casinos, more than one deck is used, generally around six or seven, depending on the casino. However, the math involved proves that this provides no hindrance to the card counters. The fact remains that, no matter how many decks are used, there are always the fifty-two cards in the deck, and therefore the count proportion is the same. Essentially, card counting has two simple rules, according to Rubin: “When there are more big cards in the deck, you bet more; when there are fewer big cards in the deck, you bet less” (Breaking). It may take longer to become certain of the true count, but patience is a virtue, and with enough of it, one can persevere against the house.
Of course, many will contend that, with today's technology, it is quite a bit harder
to succeed even with methods as simple as counting cards in today's casinos. And this is
not completely untrue. Many casinos have an extraordinary amount of security, known
among card counters as the "Eye in the Sky." Nowadays, casinos have cameras that cover
almost every inch of the floor, and many of them have a special technology that recognizes
faces (Breaking). With this technology, it is possible for casinos to see when a known card
counter is coming in, and keep them from entering the casino. As a consequence of this, it
is not impossible that a person can be banned from every single casino in Vegas by getting
caught while doing card counting, which would make it very difficult to beat the house.

Many opponents may also claim that, even with all of the aforementioned skills,
the actions necessary to break the house could never all work correctly in concert, and that
it is impossible for people to pull it off well enough to make any real profit. However, it
has been done, by a group of elite MIT students. Their endeavor is quite well known—
books have been written about them, documentaries have been made on their methods,
and a film, 21, produced by Columbia pictures, dramatizing their adventures in Vegas,
will be released soon. Their modus operandi was a combination of card counting, acting,
and wit. As told in their biography by Ben Mezrich, the group, known as Blackjack 101,
used a complex tiered system of players to take the house. There were three types of
players: the Spotters, the Gorillas, and the Big Players. The Spotters would "watch
blackjack games in progress, count the cards, and when there's a good situation, give the
signal"; the Gorillas would further refine the count (this is owing to the fact that more
than one deck is used); and Big Players would, at a given signal, lay down a huge amount
of money on a few turns, take the money, and leave (Breaking). In this way, they solved
both of the dilemmas presented to card counters. Firstly, by going in groups, there was
not one single person betting abnormal patterns, making each player look independent from the others. This in turn fooled the casino managers, who couldn’t tell that the players were working in concordance. It also helped that the MIT students played different parts: one person pretended to be a jocky tennis player, playing dumb at the tables, when he was really setting up for the Gorillas and Big Players; another person acted like she was a newlywed, aimlessly waiting for her husband to return, when in actuality she was taking in the rewards of a positive-15 deck (Mezrich). To say they broke the house would not exactly be accurate—they merely successfully sucked the casinos of a substantially larger sum of money than they would normally lose. At one point, the team had made a total profit of around $888,560 dollars (Breaking). Nonetheless, they have shown that it is indeed possible, and that with the proper training and experience, someone one day may truly break Vegas.

Ultimately, the myth of beating the house at Vegas comes down to sheer luck and wit, with a bit of MIT-grade math knowledge thrown in. As for the status of the myth, beating the house can be considered “plausible” (as compared to “busted”). This is because succeeding at beating the house is extremely unlikely under normal circumstances. However, with appropriate methods and a bit of luck, it is impossible to say that no one will ever beat the house, and take home millions.
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John Wood wrote this essay as a freshman at St. Mary's. In addition to being a member of the Honors program, he also worked in the library and was Vice President of the Japanese Popular Culture Club. He will be attending CSU Monterey Bay in the fall to pursue a major in Japanese Language and Culture.
Most of the time people identify themselves by what they do. Our professions, our jobs, our passions and hobbies significantly determine how we spend our time, form relationships, get motivated, receive feedback and develop our self-image. When what we do changes for some reason, it can cause an identity crisis because how we have defined ourselves no longer fits. The shell of our ego cracks and the habitual way we have constructed our world falters. Without our familiar frameworks, we don't know who we are until we develop a new framework and identity.

