A FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION OF SELF WITHIN SECOND LIFE

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Abstract

This research uses Second Life as a research environment to examine the ways in which expression of self and identity are developed via avatars within social virtual worlds. It documents and categorises the different purposes of avatars, the relationships that operators develop with them and the various factors which influence this development.

The historical and theoretical context of the research charts the development of theories of identity from the pre-modern through modern and post-modernist schools, and contemporary authors and researchers such as Tom Boellstorff and Nick Yee whose extensive work within Second Life relate directly to the research topic.

The methodology chapter justifies the use of Second Life as a platform to conduct the research which includes interviews with individuals already operating avatars within Second Life, operators new to this virtual environment, and artistic practitioners who have used Second Life to examine issues of identity. In addition the research uses ethnographic and phenomenological research methods based in the author's own artistic practice to gain additional supporting data.

Developing upon the historical and theoretical context, the Lacanian concepts of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real are used to develop an original Table of Modalities (Table 6) typifying avatars by their differing purposes, characteristics and operator/avatar relationships, and promoting the use of a common framework of language by researchers discussing these topics. This table is used to analyse the data collected and facilitate an examination of the ways in which individuals manifest different relationships with, and behaviours via, avatars and the resultant changes in the expression of identity of both avatar and operator.

Chapter 1: The Research Framework

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will set out the motivation, context, and objectives of the research undertaken, the terms used herein and the significance of the study. The research originated from studies in the field of Creative Technologies, i.e. the use of technologies such as Second Life within artistic practice, and the findings contribute to the body of research in that field. However it can be demonstrated that the Table of Modalities (Table 6) developed will also contribute to, and have wider application within, areas of study including identity theory, games theory and other fields relating to virtual-human interaction.

Second Life is unique in being the first non-ludic 3D virtual environment, i.e. without external imposition of games rules and objectives, to allow individuals a high level of autonomy in the creation and development of their avatars, leading to a thriving virtual social and creative environment ideal for this study. The research study began in October 2009 with the core primary research and development of the Table of Modalities (Table 6) carried out between March 2012 and March 2015. The decision to use Second Life as a research platform was taken at the height of the popularity of its popularity in 2009 with approximately 62,000 users on line at any one time (https://community.secondlife.com). Although a number of competitors emerged during the period of the research, e.g. Blue Mars, they captured neither the attention nor market penetration of Second Life which, according an interview with founder Philip Rosedale (Lacy, 2012), maintained 1 million active users and a $700 million virtual economy in 2012, similar to that during its peak of popularity three years earlier. With over 45 million total avatars registered since its inception in 2002, estimates in 2012 indicated around 50,000 to 60,000 residents were

online at any given time (https://community.secondlife.com). Towards the end of this study, when checked on 20 Feb 2016 (http://gridsurvey.com), over 37,000 residents were actually online on the Second Life grid. Although this indicates a clear decline in the use of Second Life over the period of the study, experience by the researcher in-world suggests that this reflects a reduction in the number of new and casual users being attracted by the media hype which surrounded the platform at the height of its popularity. Second Life continues to have a strong social community and remains a popular platform both for the purposes of academic study of virtual worlds, and for artistic practice within such virtual worlds. Anna Peachey and Mark Childs write that "in recent years Second Life has provided a compelling environment for research, emerging as the most sophisticated of the social virtual worlds" (2011, p.2).

1.2 Terminology and Conventions

Actual World

There are a variety of terms used by writers on the topic of virtual worlds to describe the concrete, tangible 'everyday' world in which we live, including First Life/ Real Life/NVL (non-virtual life), though none are universally accepted and all have flaws. As Tom Boellstorff (2008, p.5), author of the seminal book on the Second Life, 'Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human', points out "our real lives have been virtual all along… since it is human nature to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being." Whilst when quoting writers the terms they have used will be transcribed, it is generally the intention herein to follow Boellstorff's example of using the term 'actual world' for this purpose.

Operator

To differentiate between the avatar and the individual sitting at a computer terminal directing the actions of such avatar, the latter is often referred to as the 'player' or 'user'.

Whilst 'user' will still be used as a general term for individuals who use virtual worlds or Second Life specifically (sometimes referred to in quotes as Second Life residents) it is felt that, for the purposes of clarity a separate term should be used to define the specific individual controlling a given avatar. Whilst Boellstorff refers to an avatar's 'driver', and this term and others may be used in quotations, it is the intention to use the term 'operator' for the purpose of making this distinction within the original material herein. It should also be clarified that where the process of avatar development is being discussed the term operator may also be assumed to be the individual creating, developing or fashioning the avatar. Where this is not the case it will be made clear where an operator has been asked to control an unfamiliar avatar, i.e. one for which they did not control the creation, development and fashioning of such avatar.

Physicality

Some researchers (including Sanchez, 2010) have used phenotype to describe the physical characteristics of an avatar. The term phenotype however is felt to be ambiguous in so far as it might also be used to include psychological traits so in this thesis it is the intention to use the term 'physicality' to describe the physical characteristics whether of an avatar or operator.

1.3 Motivation and Significance of the study

The motivation for this study stems from observations of the way that individuals create and relate to avatars within virtual worlds either to fulfil fixed roles, or as representations or extensions of their own constructed personae. A number of authors and researchers have commented upon the importance of research into areas of identity construction within virtual worlds. Boellstorff writes that "a crucial area for continuing research [within Second Life] involves questions like the imbrication of body fashioning and architecture. Such research can help us better frame notions of 'social-constructionism' in the actual world" (2011, p.216). Peachey writes how the flexibility offered by "the act of representing ourselves through an avatar, of having choices about how to present visually and act through this medium, have made virtual worlds into social laboratories for identity study (Peachey 2010, p.37).

Peachey and Childs write of the process of avatar construction within virtual worlds and the relevance to actual world identity: "We can challenge previous preconceptions; about gender, sexuality, physicality. We can redefine our roles in society or invent new ones. We can change how we view our bodies, or even modify them to adapt to our desires. These are changes that society as a whole will be facing in the ensuing century and these are issues that those exploring virtual worlds are already encountering. The debates encountered here will be ones that not only have relevance to the role of identity in virtual worlds, but will eventually challenge the meaning of identity for everyone." (2011, p.2)

Existing research findings in this area, notably by Nick Yee of the Palo Alto Research Center, have been influential to the development of this research particularly Yee's conclusions that "the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world have come to govern our

embodied identities in the virtual world" (2007). While it may be hypothesised that this may be due to concerns that changing avatars radically or regularly may compromise a coherence of identity which facilitates acceptance in the social space in which they coexist with others, individuals may also be resistant to changes which may result in a modified relationship between themselves and their avatar resulting in a disruption of the discourse between the two. This relationship between operator and avatar will be a key area of focus within this study which will use Second Life as a research platform to examine different ways in which individuals construct avatars, and develop relationships with their own avatars and other avatar/operators and relate this to existing theories of actual world identity development.

The use of avatars to represent the participant within computer games and social virtual worlds is a long standing convention dating back to the earliest text based chat rooms and first person shooter games. A wealth of writing exists cataloguing research within virtual worlds in general, and Second Life in particular, much of which addresses topics relating to the expression of self by means of avatar construction and appearance and to their operators' behaviour and interaction with others via their avatars. Much of this research serves to highlight the significant variation in the ways in which operators relate to their avatars. Yee writes that "For some players the avatar becomes a purposeful projection or idealization of their own identity, while for others, the avatar is an experiment with new identities" (2008). In some instances avatars are viewed as little more than 'game pieces' which the operator controls which Domenico Quaranta (2007, p.6) refers to as "a kind of puppet that does everything I tell it to by means of a series of input tools"; in other cases they are a "virtual placeholder for an actual person" (Sherman, 2011, p.42) or 'proxies' for the operator within the virtual environment (Apter, 2008; Lastowka and Hunter, 2006, p.15; Little, 1999). Similarly Laetitia Wilson described an avatar as "a virtual, surrogate

self – can be understood as a 'stand-in' for our real-space selves; a 'visual agent that represents the user" (2003) while Methal R. Mohammed describes "avatars, as representatives of 'real' people… born as 'hybrids' that sway somewhere between 'reality' and 'illusion'" (2009). For others still avatars are a means of creative expression or even for the transference of self into virtual worlds. Boellstorff suggests that "avatars make virtual worlds real…they are a position from where the self encounters the virtual" (2008, p.29).

Although the topic will be expanded upon in the following chapters, it is important at this stage to clarify, at least in a rudimentary fashion, the distinction being made herein between self and identity, though this is complicated by the fact that numerous writers have used the terms differently and sometimes interchangeably. For the purposes of this study identity may be considered to be that with which an individual chooses to identify themselves or to construct to allow interaction with others, whereas self may be taken to refer to that essence within the individual which is capable of such identification. Stuart Hall provides a useful expansion on this definition of identity: "Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always knowing ... that they are representations" (1996, p.6).

As with this blurring of meaning between self and identity, it has been identified that writings relating to virtual worlds do not always share a common terminology when discussing basic concepts and this can lead to a lack of clarity. David J. Gunkel writes of the need to "engage in philosophical speculation about the nature of (virtual) reality... to get real about computer-generated experience and social interaction, providing this relatively new area of study with a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of some of its own key terms and fundamental concepts" (2010, p.3). Similarly William Farr, Sara Price and Carey Jewitt write of digital technology that "multiple sign systems exist, present with power structures, social

structural arrangements, participation frameworks and orientation issues... This is particularly the case as experiences of people on social networking sites show with Facebook, Twitter, and Second Life, placing a wall of meaning between the actor and the reader" (2012). Building on these discussions it is proposed that there is a need to establish a common critical language to allow structured discussion, comparison and analysis of the perceptions of selfhood and development of identities via the medium of avatars within virtual worlds.

