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My Experience with There

I chose to become a member of the community called There for several reasons. It was open to everyone, regardless of age or interests, it was free, and it didn’t warn of bizarre sights that one may see in Second Life.

When I got to There, I was greeted by a There Tour Guide who gave me a quick tour of how to navigate around There. They also helped me create my avatar – someone I tried to make as close to my real likeness as possible. I was irritated that eye glasses were not an option for my avatar. When I finally found a glasses shop, I realized I had to pay real money to get that accessory. I couldn’t believe people would actually spend their own money on items for an avatar in a virtual community. This shocked me.

I met several people that I was able to have conversations with while I was in There. Ages ranged from 16 years to 40 years. I spoke with both males and females. I was also able to “watch” several conversations between other avatars that were taking place. Most conversations were pretty basic in nature – favorite movies, directors, etc. Other conversations were disturbing. I was surprised how quickly people asked how old others were and where they lived in real life. Even scarier, was how many times I saw aviators admit their young age AND where they live. I have to admit that when asked where I lived, I felt very guilty lying, even though it should have been something easy to do.

I also stumbled upon a conversation between a 36-year-old man and a 22-year-old woman. Both were single. They were obviously flirting. I was shocked when the young woman asked the man if they wanted to “date” while in There. What??? Not only is this a world for people to meet new people and have conversations, but they are even dating??? I couldn’t believe it, but that was a very common occurrence. This particular couple was discussing if either of them had ever “dated” someone in There who was married in the real world. The young woman admitted that she had, but she didn’t consider that cheating since it was a virtual world. Although morally, this was appalling to me, it didn’t surprise me. I have often read and heard that people will often say and do things online that they would never do in “real” life. Watching this conversation, validated this. It was almost as if she was saying, “This isn’t the real world, so anything goes because it’s fake.” As a wife, I would have a hard time understanding that. As a mother, I would have a hard time understanding that if I found out my child was “dating” an older, married person in a virtual community like There.

My overall experience was not a good one. I often felt uncomfortable. The avatars appeared “ageless,” so it was hard to get a take on who I was really talking to. Was I speaking with a teenager, a middle-aged woman with a family, or a swinging single? We base a lot of our opinions of people on their appearance. There are many things we are able to assume about people based on what we see. When you take away these things, it made me feel very vulnerable. I also found that some of the people in There were lonely teenagers who didn’t have a social life outside of their virtual community. This made me sad for them. It was odd to think that these people had no friends at school, but an entire community of friends online that they were able to connect with.

Will I return to There, or any other virtual community in the near future? No. It wasn’t something that appealed to me – as I said, it made me quite uncomfortable, but it was an enlightening experience as to what my students are experiencing.