For my entire life I have defined myself as an athlete. I have always been involved in sports and have taken great pride in my athletic abilities. This summer, I had a choice to stay in my hometown of Monterey and continue to play baseball at the local community college—or to be one of the few from my high school to go away to college and take on a whole new identity. Obviously I chose the latter, and with that choice I have engaged the struggle of redefining who I am. The late anthropologist Victor Turner, who identified the three stages of transformation, termed the second stage, “the time between no longer and not yet,” which is where I am. Choosing not to play league sports has created lots of changes and new possibilities in my life.

I have played league basketball and baseball since I was six. My life has pretty much revolved around practice and games. I always wanted to excel at my sports, which required a serious time commitment. Even our family vacations were organized around my sports. Especially in high school, basketball and baseball took up a major segment of
my time and energy, which meant that there wasn’t time to just “hang” after school, to get a jump on my homework, or to work for money. The most obvious change in my life, now that I am not playing a league sport, is the amount of discretionary time I have. I have the freedom to plan out my day— to get my homework done in the afternoon which frees up my evenings, to fit in a movie or video game, to take my dog for a run on the lake, or to just catch up on sleep. For the first time, I have the time to consider other interests like learning to play the guitar I got for Christmas three years ago.

As an athlete, there was an automatic outlet for my energy and any stress that had accumulated during the day. There was also a constant emphasis on improving my skills. I was always working to get better and because the results of practice are tangible, I always felt like I was accomplishing something. I got a lot of feedback from coaches, teammates and even teachers about my abilities and my improvements, which gave me a sense of confidence in who I was. I was always sure of myself and knew what I was capable of doing. Without regular practices, I have to intentionally plan physical activities for myself like walking my dog or working out at the gym. I find it takes more discipline to exercise regularly on my own when there is no outer feedback, encouragement or camaraderie. Now that I have transferred my focus to my studies, I find that I have to settle for more subtle feedback. Though I am learning new things everyday, they are not as visible or readily applicable as athletic skills.

I miss the intensity of competition and the natural high I got whenever I stepped on the court or field. Hearing people cheer for our team gave me goosebumps, but what I enjoyed most was the challenge to show up and be the best we could be. There is no feeling to compare to the time when a game is coming down to the wire, or is on the line. I thrived under that kind of pressure. My heart would be pumping and my mind racing.
but I knew that this is what we had all been working and training for and that we were up
for the challenge. There is no feeling like it. Finding another outlet for my
competitiveness and aggression is crucial. I watch sports now—as a fan. It’s a different
feeling to give people goosebumps (being the fan) rather than get them (being the player).
I yell and cheer my team on, and sometimes, in a close game, almost get the same high—but
not quite. Sometimes it feels like torture knowing I won’t ever be there again.
Nevertheless, there is some enjoyment in relaxing with a hot dog and being the “sofa
quarterback” or “coach.” I can just sit back and enjoy the show—and even get some work
done in the process. Though it is hard not being able to play, I still love the game(s)—and
still get great enjoyment as a fan. And, to help fill the physical gap, I have joined a club
team at school and I try to find pick up games at the park or with friends. I have also
joined a gym and try to get a fix from pushing myself through weight-lifting.

What I miss most, however, is the bond that developed with my teammates from
sharing a passion, a commitment, a discipline, and putting it all on the line together at
every game. My varsity baseball team was made up of guys that I had played baseball
with for eight years. There is a trust, a brotherhood that grows through the process and is
irreplaceable. The members of my team became my best friends, as we learned to know
and depend on each other in every kind of situation. I have more time to “hang out” with
friends now, but I miss the brotherhood that came with team sports. I know that
friendship can be based on other things—but since I have always had sports, I have to find
other things to connect around.