This study therefore makes original contributions not only by adding to and developing on gaps in current knowledge relating to the nature of the relationships which develop between operator and avatar in virtual worlds, but by developing the Table of Modalities (Table 6) to provide such a common and coherent framework of critical language which may be adopted within ongoing academic discourse relating to the topics of identity and interaction within virtual social environments, virtual worlds and games. Whilst the current study is limited to Second Life, the Table of Modalities could be applied to, and tested in, other virtual environments such as World of Warcraft to examine the relationship between operator and avatar, used to examine the expression of self within social networking environments or even applied to identity theory more generally.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

Aim:

To construct a framework for the classification of modalities relating to the development of identity and expression of self in virtual worlds, and to apply such framework to analyse differing types of relationship between operators and avatars within Second Life, thereby establishing a common critical language for the discussion of selfhood as it relates to the relationship between avatars and their operators in virtual worlds.

Objectives

This research will explore, define and catalogue ways in which individuals develop identities and expression of self within Second Life to specifically to meet the following research objectives:

1. Ascertain the frequency and nature of changes operators typically make to avatars and thereby determine the continuity of identity which operators typically manifest when using their avatars;

2. Determine the factors which influence operators in developing and fashioning avatars, including the purpose of the avatar, and the effect this process has upon the relationship between the operator and avatar;

3. Investigate ways in which artistic practice within Second Life can facilitate diverse experimental expressions of identity and lead to the development of different types of relationship between operators and their avatars;

4. Investigate how behaviour and the relationship between operator and avatar is modified by operators controlling avatars which change in response to external stimuli;

5. Develop a systematic approach to allow the classification of the data collected and examination of the different ways in which of development of identity and expression of self are manifest within virtual worlds.

Chapter 2: Historical and Theoretical Context

The categorization of the modalities used within the framework will be achieved by reference to existing paradigms relating to our understanding of identity within the actual world of corporeal existence. It is therefore necessary to first consider the progression of theories which have shaped our concepts of identity and self from a pre-modern understanding, through modern and post-modern theories, taking into account also the writings of contemporary authors and researchers whose studies relate directly to Second Life.

2.1 The Development of Identity Theories and their Impact and Application to Social Virtual Worlds

This chapter will review the historical and theoretical context to the study, and the contribution of current writers and researchers. The presentation of identity theories herein will not be exhaustive but will focus instead on key concepts which can be related to the study of identity within virtual cultures, specifically with focus on Second Life. Literature relating to each of these concepts will be examined both in relation to the contribution of each concept to the development of identity theories and to its specific application to the study of identity within virtual social worlds. While these concepts will be introduced in an order which generally reflects the chronology in which the theories were developed, or where they were the commonly accepted paradigm, or in which writings on the topic were prevalent, an attempt has been made to group them into underlying themes rather than to stick rigidly to the schools of thought from which they were generated.

2.1.1 Role Identity

Stuart Hall, writing on cultural identity, discussed the view of identity prevalent in the 'pre-modern' era that "One's status, rank and position in the 'great chain of being'--the secular and divine order of things- overshadowed any sense that one was a sovereign individual" (1995, p.602). Described by Charles Taylor this concept of one's own identity involved "connecting one's life up to some greater reality or story" (1989, p.42), i.e. identifying oneself as synonymous with one's role in life be it warrior, citizen or monk.

This pre-modern notion of role identity is an enduring one; Eva G. Clarke and Elaine M. Justice note that, even in contemporary society, when adults are asked to introduce themselves they will often do so initially by talking first about their occupation or career. In the introduction to 'The Ethics of Identity' Kwame Anthony Appiah concurs; "when we are asked…who we are, we are being asked what we are as well" (2007, xiv). Appiah goes on to discuss how our own perception of our roles or designation can impact upon our expression of identity: "One draws, among other things, on ...ideas about how gay, straight, black, white, male, or female people ought to conduct themselves. These notions provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping our plans of life" (2007, p.22). Hall question's the mechanisms "by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the positions to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and 'perform' these positions, and why they never do so completely" (1996, p.14) whilst Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke writing extensively on role and social identities, emphasized "that the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and incorporating, into the self, the meanings and expectations associated with the role" (2005, p.134). Appiah discusses how identification and behaviour can be shaped

by role labelling and cites Ian Hacking (1986) that "once labels are applied to people ideas about people who fit the label come to have social and psychological effects" (2007, p.66).

An additional factor relating to the different paradigms of identity is that of naming; Marcel Mauss (1997, pp.1-25) examines how, in actual world tribal culture, names represented role identity; there were "a limited number of forenames in each clan; and the definition of the exact nature role…expressed by that name." Role identity forms the origins of many western names, e.g. Smith, and within Second Life groups can deliberately pay for a group surname to identify them as belonging to that group, whilst avatars with the surname Linden, are recognised as part of Linden Labs, who operate Second Life, and therefore as authority figures.

Research undertaken by Peña & McGlone investigated how a female avatar's differing clothed appearance and role label assigned to it impacted on the way people wrote about that avatar to describe a fictional account of her day. They concluded that both the appearance and:

> adding a verbal role label to an avatar affected participants' language use. For instance adding a "professor" role label to the formally dressed avatar increased the use of words connected to education, attempts at crafting approximate descriptions of a character's everyday routine, and sequential food habits in comparison to participants in the formally dressed avatar with no label condition (e.g., then she grabbed lunch and went to her next class). In contrast, participants using the formally dressed avatar with no role label created stories about the office life of a woman (e.g., Kate) that has a business job and/or goes shopping... Finally, adding a "supermodel" role label to the glamorously dressed avatar significantly affected participants' language use in stories. (Peña & McGlone, 2012).

This assumption of a role as the defining factor of identity is echoed within many computer game worlds where the player can assume the role of a pre-defined character avatar with a specific appearance and attributes. Examples range from the Gauntlet arcade game of the mid-1980s to the latest iterations of Grand Theft Auto, where the key factor defining the avatar's behaviour is generally the role it fulfils within the game rather than any expression of identity on the part of the avatar's operator, though there is much popular speculation as to whether an operator's identification with the role identity of their avatar can lead to changes in their actual world behaviour, e.g. if identification with avatars which are characterised by the use of anti-social behaviour leads to anti-social behaviour by the operator in the actual world.

2.1.2 Constructed Identity

As early as the 4th Century Augustine of Hippo made the distinction between the inner and outer in relation to the self, a concept which endures today in modern Western tradition with thoughts and feelings often being ascribed to an 'inner self.' However there was little development of such theories until the 17th Century when Rene Descartes and Michel de Montaigne both theorised a mind/body duality which would make significant contribution to modern concepts of identity. Descartes discussed the idea of the body as a possession, distinct from the self;

> I possess a body with which I am very intimately conjoined, yet because, on the one side, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other, I possess a distinct idea of body, inasmuch as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that this I [that is to say, my soul by

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which I am what I am], is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (trans. Long, 1969)

Charles Taylor (1989, p.182) discusses how both Descartes and Montaigne recognised the individual as having the agency to reflect upon one's own nature; for Descartes this took the form of a disengagement which allowed one to classify and work upon oneself. In contrast Montaigne was concerned with 'a deeper engagement in our particularity' in an effort to discover one's individual nature. Contemporary thought seems to favour Descartes' view over Montaigne's; Castells quotes Calhoun (1994) that identity is "always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery" (2010, p.6).

Following from Montaigne and Descartes, John Locke introduced the idea of a radical disengagement in which the real self is not the object being worked upon and remade, but that which is capable of working upon the remaking. He pictured the mind as a tabula rasa, or blank slate, onto which the identity can be imprinted by sensation, experience and reflection. If Lockean logic defines the Self as that which is capable of working upon the remaking it is not unreasonable to define the object being worked upon and remade, and that which the Self presents to others, as Identity. Locke's view formed the basis for most of the Modern theories of identity, centring around a unified self having a role in the construction and curation of its own identity.

A further contribution of Locke to identity theory was his proposal of a number of thought experiments, including one in which the soul (or consciousness, which Locke seems to equate with the self) of a prince is transported into the body of a cobbler, to enable him to

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examine the relationship between the physical presence of the cobbler and the prince (1690): "Everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions: but who would say it was the same man?". He concludes that self is the 'conscious thinking thing...' and explains that with the following illustration: "If the finger were amputated and this consciousness went along with it, deserting the rest of the body, it is evident that the little finger would then be the person, the same person; and this self would then would have nothing to do with the rest of the body" (2007, p.118). Immanuel Kant (1787, p.112) also makes a Cartesian distinction between "...myself considered as a thinking being, a soul, an object of inner sense, and myself as a body, an object of outer sense", but cautions that this Inner sense "represents us to our own consciousness, only as we appear to ourselves, not as we are in ourselves."

Sartre wrote of 'conscience de soi' or consciousness of self and separated this into being in-itself (en-soi) and being for-itself (pour-soi). Though he wrote of choosing ourselves, for Sartre this was in the pursuit of the 'fundamental project'. Sebastian Gardner writes of Sartre referring not simply to the choices made in constructing an identity, but rather "the total (rather than merely the past) pattern in my empirical choices." i.e. the whole of one's choices over time, leading to and moderated by each other.

In both virtual and actual worlds we have to a lesser or greater extent the agency to be able to change the way we construct our appearance and the identity we present. Within Second Life the high degree of control over the avatar's appearance gives operators a wide diversity and high level of fluidity in the ways in which they may choose to express their identity, or aspects of it, using their avatar. Madan Sarup writes of Eva Hoffman's immigrants' view of America, which could easily apply to such choices within Second Life: "Nobody gives you an identity

here, you have to reinvent yourself every day… but how do I choose from identity options all around me?" (1996, p.5). He describes how "one can put together the elements of the complete Identikit of a DIY self" but warns that "by gaining a new face one simultaneously loses one's own" He quotes Judith Williamson (1986) on how choices of what to wear are also choices not only of which images to present but also which to exclude.

Research suggests that despite the wide variety of ways in which avatars can be personalised, avatar operators are often self-limiting in the ways in which they express themselves. Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, and Merget write that "even as our identities became virtual, we insisted on embodiment. And in doing so, the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world have come to govern our embodied identities in the virtual world" (2007, p.15).