I am finding that being an athlete who goes to school is very different from being a
full time student who enjoys sports. I have different priorities, different commitments,
and different things I need to get done. Just because I don’t play anymore, however,
doesn’t mean the game and the lessons I learned from it are no longer with me. While I am in “that time between no longer and not yet,” I know that I will integrate the athlete I was with whoever I am to become. It is actually pretty exciting to stand on this threshold of new potential with new ordeals to be faced, friends to be made and talents to be discovered.

Kyle Elder will be a sophomore at SMC in Fall 2008. He has narrowed his choice of majors to Communication, Politics, or English, and is trying to figure out how to accomplish a double major in two of the three. He loves sports and loves to write, and reports that he has learned a lot about himself through writing assignments, especially this one.
In Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Richard Cory,” the title character was a prominent man who seemed to have everything: wealth, manners and respect. But though he was the embodiment of success, Cory “one calm summer night / Went home and put a bullet through his head” (15-16), a desperate act that contrasts with the speaker’s noble characterization of him. Such an act warrants investigation: by analyzing Robinson’s narrative style, use of imagery and ironic language, one discovers that the public’s perceptions of Richard Cory are responsible for his demise.

The poem’s narrative structure gives the reader a sense of how Cory’s life was scrutinized by people who did not know him. Unlike dramatic poems which place the reader within the action itself, the speaker addresses the audience as an observer: he was one of the “people on the pavement” (2) who admired Cory from a distance. Because the speaker did not know Cory personally, the reader only learns about his appearance – he was “Clean favored and imperially slim” (4) for instance – and nothing else. The speaker’s focus on Cory’s appearance is natural, even expected from a working class person who “cursed the bread” (14) as part of his daily ritual. To the speaker, Richard Cory represents everything he is not: “rich – yes, richer than a king” (9), a man whose very presence “fluttered pulses” (7). By observing Cory’s admirable lifestyle, the speaker can forget about his own miserable existence – “we thought that he was everything / to make us wish that we were in his place” (11-12), the speaker says. But because the speaker is removed from the action, in this case Richard Cory’s personal life, he is unaware of Cory’s suffering. In a dramatic poem, Richard Cory himself could talk about his private anguish,
but in Robinson's narrative he is a distant, silent character, an object scrutinized by the masses. But despite having legions of fans, Richard Cory takes his own life, a perception-shattering act that leaves the audience wondering how they could have been wrong the whole time.

Robinson's use of imagery in "Richard Cory" suggests that Cory was forced to act in a certain way because the public put him on a pedestal. Cory could never let his guard down - "Whenever [he] went down town / We people on the pavement looked at him" (1-2) the speaker testifies. One can imagine Cory surrounded by gawking fans, expecting him to act and behave like a man who has everything. Indeed Cory dutifully fit this role, he "was always quietly arrayed" and "always human when he talked" (5-6) when dealing with the public. Cory comes across as a perfect upper-class gentlemen, an "imperially slim" (4) aristocrat who knew what the public wanted. Cory not only acted, but looked the part - he was a "gentlemen from sole to crown" (3), which was probably why he "fluttered pulses" (7) when he greeted his fans. Cory must have realized that the public "thought he was everything / To make us wish that we were in his place" (11-12) or else he would not have acted so "clean favored" (4) whenever he was in their presence. Cory understood that he served as a role model to people like the speaker, who deal with the everyday hardships of life. Yet even the most caring role models are subject to fatigue. Cory must have been tired of being expected to act like a gentleman just because he was "richer than a king" (9). It seems that after being put on a pedestal for so long, he could not take it any longer.