Writers on the topic of identity in Second Life generally concur that much of the thinking and behaviour of those inhabiting such social virtual worlds remains anchored to the Modern paradigm of identity construction. Kathy Cleland (2008, p.143) observes;

> It is ironic (but perhaps not surprising) that in these new virtual arenas, where theoretically we can be anything we want to be, homogenising social stereotypes and idealised media types dominate the virtual landscape... Offline cultural norms and stereotypes are reproduced online.

Boellstorff relates how Second Life residents "created avatars that resembled their actual world embodiments...Outward appearance really does communicate a lot about you as it is made up of conscious choices of how you want to present yourself…. (One's) main avatar is usually designed by real life standards of beauty or as a reflection of the real life self" (2008, p.132).

Matthew Meadows (2007, p.106) states that "we generally build a second version of ourselves that has some bearing on the real world… Avatars are ultimately interactive self-portraits that we use to represent ourselves. Most users, when they build their avatar, arrive at an alternate, less protected version of themselves." Messinger, Ge, Stroulia, Lyons, Smirnov & Bone concur that people's behaviours in virtual worlds tend to be congruent with those in the real world: "on average, people report making their avatars similar to themselves, but somewhat more attractive". However they also state that their own research was inconclusive and they "could not reject the alternate hypothesis that respondents make their avatars "a mix of similar and unrecognizable features to your real self" (2008, pp.1-17).

Maeva Veerapen describes the act of constructing her avatar identity:

From the moment I registered a Second Life account, notions of how to present myself to others influenced most of the choices that informed the making of the avatar... I did not want to be scantily clad; I wished to look respectable and professional... I used several aspects of my own established pre-virtual world identity metrics to assist in the creation of the avatar by, for example... choosing a female avatar which maintained my physical world nominal and self-informative gender. (2011, p.84)

Other writers record similar experiences; Tim Guest recalls how he "recreated (his) offline self as accurately as possible" (2008, p.13) while Wagner James Au created "a somewhat stylised version of (him)self" (2008, Preface xvii) drawing inspirations from others he admired.

Following research in which participants were asked to create avatars for different purposes of blogging, gaming and dating, Vasalou & Joinson discussing that, though the dating and gaming treatments accentuated certain aspects of their avatar to reflect the tone and

perceived expectations of the context, for all three purposes the avatar attributes drew on participants' self-image, and thus avatars were perceived by their owners as highly similar to themselves. Not only were physical attributes mirrored by the avatars, but also clothing, fashion accessories and "participants chose options that mirrored upcoming, past or current life happenings, thus expressing anticipated events or precious memories... desired life changes and self-improvements were also reflected (2009, p.516). It is unsurprising that many avatars express either an idealised version of oneself or an expression of one's idea of beauty; Bessière, Seay & Kiesler (2007) write that an avatar allows an operator to enact aspects of his/her ideal self, i.e., the physical or psychological self the player wants to be and that people who are more dissatisfied with aspects of themselves (i.e., have poor self-evaluation) are more likely to engage in virtual self-enhancements through their avatar. Jacob Van Kokswijk (2008) suggests that "for some individuals their virtual persona is at least as important as their real life image." There is also evidence that the choices made to have the avatar more closely reflect the appearance of the operator can happen over time as the operator's relationship to the avatar strengthens. Duffy and Penfold (2010) cite the research of Bradshaw (2006) in finding that, in studies, the participants were initially "very liberated by the use of their avatars, as they could choose what identity they would like to be, although …towards the end of the project individual avatars more closely resembled the real person in looks." Au offers the case study of Stella Costello whose operator felt no relation to the avatar due to "the avatar settings for Stella's size, making her svelte and petite – which Stella's owner was admittedly not." Gradually Stella's operator modified the settings to make Stella more 'full-figured' and is quoted as saying she "felt more honest with (her)self and more connected to her." Andrea Chester writes of "a desire for honest relationships with other players and a strongly held belief in authentic self-presentation" and concludes that

"Ironically, in cyberspace the most postmodern of all spaces, the most strongly held belief was in a coherent and authentic self and in the self-presentation of the "real" me" (2004, p. 335-362).

Becerra and Stutts (2008) suggest that whilst low body image or perceptions of attractiveness (in the physical world) increase the desire to become someone else, which in turn increases the use of virtual worlds, virtual worlds reduce the importance of physical attractiveness, allowing individuals to be valued on traits that may not be easily observable such as kindness, warmth, and/or honesty.

Merola and Pena discuss that when an avatar is treated by others in a particular way due to its appearance this can lead to operators modifying the behaviour of the avatar in line with what they consider to be the expectations of others. However their studies further suggest that this identity modification can take place due to the operators' own perception of the avatar even where third parties do not view the physicality of their avatar. Of customizable avatars such as those in SL they write that, just as clothing can affect not only the way in which we are perceived but also the way in which we act, "by altering the physical appearance of avatars, we can also expect to alter the way the user of the avatar thinks, behaves, and is received by others" (2010, p.8). Banakou and Chorianopoulos conducted research showing that when the same operators were controlling avatars with different skins, one attractive, the other not so, other people were almost twice as likely to respond to face to face communication from them and over six times as likely to initiate conversation. For the 'non-attractive avatar' they selected the SL default avatars so the figures could be attributed not to other operators being reluctant to speak with non-attractive avatars so much as their being reluctant to talk to those who they perceived as 'newbies' rather than a preference for attractive avatars. The experiment nevertheless shows the extent to which avatar appearance influences how others interact with it and the assumptions that

are made about other operators by interacting with their avatars. Guest quotes an SL resident, on encountering a short ugly avatar, as saying; "I'd assumed from his gnome like appearance he was an older man – there were few ugly people in SL and I'd assumed it took an older perspective to choose to be odd looking" (2008, p.83).

Sarup questions how one can discern whether self-creation is, for an individual, truly radical or an example of 'pseudo-individuality' a mere simulation of authenticity. He concludes that the main task when dissecting identity construction is "to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom and with what components" (1996, p.160). While there is a general consensus that, where conscious construction of avatar physicality has taken place, people tend to carefully choose the avatars to represent the identity characteristics they wish to express, Denise Doyle raises the question, "What if the representation of the avatar is completely different but to the person is closer to the way they see or experience themselves?" (2011, p.103).

Douglas Gayeton discusses the attraction of playing avatar animals or 'furries': "Historically people have always been attracted to the purity of the animal ideal; look at ancient Egypt and their animal gods or native Americans and their totem poles. Even Aesop's fables are totally anthropomorphic" (2007). Au writes that even with non-human avatars such as 'furries and otherkin' the impetus is often inspired by the person's sense of self. He quotes Relee Baysklef (an SL squirrel furry avatar designer) as speculating on a connection between such choices and real physicality to the extent that "dragons will often have scaly skin from eczema in real life" (2008, p.76). While there is no evidence put forward to support this it bears investigation into to what extent individuals might generate avatar physicality by turning negative attributes in the physical world into positive ones within Second Life. Boellstorff relates that "a few residents created embodiments that referenced their actual world disabilities" (2008,

p.136) and Winder cites case studies of SL residents who were wheelchair users in the actual world (2008, pp.41-44); the first chose to represent his avatar as a wheelchair user, quoted as saying "I have always been disabled and do not know how not to be" (2008, p.41). In contrast a second resident with the same disability chose not to use a wheelchair in SL based on the premise that his wheelchair did not define him, but was merely a tool.

Research by Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut (2006) further determined that an avatar's appearance can also change how people behave in virtual environments. They coined the term Proteus Effect to describe how "people infer their expected behaviours and attitudes from observing their avatar's appearance." An example of this phenomena is illustrated by their findings that "taller avatars would behave in a more confident manner and negotiate more aggressively than participants in shorter avatars" even though the others with whom the avatar was interacting were made unaware of the avatars height. They also found that more attractive avatars exhibited a greater degree of intimacy towards strangers and suggest that their results implied the design and implementation of avatars may have an effect on shaping the emergent social norms and interaction patterns within virtual communities. They go on to ask; "Do users who frequently use tall and attractive avatars become more confident and friendly in real life?" and speculate on how "the behavioural repertoire that is shaped by our digital avatars in virtual environments carries over into physical settings". They concluded that their findings suggested "that neither the virtual nor the physical self can ever truly be liberated from the other. What we learn in one body is shared with other bodies we inhabit, whether virtual of physical."

Lori Kendall (2002, p.19),in a study of text based virtual worlds, found that "online identities … are generally congruent with (participants) offline identities" and hypothesised that "social effects flow... mostly from cyberspace to the offline world rather than the other way

around" (2002, p.10). Aas, Meyerbröker and Emmelkamp (2010, pp.3-15) set out to measure the stability of personality-traits when entering a virtual reality. They compared measurements of five personality attributes: extraversion, friendliness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and development across 'real life' and 'Second Life.' Their research concluded that "high correlations of the personality traits" were evident between worlds. However they note the limitations of their own research including limitations of the categories themselves and particularly that most participants of the study were new to Second Life and may not therefore have had sufficient time to develop a 'virtual' personality, i.e. they were responding as their pre-existent selves, not as a developed avatar persona. They do not exclude the possibility that a normally introvert individual may develop a greater sociability in Second Life, but this would typically not emerge until they have spent an extended period becoming comfortable with the interface and environment. In the research undertaken by Bessière, Seay and Kiesler (2007) operators self-evaluated themselves and their avatars on these categories and rated their avatars less neurotic, more conscientious and more extraverted than themselves.