The buildup of praise throughout "Richard Cory" reveals an ironic and painful truth - in their quest for happiness, the people caused their hero to end his life. The irony is structural because the speaker, like the rest of the public, is naïve in thinking that their
adoration of Richard Cory will not harm him. The poem starts with a simple assessment of Cory: to the public, he was always the ideal “gentlemen from sole to crown,” (3-4) a demigod living among ordinary men who “went without the meat and cursed the bread” (14). While the rest of the world – the “people on the pavement” (2) – was afflicted by hunger and poverty, Richard Cory was immune to such problems and deserved praise. But as the poem continues, the public’s adoration of Cory intensifies to the point of hysteria. Cory is no longer just a wealthy man, but someone “richer than a king” (9). Even though Cory was “always human when he talked,” (6) the public exaggerates his every action: he “fluttered pulses when he said, /’Good morning,’ and he glittered when he walked” (7-8), the speaker recounts. By the final stanza, the speaker remarks that the public “worked and waited for the light” (13), as if seeing Richard Cory had become their only source of hope for happiness in the world. Such embellishment of Cory’s actions reveals how the public was deeply attracted to him to the point that they wished “that we were in his place” (12). Yet this statement is the ultimate irony – Richard Cory eventually puts “a bullet through his head” (16), forcing the public to acknowledge that his life was even worse than theirs. Cory’s death, like the poem’s ending, is dramatic and surprising on purpose – it forces the audience to recognize the harm in giving praise.

Despite being fabulously wealthy, Richard Cory lacked happiness. Perhaps he thought that pleasing the public would give him the one thing money cannot buy. But how long can one man live a lie? Richard Cory wanted to get away – and there was only one place where the public could not follow him.
Works Cited


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Two Worlds
By Caroline Grafft

Can two people who live in two worlds separated by culture, time period and political events truly experience the same emotions? Yiyun Li’s short story “Love in the Marketplace,” set in China during the 1990’s, and the film “Casablanca” directed by Michael Curtiz, set in Europe during the 1940’s, describe characters going through similar emotions. In “Casablanca,” a man is confused by the recent dip into his past when an old lover returns, while in “Love in the Marketplace” a woman fights to stand her ground against social norms and follow her own heart’s promise. Although Rick and Sansan come from two different worlds, it is this return of each one’s lover that propels the two characters into parallel lives filled with love, loss, and friendship.

Rick Blaine, owner of Rick’s Café, is a man with no emotion, or so his customers think. It was a night just like any other night in Casablanca, Rick’s Café was packed, and Rick was nowhere to be seen. Caught off guard with a familiar tune Rick rushes to the piano, “Sam, I thought I told you never to play... As he sees Ilsa he stops short. Sam stops playing.” A shocking moment for Rick, as he hasn’t seen Ilsa since the day she left him in Paris to go on without her. Silenced by their mutual overwhelming emotions he recalls their last encounter: “I remember every detail. The Germans wore gray, you wore blue.” Both characters are put in an awkward situation of past emotions in their present lives; Ilsa leaves shortly with husband Victor Lazlo. Alone in his café with pianist Sam, Rick requests his and Ilsa’s song “As Time Goes By,” drifting back to their love affair in Paris; this walk down memory lane brings out the depth of their love affair. Caught up in the political warfare of WWII, Ilsa thought she had become a widow, and had therefore
moved on and allowed herself to fall in love with Rick. Driven by the troops to get out of Paris, Rick planned an escape to Marseilles for the two of them. Ilsa received news of her husband's being alive and left Rick at the train station to go off to Marseilles without her. Rick leaves Paris heartbroken with only a letter that reads, "Richard, I cannot go with you or ever see you again. You must not ask why. Just believe that I love you. Go, my darling, and God bless you. Ilsa." Brought back to present day in his café, Rick looks up to find Ilsa standing in the doorway. Rick, confused with her purpose, conveys his bitterness through sarcasm: "It's funny about your voice, how it hasn't changed. I can still hear it. 'Richard dear, I'll go with you any place. We'll get on a train together and never stop.'" His words sting Ilsa as she storms out of his café.

Sansan, a teacher at the Educators' School in the small town where she grew up, also deals with a past love. Ten years since her break-up with her ex-fiancée Tu, Sansan’s mother arrives to share the news that Tu is divorced. When the janitor comes to tell her that her mother is waiting outside her classroom, Sansan lashes out, "Can't you see I'm busy with my students?" Expecting Sansan to eagerly greet this news, Sansan's mother is ashamed once again by her daughter's will to stand out against the social norm of getting married. "What god did I offend to deserve you as a daughter?" (94). Her mother tries to convince Sansan that "even in arranged marriages, people fall in love" (104), and that is just what the relationship had become between Tu and Sansan: an arrangement.