Whilst, as Kevin Miguel Sherman notes, "avatars are unavoidably imbued with the real life experiences of their creators" (2011, p.35) Boellstorff proposes that: "The avatar is a specific persona, and different identity, of the driver (and) has a different psychographic (with) different interests, different needs" (2008, p.66). A 2007 Second Life survey by Global Markets found that 11% of residents had an avatar with a different political orientation. Winder writes; "We separate ourselves from responsibility for our avatar actions and indulge ourselves in the act of disassociative anonymity, whereby online fiction and off line fact never meet... The hidden aspects of personality bubble to the surface and reveal the person we really want to be, the

person we truly are" (2008, p.236) and quotes a case study in which an operator stated; "My real life identity is a façade and my internet identity is truer to who I actually am" (2008, p.25).

John Suler suggests that a digitally constructed identity may result in the hidden aspects of an operator's personality emerging through the avatar:

> How we decide to present ourselves in cyberspace isn't always a purely conscious choice. Some aspects of identity are hidden below the surface. Covert wishes and inclinations leak out... A person selects a username or avatar on a whim, because it appeals to him, without fully understanding the deeper symbolic meanings of that choice... Like masks of any kind, avatars hide and reveal at the same time. Behind it, people can conceal some personal things about themselves, but the av also selectively amplifies other aspects of their personalities. It may reveal something about the member that otherwise is not immediately obvious - maybe not even obvious if you met that person in real life. Maybe not even obvious to the owners themselves (2002, pp.455-460).

Boellstorff (2008) discusses the use of names in the construction of an avatar identity and relates the importance of the name we use to represent ourselves on screen to our modern notion of selfhood. Messinger et al (2008, pp.1-17) question how people choose their avatars' names and to what extent choosing a name supports self-verification (when avatar names are borrowed from real names or nicknames) or self-enhancement (when avatar names have positive connotations)? Corey Anton quotes Thayer (1997, p.109) that "to name something is to imagine where it goes when it is not in sight" (2001, p.50) whilst Childs (2011, p.23) posits naming as a factor in creating a persistent identity.

2.1.3 Self and Society

Immanuel Kant marked a change in the perception of an identity constructed as stable and singular, writing of the "many-coloured and various" selves which we use to represent ourselves. For Kant however, whilst the representations were multiple, the self-maintained its unity; he expands his discourse to state:

> These representations given in intuition belong all of them to me," is accordingly just the same as, "I unite them in one self-consciousness, or can at least so unite them"; ... for the reason alone that I can comprehend the variety of my representations in one consciousness, do I call them my representations, for otherwise I must have as many-coloured and various a self as are the representations of which I am conscious. (1787, p.112)

Kant's contemporary Giambattisto Vico was amongst the first to argue that whilst our thinking is necessarily a matter of personal choice, it is always rooted in a cultural context. Building upon both of these concepts, William James went on to discuss the idea of the role of social interaction in the construction of the self and suggested that an individual "has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups "but, still maintaining the notion of the unity of consciousness of a singular self, discusses how these social representations still share "the bare principle of personal Unity" (1890, pp.292-310).

He writes of different possible selves from which individuals choose:

> I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest... Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life

be alike possible to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal (1890, pp.292-310).

George Herbert Mead further addressed the role of society in shaping the self in Mind, Self and Society in which he wrote: "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process... After a self has arisen, it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences, and so we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self. But it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience" (1934, p.135). However for Mead, like his predecessors, the individual's agency to reflect upon one's own nature remains the defining factor of self: "The pre-reflective world is a world in which the self is absent" (1934, p.135). Mead further introduced the concept of two components of the self which he referred to as the "me" and the "I", writing:

The 'I' is the response to the attitudes of the others; the "novel reply" of the individual. The 'me' is the organized set of attitudes which an individual assumes...a conventional, habitual individual... the "I" and the "me" exist in dynamic relation to one another. The human personality (or self) arises in a social situation (1934, p.214).

Sarup writes that "Identity is a mediating concept between the external and the internal, the individual and society, theory and practice" (1996, p.28). To attempt to clarify the role of the

relationship of self with the interplay between social structure and individual agency, that is to say how much of who we are is determined by external forces and how much it is shaped in accordance with our authentic self-concept, Appiah writes of the roles both have to play: "If we are authors of ourselves, it is state and society that provide us with the tools and contexts of our authorship... An identity is always articulated through concepts and practices, made available to you by religion, society, school and state, and mediated by family, peers, friends" (2007, p.156).

Mead distinguishes between and specifically comments upon the relationship of self and others; "when taking the attitude of the other becomes an essential part in his behaviour - then the individual appears in his own experience as a self; and until this happens he does not appear as a self" (1934, p.135). Martin Heidegger later wrote extensively on the subject of the individual's relationship with the Other but instead of referring to self, soul or consciousness Heidegger centred his enquires around the concept of Dasein. In 'Heidegger and Being and Time' Stephen Mulhall refers to Dasein as existing "in the sense that the continued living of its life, as well as the form that its life will take, is something with which it must concern itself... the being who inquires into the Being of all beings" (2013, p.15). He continues; "Dasein's capacity to lose or find itself as an individual always determines, and is determined by, the way in which Dasein understands and conducts its relations with Others" (2013, p.66).

Heidegger examines the relationship that the Dasein has with Others:

'Others' does not mean everybody else but me - those *from* whom I distinguish myself. They are, rather, those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too... The entity which is 'other' has itself the same kind of Being as Dasein (1962, p.111).

Interaction with this Other can be demonstrated to impact upon the individual; Laplanche & Pontalis describe the act of identification as "the psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partly" (1973, pp. 205 - 208) and Sarup discusses the concepts of introjection (transposing objects and their qualities from the outside to the inside of oneself) and projection (where the subject refuses to recognise qualities in oneself, instead projecting them, often as unfavourable traits, onto others) (1996, p.33).

Childs defines "two main subdivisions to a role or social identity, which are; Those that conform or represent affiliation to the role or group and; Those personal aspects of identity with which the person individuates him or herself from that group" (2011, p.15). Kendall emphasises the role of Other within the formation of such group identities: "the political nature of identity including its exclusionary (we're not like them) and normative (people in our group never do X) aspects" 2002, p.138). Veerapen (2011) writes how, not just the perception and reaction of the Other within Second Life, but the act of considering how one is perceived by these Others results in modification of inworld behaviour:

> I have become what the Other sees. When all the Other sees is an avatar, which can never become the sum of its user, the latter is altered and 'becomes' during the period of interaction with the Other his/her avatar, thereby temporarily modifying the user's pre-virtual world experience identity during the inworld experience (2011, p. 99).

Guest (2010) describes virtual worlds as a "solution to that tension between self and other, a way to come together when we felt so alone. In virtual worlds we could come together but also keep each other at a safe distance." Rune Klevjer goes further to reject theories that we

identify with our avatars at all; "We do not identify with the avatar; we generally 'identify' with other people's actions, not with our own" (2007, p.90).

Winder quotes Howard Rheingold (1994) as saying "we see ourselves in terms of the groups we belong to" (2008, p.226) and Boellstorff too recognises the role that communities play in the development of our virtual identities quoting Ihde (2002, p.xi) that "embodiment can be physical but 'we are also bodies in a social and cultural sense'" (2008, p.135). Verhulsdonck & Morie describe avatars as "powerful social constructs that affect us both psychologically and physically" and predict that as "virtual worlds mature, our avatars will play an increasingly important role in representing our identity to others" (2009, p.7). Similarly William C. Hill wrote that "all representational media influence their users' thoughts, and because representational media are typically shared, these influences are usually social" (1989, p.32). He defines such "co-representing communities" as "any group in a process of agreeing how to consider the world by refining and exchanging shared representations" and writes that the new paradigms created "exert new types of force in our social worlds."

Meadows quotes Nick Yee's findings that 40 percent of men and 53 percent of women who spend time in virtual worlds said their virtual friends were equal or better to their real life friends. He asserts that shared experiences create a sense of reality and goes so far as to propose that "a shared virtual glass of wine above a shared virtual ocean with an avatar is as important to us, psychologically and socially, as a real glass of wine on a real cliff with a real friend" (2008, p.51). Salazar (2009) writes of important specific social experiences within virtual worlds as Identity Liminal Events on which the constitutive elements of social identity can be observed.

The interactionist theories such as those of Peter Stets, Jan Burke and Sheldon Stryker focus on how identity is expressed as a response to social interaction. Stets & Burke write of the relationship between self, identities and society and how identities are expressed in and through interaction:

> The self emerges in and is reflective of society, the sociological approach to understanding the self and its parts (identities) means that we must also understand the society in which the self is acting, and keep in mind that the self is always acting in a social context in which other selves exist... The self-concept includes not only our idealized views of who we are that are relatively unchanging, but also our self-image or working copy of our self-views that we import into situations and that is subject to constant change and revision based on situational influences. It is this self-image that guides moment-to-moment interaction, is changed in situated negotiation, and may act back on the more fundamental self-views. (2003, pp 128-152).

Turner writes that Stryker posits identity as a:

> ... critical link between the individual and social structure because identities are designations that people make about themselves in relation to their location in social structures and the roles that they play by virtue of this location. Identities are organized into a salience hierarchy, and those identities high in the hierarchy are more likely to be evoked than those lower in this hierarchy. (2013, pp.332-337)

Appiah notes of how "an identity's basic norms might be in conflict with one another" (2007, p.181) while, in a similar vein, Judith Butler writes of how individuals take on different roles, often conflicting and simultaneously in response to a variety of different demands but that

doing so does not adversely affect the coherence of the expression of identity; "Coherence and continuity of the person are not logical or analytical features of personhood but rather socially instituted and maintained norms of ineligibility" (1990, p.199).

Boostrom (2008) writes of the natural desire to fit into virtual society and Lakshmi Goel and Iris Junglas (2009) concur, writing of the need of individuals to present a self that is approvable to society and the social worlds they belong to. They go on to discuss how, in virtual worlds, doing so is unhampered by 'age status, gender or the stereotypical notions they face in real life,' however anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that the appearance, behaviour and social interaction of an avatar can lead to such stereotyping by others within a shared virtual environment. Guest (2008) relates the anecdote of Simon, a resident of a virtual Big Brother household, who is quoted as describing himself as "a clean gay disabled man in a house of whores" a statement seemingly reflecting Simon's actual world view of himself and his in-world perception of the other resident-avatars. It may be observed therefore that, unlike in virtual game worlds where social conventions are derived from the rules of the game, expectations of behaviour within non-ludic social virtual worlds are often transplanted directly from those within the actual world and, as Boellstorff observes social conventions "from landscape to embodiment, drew upon cultural logics from actual world" (2008, p.125).