Both Sansan and Rick are rendered complex since they are marked by loss and given a second chance. Rick experiences the same loss twice within the film. The loss of his lover, Ilsa, happens once in Paris, in a flashback scene, when she leaves him waiting at the train station, and again at the end of the film, when he forces her to go to America without him. Rick takes a one-eighty turn in character after experiencing his loss. This
change can be observed in his café when he is invited to have a drink with the customers; Captain Renault butts in and says “Oh, no Rick never” and then is interrupted by Rick himself “Thanks, I will.” This is something he has never done. That same evening Captain Renault comments on Rick’s behavior again when he is reminiscing with Ilsa. “Ricky, you’re becoming quite human, I suppose we have to thank you [Ilsa] for that, Mademoiselle.” These changes come from the emotional pull Ilsa has in Rick’s life; although she has not been around, it is obvious Rick still holds a place for her within his heart.

Sansan’s loss is different from Rick’s in the fact that she does not make a one-eighty turn during the course of the story; Sansan’s change has already occurred. Sansan shows the film “Casablanca” to her students as the narrator comments, “Casablanca says all she wants to teach the students about life.” Sansan did not always have this opinion: “Sansan discovered Casablanca the year Tu wrote a short and apologetic letter from America, explaining his decision not to marry her. Before the letter’s arrival, she showed The Sound of Music to her students, humming with every song, ready to abandon the students for America at any minute” (95). Sansan’s loss occurs when her best friend Min and fiancé Tu go off to America under a “staged” marriage, only performed to get Min to America. They end up staying married and falling in love, leaving Sansan alone in China, heartbroken. She had allowed herself to be taken advantage of and that is exactly what her two friends did, unknowingly: “She has put her faith in the love between Tu and herself, to save a friend. But inexplicable as life was, Min and Tu fell in love” (101).

Another product of the change in Sansan is her cravings for sunflower seeds: “Sansan took up the habit of eating sunflower seeds when she could no longer stand her imagination”
This craving was Sansan’s way of dealing with the loss of Tu: “It is the sunflower seeds, sweet and salty and slightly bitter . . . that make her life bearable” (97).

Friendship is something that both Rick and Sansan find at the end of their stories; a friend, someone to whom they are attached by feelings of personal regard (Chicago Manual). For Rick this companionship is found in Captain Renault. Left alone on the concourse after watching Ilsa and Victor fly off into the distant skies toward America, Rick realizes that Louis is all he’s got: “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” This relationship fulfills only surface needs of proximity and companionship for Rick.

Sansan too, finds companionship at the end but her relationship is an intricate, deep understanding. As she returns to the marketplace of her childhood love and family roots, she finds herself in awe of a beggar, “Give me ten Yuan and I will let you slice me once wherever you like; if you finish my life with one cut, you owe me nothing” (109). After the beggar denies Sansan’s mother’s offer of money without cutting him, “Sansan picks up the bill and walks to the man” (109). Between Sansan and the beggar there is this weird deep connection of understanding; although this is such a strange request Sansan understands perfectly why one must cut the man for him to be able to take the money. “Crazy as they may seem to the world, they are not alone, and they will always find each other, such is the promise of life; such is the grandeur . . . she points the knife at the man’s shoulder and slices, slowly opening his flesh with love and tenderness” (109). Li’s language of love is one of precise choice and touches the reader emotionally as many can relate to an intimate moment of deep understanding that transpires without words.

Coming from drastically different worlds, Sansan and Rick are brought together in the experience of similar emotions. Through a final farewell and an experience of deep
understanding both characters find themselves with closure. Is this something that we all can strive after, are all humans capable of achieving such peaceful closure, and do we all seek friendship, is friendship a crucial part of life?

Works Cited


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