Within Second Life, houses have bedrooms, kitchens, even toilets, that are of little use to the avatar, but serve to familiarise the world for them to inhabit. Au (2008, p.57) quotes Philip Rosedale as saying "Why would you build bathrooms and dining rooms?" and continues "But that kind of artificial realism was the preference of the majority (and still is)." Jean Baudrillard had predicted a similar scenario in Simulacra and Simulation: "It is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real. The process will,

rather, be the opposite: it will be to put decentred situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction" (1994, p.124). Yee, Ellis & Ducheneaut (2009) conducted research into why virtual environments emulate the physical human experience citing among the reasons, operators expectations of avatars to have human embodiment and to move about and do things the way that people do things in the physical world.

It may be speculated that the structure of virtual worlds such as Second Life is designed not to facilitate the expression of truly mutable identities but simply to provide a resituating of existing identity disembodied by cyberspace, allowing us to re-embody our selves in this safe reproduction of the physical world. Consideration may also be given to the effect of the individual's relationship with the construction of the virtual environment (rather than, or as an adjunct to, their social environment) on the identity expressed by or through the avatar. Appiah quotes George Saunders on the subject of 'fluid nations' dependent not on "geographical contiguity but on values, loyalties and/or habitual patterns of behaviour" (2007, p.237) while Sarup cites Kai Erikson's writings that the boundaries of a place, rather than being geographic, are only marked by the behaviour of its participants and goes onto write that "We apprehend identity not in the abstract, but always in relation to a given place and time… there is a continued smudging of personas and lifestyles depending where we are (at work, on the high street) and the spaces we are moving between" (1996, pp.14-27).

Peter Ackroyd, (quoted by Merlin Coverley, 2010) writing of the psychogeography of London, observed that "it has become clear that certain activities seem to belong to certain areas" and describes how these areas "go some way to defining individual character and identity; … it seems possible to me that a street or dwelling can materially affect the character and behaviour

of people who live within them". Doyle (2007), through avatar Wanderingfictions Story showed how this psychogeographic tradition might be carried into Second Life by going in search of a virtual India and, she writes, in doing so "comparisons were made between the early travelers exploring and discovering new lands... but India itself, with its jasmine and gupshop is not so easily found." (2011, pp.106-108).

Michael Foucault, describing utopias as fundamentally unreal spaces that present society in a perfected form, coined the term heterotopias to describe places which exist but do so outside everyday social and institutional space as an "effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1997, pp.300-336). He goes on to give examples including boarding schools, rest homes, psychiatric hospitals and prisons, cemeteries, museums and libraries and it may be observed that social virtual worlds such as Second Life seem too to fulfil the criteria he sets out. Marietta Rossetto describes such heterotopias as potential spaces "for reconstituting the self, rewriting the scripts of identity and placing the self within a context" (2006, p.446).

T.L.Taylor discusses frequent reports of operators feeling that there is something about using an avatar that lies outside of their control or that an avatar has some independence apart from them:

> It strikes me that these comments touch upon a phenomenon equally common in offline life. We exist in social and cultural contexts that often have profound effects on our identities and bodies despite our intentions or wishes. It is this social production of self and body that I think users are tapping into when they discuss avatar autonomy... Through action, communication, and being in relation to others, users come to find

themselves "there". It is through placing one's avatar in the social setting, having a self mirrored, as well as mirroring back, that one's presence becomes grounded. Identities and bodies are not constructed in a vacuum but are given meaning, as well as supported or challenged, in social contexts. (2002, pp.40-62)

2.1.4 Continuity of Self and the Creation of an Identity Narrative

Kant followed the notion of a single unified self prevalent among his contemporaries and examined its continuity over time, hypothesising the persistence of 'numerically identical self' through a series of successive states, writing that:

Anything that is conscious of the numerical identity of itself at different times, i.e. of being the very same individual thing at different times, is to that extent a person... I relate each of my successive states to the numerically identical self in all time. . . in my own consciousness, therefore, identity of person is unfailingly met with.

He continues, discussing an alternative viewpoint:

But if I view myself from the standpoint of someone else (as an object of his outer intuition)... this observer... won't infer from this that I am something objectively permanent. It could be that one thinking subject is replaced by another, that by a third, and so on, while the same-sounding I is used all through, because each outgoing thinking subject hands over its state to its immediate successor. (1781, p.363)

William Godwin, a contemporary of Kant, viewed an individual's qualities as acquired from without and changing over time and compared ideas being to the mind as atoms are to the body:

The whole mass is in a perpetual flux; nothing is stable and permanent; after the lapse of a given period not a single particle probably remains the same. Who knows not that in the course of a human life the character of the individual frequently undergoes two or three revolutions of its fundamental stamina? (1798).

David Hume follows a similar line of reasoning which leads him to seemingly reject the notion of a unified Self. Moving away also from the idea of deliberate self-authoring of identity Hume ascribes passions or emotions, which are responses to the world, as a factor in the makeup of personal identity.

If the idea of self came from an impression, it would have to be an impression that remained invariably the same throughout our lives, because the self is supposed to exist in that way. But no impression is constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations follow one other and never all exist at the same time. So it can't be from any of these impressions or from any other that the idea of self is derived... When I am without perceptions for a while, as in sound sleep, for that period I am not aware of myself and can truly be said not to exist.... each of us is nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions that follow each other enormously quickly and are in a perpetual flux and movement... we only feel a connection or a determination of the thought, to pass from one object to another. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone

finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind, the ideas of them are felt to be connected together... our notions of personal identity must proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted movement of thought along a sequence of connected ideas... we only feel a connection in our mind when our thought is compelled to pass from one object to another. It follows, then, that personal identity is merely felt by our thought; this happens when our thought reflects on the sequence of past perceptions that compose a mind. (1739, pp. 132-140)

However in his Appendix he tries to reconcile these ideas to incorporate the notion of unified self:

> When I look in on myself, I can never perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive anything but the perceptions. It is a complex of these perceptions, therefore, that constitutes the self.

In support of the notion of a unified and persisting Self, Thomas Reid proposed a thought experiment to refute the view that continuity of consciousness, as demonstrated by the memory of past actions, correlates to continuity of the self, in which an Officer was conscious of a particular experience as a boy, and a General conscious of his experience as that same Officer but no longer recalled the experience as a boy. Reid enquired as to whether the general was the same person as the boy and argued:

> My thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment -they have no continued, but a successive existence; but that Self of I to which they belong is

permanent, and has the same relation to all the succeeding thoughts, actions, and feelings, which I call mine. (1785, p.203)

Tittle further comments upon a thought experiment by Bernard Williams (1957) which examines a scenario in which a person, Charles, loses the memory of his actions, but recalls accurately those of a different person, Guy Fawkes. Williams concludes that, regardless of this, it could not be said that Charles has become Guy Fawkes. Tittle argues that Williams therefore supports the claim that 'bodily identity is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of personal identity' (2005, pp.76-77).

Henri Bergson presented a new perspective on the relationship of memory and the continuity of the self:

> Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act sui generis by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a certain region of the past - a work of adjustment like the focusing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual… (1991, pp. 33-34).

He expanded upon the role of memory in moderating perception to present actual and virtual aspects of our existence to us:

> Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting, for the present moment, always going forward, fleeting limit between the immediate past which

is now no more and the immediate future which is not yet, would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory (1920, p.165)

Of these concepts Gilles Deleuze wrote:

We have great difficulty in understanding a survival of the past in itself because we believe that the past is no longer, that it has ceased to be. We have thus confused Being with being-present. Nevertheless, the present is not; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside itself. It is not, but it acts. Its proper element is not being, but the active or the useful. The past on the other hand has ceased to act or to be useful. But it has not ceased to be. Useless and inactive, impassive, it IS, in the full sense of the word; it is identical with being in itself (1991, p.55).

Kilpatrick (1941) writes that the sense of continuity of the self is a key stage in the development of a child's perception of Selfhood whilst Anthony Giddens attaches a particular importance of a continuing narrative in shaping identity; "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor … in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going ... It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self." (1991, p.54). It is of exactly this kind of integration which Jurgens Habermas discusses when he writes of the "ability of the adult to construct new identities in conflict situations and to bring these into harmony with older superseded identities so as to organize himself and his interactions … into a unique life history." (1974, pp.90–91). Alasdair MacIntyre added the notion that in constructing identity by means of a life narrative an individual must necessarily take responsibility for all past and future acts, going so far as to say

that "all attempts to elucidate the notion of personal identity independently of and in isolation from the notions of narrative, intelligibility and accountability are bound to fail." (1981, p.218)

Writing on virtual worlds Winder writes that we should "think of a personality as being the sum of its parts; behavioural, temperamental, emotional and mental. One's personality can change from day to day… whereas an identity is the distinct personality that remains as a persisting entity" (2008, p.xi). Boellstorff writes of our expectations of a narrative to the existence of our avatars: "One way cultures construct selfhood is by placing the self on a temporal trajectory or life course" (2010, p.122) and quotes Charlotte Linde in referring to a 'coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story' (1993, p.3). For an avatar to be used to exhibit a consistent identity a narrative must be imposed upon it, either within the virtual world, e.g. that of a pre-defined role, or a narrative 'back-story' devised by the operator, or the actual world narrative of the operator themselves. In traditional game worlds the avatars normally assume the narrative of a pre-defined role. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2009) write of games such as World of Warcraft: "The situation is determinative insofar as one's identity is defined and constrained by the 'rules of the game' or the structure of the world." Social non-ludic virtual worlds such as Second Life offer a much less constraining structure within which individuals can impose their avatar identity narrative.

Rune Klevjer discusses how such performances of identity within virtual worlds are impacted on by the imposition of narrative:

The primary function of character has to do with narrative; when we play with characters, we play with a story... Through the avatar, instrumental agency is replaced with fictional agency and fictional destiny; the player is incarnated as a fictional body-

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subject who belongs to and is exposed to the environment that it inhabits. (2007, pp.116-130)

This description of a 'fictional body-subject who belongs to and is exposed to the environment that it inhabits' may be compared to Johan Huizinga's theory of the Magic circle which posits play as an act separate from everyday activity: "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. (Huizinga 1955, p.12). However those in opposition to the application of Huizinga's theory to virtual worlds argue that this does not take into account the fact that experiences within virtual worlds "are very much part and parcel of our mundane, everyday reality." (Calleja, 2015, p.213)

Papargyris and Poulymenakou (2009) refer to the collective formation of significantly critical narratives through which the process of negotiation of meaning, collective and individual identity is constructed. Appiah (2007, p.22) discusses how collective group identities provide narratives that individuals can use in shaping their personal identity; "Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories."

2.1.5 The Self as Embodied Experience

Discussing Bergson's distinction between actual and virtual Keith Ansell-Pearson writes: "the present comes from the consciousness of my body; actual sensations occupy definite portions of the surface of my body" (2010, p.70). The writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenologist contemporary of Sartre, emphasised this role of the body in human experience:

I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises towards the world (2002, p.87)... Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. (2002, p.475)

Applying this to the experience of virtual worlds may at first seem to suggest that the authentic experience would be that of the operator's interaction with the hardware rather than that which they experience through the avatar. In referring to the body however, Merleau-Ponty does not refer merely to the physical body, but rather to the subjective experience of body. Of the physical makeup and operation of the body he writes "I cannot gain a removed knowledge of it. In so far as I can guess what it may be, it is by abandoning the body as an object... and by going back to the body which I experience at this moment" (2002. p87). Anton writes "embodiment refers not to our material tangible bodies, but rather, to the fact that I always already am in-the-world… As it is lived through, my body is always outside and past its fleshy boundaries… To be a body then, is to be outside one's flesh" (2001, p.14). Researching the experience of the body in virtual worlds Vicdan and Ulusoy write that "the focus becomes more of 'body as experience' ...through the enabling of consumers to playfully engage in symbolic avatar creation and experience different bodily selves" (2008, p.10).

Sydney Shoemaker (1963) proposed a thought experiment similar to that of Locke in which, when the brain of Mr. Brown is put into the body of Mr. Robinson, the resultant combination of the two, referred to as 'Brownson' identifies himself as Brown and behaves in

accord with Brown's identity. Peg Tittle suggests that Shoemaker claims that we are not using the body as our criterion for identity and that one's self is somehow separate from one's body. She notes "that we say 'I have a body' rather than 'I am a body' which suggests that one's self is somehow separate from one's body" (2005, p.79) as well as one's thoughts, actions, and feelings. If we consider how this experiment might be applied to an operator's relationship with their avatar, following this logic might lead to the conclusion that, if the body is not a criterion for identity, the operator's selfhood may reside within or as a part of the avatar they control. However, examining Shoemaker's experiment in light of the identity theories of his contemporaries, the conclusion drawn can be seen to be flawed in so far as it refers only to the physical body, not to the phenomenological subjective body as experienced. The body experienced by Brownson (that of Robinson) is likely to be subjectively very different from that of Brown. Tittle goes on to consider the 'causal relationship' of the body to identity, that is to say, in Shoemaker's Brownson experiment, the effect it would have had on Brown's identity had Robinson's body, in which Brown's brain had been placed, been of a different ethnicity or sex to that of Brown's original body. Avatars can, of course, go some way in enabling operators to experience the phenomena of presenting others with a very different self appearance to that of the operator's actual physical attributes.

Edmund Husserl (1950, p.26) suggested that "anything worldly necessarily acquires all the sense determining it, along with its existential status, exclusively from my experiencing, by objectivating, thinking, valuing, or doing, at particular times." He refers to his experience of the object-as-perceived as the noema or noematic experience. Accordingly, different experiences of the same object or person will have different noemas. The noema is therefore subjective and moderated by the viewer, rooted in the cultural context in which it exists, and the noema of an

individual expressed by an avatar to another avatar with a virtual environment will be very different from that of an interaction between the operators in the physical world. If Shoemaker's Brownson experiment is analyzed in light of Husserl's noema, even if Brownson's identification of himself with Brown remains constant, such identification is only Brown's own noematic sense of the experience. Those meeting Brownson would initially have the noematic experience of meeting not with Brown, but with Robinson. Shoemaker himself writes (2003, p.65): "The experiences are co-conscious … by virtue of the fact that they are components of a single state of consciousness."

Erich Fromm (1976), exploring the differences between to have and to be, noted the change over time in the language we use to refer to ourselves which can be seen to correspond to the increasing popularity of the modernist separation of the 'essential' self, and the Self that is capable of working upon it; "Some decades ago, instead of "I have a problem," a patient probably would have said, "I am troubled"; that there also exists a being relationship to one's body that experiences the body as alive, and that can be expressed by saying "I am my body," rather than "I have my body" (1976, pp. 19-20). "Being" in its etymological root is thus more than a statement of identity between subject and attribute; it is more than a descriptive term for a phenomenon. It denotes the reality of existence of who or what is; it states his/her/its authenticity and truth. Stating that somebody or something is refers to the person's or the thing's essence, not to his/her/its appearance. (1976, pp. 19-20). He goes on to write; "Having refers to things and things are fixed and describable. Being ...is in principle not describable" (1976, p.71) although this may be seen to conflict with the earlier statement assigning the description of the patient as troubled to the state of 'being'.

Yaakov Rand added an additional mode, 'doing', which had previously been implicit within the 'being' mode as evidenced by Fromm's description of "the concept of process, activity, and movement as an element in being" (1993, p.21). Susanne Friese discusses the three concepts in relation to the perspectives of Sartre, Marx and Fromm:

> For Sartre, the most fundamental of the three modes is having. He believes that one can only know who one is by looking at what one has: "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (1943, p. 145). Marx's focus in contrast is on doing. He advocated that people could best actualise their selves by being involved in meaningful work... Fromm emphasized being. For him the only (desired) role of possessions is to facilitate being as a way to provide the means for personal growth and development. (n.d.)

Friese goes on to write that, "in a consumer society, objects (having) seem to be an important source of meaning with which we construct (doing) our lives (being)" (n.d.). The application of these terms to our relationship with avatars allows a distinction to be made between operators regarding an avatar as a third-party functional object (having), a constructed performance (doing) or directly representative of themselves (being). These categories may also be seen to be related to the categorisations made by Lukas Blinka (2008) discussing the relationships of players to their avatars in MMORPGs, "identification" in which the player perceives simply as a game mechanism, "immersion" in which there is a deeper interconnection of the player and the avatar and in which the player feels committed to what the avatar does in

the game and "compensation" in which a synergy is developed between operator and avatar wherein the abilities and limitations of each complement and compensate for those of the other.

Relating to the 'having' mode, Evans writes of how a Second Life operator, LQ, expressed their experience: "It's more like when I was little and playing with dolls. I would control the doll, the movement, how the doll acted, and the personality behind the doll were me, but I was not the doll" (2011, p.50). Cleland also utilises a doll analogy:

> Individuals also project aspects of their identity into and through their avatar creations enabling them to play out experimental identities and roles in much the same way as children act out stories by playing make believe characters or through projecting those characters onto dolls and other action figures. (2008, p.153)

Jacqueline Ford Morie however concerns herself more with the experience of the phenomena of Being within virtual worlds: "In a virtual environment, our self exists within a space that in itself does not exist, but that our senses readily believe is there. In our lifetimes, no greater change of Being has taken place than this duality of existence at our command." She writes of how virtual environments can become "a sacred, encompassing space, where mind transcends body even as it references the body, felt organism even in visual absence. This body, as felt phenomenon, is how we know the world" (Morie 2007, p.123-137).

Discussing embodiment within virtual worlds Frank Biocca wrote of three bodies, the physical, the virtual and the phenomenal and of oscillations in the sense of presence between them and of the conflict between what we perceive in the physical and virtual environments: "It appears that embodiment can significantly alter body schema. Metaphorically, we might say that

the virtual body competes with the physical body to influence the form of the phenomenal body"
(1997). He went on to ask "Where am 'I' present?" a question to which Sita Popat and Kelly
Preece (2012, pp.160-174) propose the answer "'1' am present wherever I have agency". Taylor
quotes A.R.Stone (1991) that virtual world residents "have learned to delegate their agency to
body-representatives that exist in an imaginal space contiguously with representatives of other
individuals" writing that "Users do not simply roam through the space as "mind", but find
themselves grounded in the practice of the body, and thus in the world…"(2002, pp.40-62).
Popat and Preece discuss the differing relationships with the avatar where firstly the interface
forms part of the embodied subject but the avatar remains an object, i.e. the attention is from the
body and interface to the avatar, and secondly where the avatar becomes part of the embodied
subject, i.e. the attention is from the body and interface and the avatar to the interaction within
the virtual world. They write of this paradigm that:

> … the avatar itself is a digital entity. My avatar is the digital entity infused with
> my agency, driven via the engine of my motor-activity at the interface.
> Crosscontamination at the hypersurface results in the avatar as the sum of human and
> technological features: a 'lived' posthuman body, part flesh, part technology, located
> simultaneously in two remote sites. The flow of information and feedback between body
> and avatar through the umbilical cord of the interface means that neither is fully physical
> and neither is entirely virtual, since the embodied agent spans the two subjects (Popat &
> Preece, 2012, p.173).

Boellstorff writes of the experience of immersed engagement between operator and
avatar within Second Life: "Through avatars users embody themselves and make real their

engagement with the virtual world" (2008, p.149). Of embodiment, Norberto Nuno Gomes de Andrade clarifies that "what is meant by the embodiment of personality is the appropriation of external objects such as they 'cease to be external' to the appropriator and "become a sort of extension of the man's organs, the constant apparatus through which he gives reality to his ideas and wishes" (2009, p.43).

If agency is delegated to the 'body-representative' avatar within the virtual space, and consequently the avatar actions directed by its response to other avatars and the virtual environment in which it exists, rather than the avatar being viewed as an extension it might be postulated that the operator's actual world body is the extension technology allowing the embodied avatar-self to operate by means of its interface with the computer hardware.

Elizabeth Burgess quotes Poulet (1980, p.45) whose comments, while originally referring to reading, can be applied to immersion in virtual worlds; "When I am absorbed ... a second self takes over, a self which thinks and feels for me…I am a consciousness astonished by an existence which is not mine, but which I experience as though it were mine" (2011, p.65). Cleland writes how the experience of "simultaneously feeling ourselves in our bodies and seeing ourselves exteriorised as image generates an oscillation between the experience of self as self and self as other" (2010, pp. 74-101). Anne-Marie Schleiner writes that the players identity "emerges from the reflective connectivity of the player's identification with the avatar's movements" (2001) whilst Veerapen coins the term' symbembodiment' to discuss how the distinction between actual and virtual world embodiment can begin to collapse and argues that, whilst immersed in virtual worlds:

the (actual world) body is still active and engaged when the user is inworld, albeit

in a different manner from what we are familiar with in the physical world. My whole

body reacts to the events I live out in Second Life by, for example, feeling downhearted

or elated as a result of something that happened inworld. In doing so, the body once again

acts as grounding during the inworld experience. (2011, p.83)

Doyle concurs that a "virtual world is a mixed experience of the sense of presence and absence, a

mix of objective looking and a subjective sense of being which suggests a more complex set of

relationships" (2011, p.105).

Marshall McLuhan suggested that cars may be viewed as an 'Extension of Man' and that

"the car has become the carapace, the protective and aggressive shell, of urban and suburban

man" (1964, p.244). Deborah Lupton studied this phenomena further and wrote of how a woman

involved in an incident as a victim of road rage had described the incident in a way which

invested "both the car and its driver with agency." She writes that; "...the hybrid form of our

body/self that results when a human is driving a motor vehicle. Many of our engagements with

machines challenge notions of the accepted dichotomy between human and non-human, between

self and other" (1999, pp. 57-72).

Contemporary writers have extended this analogy to virtual worlds. Meadows writes

"Avatars are like cars, another example of a prosthetic technology that is changing us… (they)

teleport our psyche" (2008, p.92) whilst Guest too refers to virtual worlds as becoming "an

instinctive extension of the self" (2008, p.68) and quotes John Lester as drawing an analogy

between virtual worlds and cars: "Just as you would say "he nearly hit me" rather than "he drove

his car and (it) nearly hit the car I was driving." In virtual worlds, like in your car you are not looking at your avatar; you become your avatar." Rune Klevjer refers to an avatar as "a prosthetic extension of agency and perception, not an independent agent" (2006, pp. 92-94). He compares the mediating experience of the avatar with that of "the body of a competent (football) player (which) becomes one with its environment" in so far as "the avatar should be understood as a prosthetic extension of the body-in-the-world." He writes of the "properties and capabilities that make the avatar and the gameworld playable" and of how it is " recognised as an agent in the fictional world" (2006, p. 152) but warns that "the more an avatar takes on behaviours that reflect either its own agency or which emerge as passive responses to forces and agents in the environment, the less it functions as a prosthesis to the body-subject, and the more its status as an avatar is being weakened" (2006, pp. 92-94).

Wertheim wrote of how virtual worlds altered the modernist paradigm of identity construction: "Citizens of the Internet are not bound to the bodily confines that have over human existence been the source for identity construction - rather, they are able to construct their lives… with the mind valued over physical characteristics of the body" (1999 quoted by Parkin 2010). The mind, described by Descartes as a "thinking and unextended thing" has not only become extended by technology, but Guest quotes Philip Rosedale that the body itself is simply "an extended aspect of your mind" (2008, p.254).

Castronova discusses the stages of immersion within virtual worlds. He identifies that in virtual worlds, operators do not refer to 'my avatar's property' but rather as 'my property' and writes of the three events that occur as an operator becomes immersed into virtual worlds –

- avatars attributes felt like they are your own personal attributes… because an avatar is just an extension of your body into a new space.

- the acquisition of a real emotional investment in an event in the virtual world.

- the recognition that currency and labour in a virtual world can be valued in the same way that they can in our daily lives.

(2005, p.45)

Au describes operators as having a "visceral empathy" (2008, p.57) with their avatars and a number of writers have documented the immersive transition into virtual worlds; Meadows writes of his own experience, "The line between the virtual and the real was getting thinner by the week" (2008, p.49) whilst Guest writes "I had forgotten myself… I had become what I saw" (2008, p.22) and quotes another resident as saying "gradually I felt as if I was in that world. At one point I completely forgot it was a virtual world" (2008, p.341). To describe the blurring of boundaries that occurs between operator and avatar when performance becomes immersion Cleland (2008, p.4) references Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919) as referring to life-like dolls, mirror images and similar phenomena as creating areas of "boundary confusion."

Writing of computer games Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer discuss the specific relation between the operator and the character played. "Players do not perceive the game's (main) character as a social entity distinct from themselves, but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist" (2009, p. 354). Taylor (2002) writes "some users have even come to identify their avatar as 'more them' than their corporeal body" and it is reasonable to surmise that this might be attributed to the Freudian notion of a cathect, i.e. the operator's emotional investment of energy in their avatar. Jeroen Jans asserts that "gamers themselves decide which

emotional situations they want to confront and which they would like to stay away from" (2015, p.272). Contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek discusses the disassociation between the actions and emotions of avatar and operator:

> When I construct a "false" image that stands for me in a virtual community (in sexual games, for example, a shy man often assumes the screen persona of an attractive, promiscuous woman), the emotions I feel and "feign" as part of my screen persona are not simply false: although (what I experience as) my "true self" does not feel them, they are nonetheless in a sense "true"… my most intimate feelings can be radically externalized; I can literally "laugh and cry through another. (1998)

Writers document the impact that virtual world events can have upon the operator in the actual world; Boellstorff recalls how one resident spent "several minutes looking for a favourite shirt (in the actual world) … before remembering that the shirt he had in mind was located only in Second Life" (2008, p.246) whilst Meadows tells of an occasion when "I caught myself thinking at times I could affect objects in the same way as I was able to affect objects as my avatar" (2008, p.95). He goes on to describe the experience of accessing his avatar after it had been 'borrowed' by a TV company:

> I logged back on to find myself, as if after a virtual binge drinking blackout… with no memory of how I got there. After my laptop was stolen I suddenly realised that were the burglar to start up SL my automatically saved password would allow them to walk in my virtual shoes (2008, p.128).

He relates the actual world impact of an instance where Second Life slave traders 'crossed boundary' to digitally harass the avatars operator: "People are prepared for theatre as theory. They are not prepared to…be affected in their lives" (2008, pp.100-101). Winder discusses acts of violence in the virtual world with unexpected impacts upon the actual world operator:

> When you remove all the physical properties of the relationship bar the image in front of you then that image becomes everything, it becomes the embodiment of who you are. Violate the image, abuse the avatar and you are also violating its creator (2008, p.155).

2.1.6 Performance of the Self

Manual Castells discusses the subject of collective or group identities and how these influence the performance of self; "while identities can be originated from dominant institutions they only become identities when the 'actors' internalize them and construct meaning around them" (2010, p.7). Erving Goffman (1956) suggests that all social actions are mediated not only through others but through one's own performance to those others. Kendall discusses how a user of one MUD invited her to join him on a different MUD where his behaviour differed considerably, which she cites as an example of Goffman's notions in practice within the text based virtual worlds she examined: "We tend to present differing messages and perform different identities depending on the audience" (2002, p.125). As Goffman pointed out, the intended identity portrayed by the performer is not necessarily the same as the perception of the performance by others; "the observer's need to rely on representations of things itself creates the possibility of misrepresentation" (1956, p.155). Goffman was concerned not only with the

perception of the performance by others, but with the impact of the performance on the performer's perception of their own identity:

> There is the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show 'for the benefit of other people.' It will be convenient to begin a consideration of performances by turning the question around and looking at the individual's own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself. At one extreme, we find that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality... In the end our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. (1956, pp.10-12)

Randal Walser (1990) quoted by Cleland compares performance in the actual world to performance in virtual spaces:

> By giving his body over to a character, an actor enters a character's reality, and he can be said to embody (that is, provide a body for) the character… An actor in cyberspace is no different, except that the body she gives to her character is not her physical body, but rather her virtual one. She embodies the character but she, personally, is embodied by cyberspace. (2008, p161)

Detailing the findings of the Rhizome project researching into digital identity, Steven Warburton writes of performed identity within virtual worlds:

The digital spaces we inhabit are performative extensions to our real world activities and similarly our digital identity is not separate from what we understand as "identity". Metaphors provide a way of conveying personal understandings of digital identity. For some this is via the 'image': 'it is my identity, thus my image, which is computer or IT mediated' and for others digital identity acts as a 'bridge' between digital and non-digital spaces: 'it is a bridge between virtual identities that exist only inside computers and things in the real world', or like a 'mirror' digital identity was represented as 'the reflection of you in the mirror, in this case in the digital mirror, is not you complete, but definitely it is you' (2010, p.10).

Marcel Mauss (1997, pp.1-25) relates how members of tribal cultures could assume the personification of an ancestor by wearing their paraphernalia, robes, mask, etc, in a similar way costume and props may assist actors in taking on roles. Discussing videogames Quaranta refers to avatars as "the mask I have constructed to interface with the environment (be it real or virtual) that I inhabit" (2007, p.6). It may therefore be seen to follow that the design and use of one or several avatar physicalities may assist an operator in expressing a desired identity, or assuming the different desirable identity traits that they connect to this avatar physicality.

Boellstorff quotes a SL resident as saying; "people behave a little differently in their online personas than for real... online activity is roleplay in every sense…because people just suppress certain aspects of their personalities and accentuate others." He quotes a resident as saying that the gap between virtual and actual "allows you to define your own role" and reflects that "the actual world is more characterised by role playing than virtual worlds where one's self is open to greater self-fashioning." (2008, pp.119-120). Winder writes that "all the things that we

have been but also what we want to be… We automatically select what is appropriate to a particular relationship" (2008, p.199) whilst Au recommends "If you want to know who you really are, try a role that is decidedly not you" (2008, p.78) and offers an interesting quote from Philip Rosedale/Linden on assumptions made when avatars differ from the norm: "If you saw somebody and they were an eight foot Gundam robot you knew that was a costume and inside there was someone who looked just like you." Rosedale's comment seems to suggest that there is an inherent normative identity to standard humanoid avatars which evolves into a performance if such avatars are 'costumed.' The statement seems to completely bypass discussions that the standard humanoid avatar might itself be seen as both costume and performance. Though Dean Takahashi (2004) quotes Vonnegut: "we are who we pretend to be, so we must be very careful about who we pretend to be", the truth is not always so simple.

2.1.7 Multiplicity of the Self

Sarup discusses how, in contemporary society, the presentation of different self images is possible, even desirable; "Personal identities are far more complex and shifting than is usually thought… people have multiple, apparently contradictory, identities at any one time" (1996, p.122-126.) He reminds us too, with a riddle, of the "diverse, heterogeneous and contradictory" way in which our identities may manifest in our everyday lives: "What do a trade unionist, a tory, a Christian, a wife beater and a consumer have in common? They can all be the same person" (1996, p.57). Levine wrote "Personal and social identities can be understood as second-order reflections on the first-order reflective experiences called self-concepts... social and personal identity constructs "make sense of" or "organize" a variety of self-concepts that "seem"

to belong together" (2005, p.175-185). Žižek offers a different perspective of the multiple facets of identity which individuals may express:

> One should turn around the standard notion of ideology as providing the firm identification to its subjects, constraining them to their "social roles": what if, at a different — but no less irrevocable and structurally necessary — level, ideology is effective precisely by way of constructing a space of false disidentification, of false distance towards the actual coordinates of the subject's social existence? Is this logic of disidentification not discernible from the most elementary case of "I am not only an American (husband, worker, democrat, gay…), but, beneath all these roles and masks, a human being, a complex unique personality. (2009, p.203)

Postmodern schools of thought in the 20th century rejected the concept of the unified consciousness. Bergson writes of the concept of unity as simply a manner in which to associate a number of disparate elements and 'to reduce the self to an aggregate of conscious states: sensations, feelings, and ideas'. However he warns against confusing such individual states with the concept of self:

> …if he sees in these various states no more than is expressed in their name, if he retains only their impersonal aspect, he may set them side by side for ever without getting anything but a phantom self, the shadow of the ego projecting itself into space. If, on the contrary, he takes these psychic states with the particular colouring which they assume in the case of a definite person, and which comes to each of them by reflection from all the others, then there is no need to associate a number of conscious states in order to rebuild

the person, for the whole personality is in a single one of them, provided that we know how to choose it. (1910, pp.165-223)

He goes on to discuss the self as the author of its own expression of these states which are moderated by the consciousness's perception of them:

And the outward manifestation of this inner state will be just what is called a free act, since the self alone will have been the author of it, and since it will express the whole of the self... the mistake made by consciousness arises from the fact that it looks at the self, not directly, but by a kind of refraction through the forms which it has lent to external perception, and which the latter does not give back without having left its mark on them. (1910, pp.165-223).

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are responsible for introducing the concept of a multiplicity that "ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world. Multiplicities are rhizomatic... There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject" (2004, p.8).

Deleuze comments further on multiplicity:

Multiplicity remains completely indifferent to the traditional problems of the multiple and the one, and above all to the problem of a subject who would think through this multiplicity, give it conditions, account for its origins, and so on. There is neither one nor multiple, which would at all events entail having recourse to a consciousness that would be regulated by the one and developed by the other" (1986, p.14).

Many writers have heralded virtual worlds as exemplars of this postmodern multiplicity, i.e., a complex mutually interactive relationship between operator and avatar. Sherry Turkle,

writing on the topic of identity in early internet multi user environments, proposed that our behaviour in virtual worlds challenged ideas about a unitary self:

> each of us is a multiplicity of parts, fragments and desiring connections… (The) disjuncture between theory (the unitary self is an illusion) and lived experience (the unitary self is the most basic reality) is one of the main reasons why multiple and decentred theories have been slow to catch on…In computer mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid and constituted in interaction with machine connections... the "embodied" life we live on a day-to-day basis has no more reality than the role-playing games on the Internet … players can develop a way of thinking in which life is made up of many windows and RL (Real Life) is only one of them (1995, p.14).

Turkle raised questions about the identities individuals create to interact within virtual environments still relevant and largely unanswered today;

- What relation do these have to what we have traditionally thought of as the whole person?

- Are they experienced as an expanded self or as separate from the self?

- Are these virtual personae fragments of a coherent real life personality?

- Can the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self? (1995, p.180)

Meadows writes that "Avatars encourage a fracturing of psyche and personality" and allow us to "strip our different personas into individual threads" (2008, p.96) whilst Winder that "the traditional understanding of identity which says we have a single, overriding core

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personality that defines us as an individual is no longer valid…Underneath whatever multiple masks we wear in the virtual world, however many personas we construct, a new collaborative identity is built which ultimately reveals the real us." (2008, p.223). He compares operators to teenagers experimenting with different identities while Suler writes of deconstructing ourselves online; "Compartmentalizing or dissociating one's various online identities like this can be an efficient, focused way to manage the multiplicities of selfhood" (2002, pp. 455-460). Conversely Kenneth Gergen claims that because technologies saturate us with a multiplicity of personalities, we can never truly know ourselves:

> for everything we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision…the very conception of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all (1991, p.7).

Artist Jacqueline Ford Morie, who describes herself to have 'a closet full of avatars to match her multifaceted personality' (Doyle, 2008, p.12, 2011, p.100), logged on as two avatars simultaneously using two computers to confirm that people would treat the two avatars Chingaling & China Bling, imbued with the back narrative that they were sisters, as two separate operators. Morie suggests that the act of emplacing a body into an immersive environment signifies 'a shift to a dualistic existence in two simultaneous bodies' and claims that the lived body has 'bifurcated and become two' (Morie, 2007, p.123-137 quoted by Doyle, 2011, p.100), though perhaps Chingaling & China Bling demonstrate that the two may become three, or more.

A common practice within virtual worlds such as Second Life is the use of multiple or alternative avatars. Gilbert, Foss and Murphy (2011, p.215) cite a study by Ducheneaut, Wen,

Yee, & Wadley, (2009) as finding that on average Second Life residents have a total of three different avatars per account. An operator's original or main avatar is usually termed as the primary avatar whilst other avatars referred to as 'alts' (or alternative avatars).

Messinger et al (2008) question the reasons why people maintain multiple avatars; Are they cultivating multiple virtual selves, just as many people cultivate a "work self" and an "informal self" in real life? In some cases such 'alts' may have practical reasons, to allow the operator anonymity to work undisturbed by the acquaintances of the primary avatar or to test something their primary avatar has built. Others may use the relative anonymity of alts for more destructive purposes such as griefing (the process of taking actions to cause distress to others within your virtual environment). However, for many, alts are a relatively 'safe' method of alternative expressions of identity while allowing a primary avatar to maintain a stable expression of identity and, as noted by Edward Castronova (2006, p.p.32-33), to build stable reputations within the virtual worlds in which they reside. Boellstorff gives an example of a resident who did not want their actual self to be associated with their avatar who made a living as an escort but writes that "Alts were not seen as deceptive because most residents did not reveal their real life identities" (2008, pp.131-134). As an alternative to perceiving alts as different expressions of a single identity, Anne Marie Schleiner cites Stone (1995) as making the case that multiple avatars represent multiple selves that extend outside the flesh body into cyberspace:

> Rather than portraying these multiple selves as fictitious characters who mask an individual player's singular core 'real' identity, Stone perceives these multiple personas as extensions of the many different roles we play on and offline, part and parcel of the natural condition of schizophrenia that we all inhabit. (2001)

Boellstorff quotes a SL resident as saying of alts "both alts are real, my second alt is very much a part of me, the part I choose not to express here on my main account." He writes of alts having a 'fractal or dividual selfhood of a plural self forged through the same practices of techne that sustained the gap between the actual and the virtual" (2008, p.197). Quoting Marilyn Strathern (1998) that alts are "constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationship that produced them" he questions the "clear gap where one alt ends and the next begins" asking "What theory of agency is in play when Frank logs in two alts at once so that Nancy is sitting with Ray" or when "a resident logs in two alts at once to have sex with herself" (2008, p.150).

Warburton discusses the process by which alts evolve:

> As our in-world interactions become more elaborate and diverse a moment is reached where we feel a tension between our single avatar and the multiple roles that our virtual self is able to adopt… social norms and modes of behaviour may begin to sit uncomfortably within the embodiment provided within a single avatar... Multiple avatars in effect offer multiple channels for reflecting the range of roles and identities that we take for granted in our everyday existence (2008).

The use of alternative avatars, particularly to experiment or behave in ways which one would not want to be associated with their primary avatar, may be seen to equate to the idea of the shadow, i.e. a manifestation of those aspects of personality which one rejects, or of which one is not conscious. Baudrillard refers to the concept of the shadow in Simulcra and Simulation and states that any attempt at exact simulation "will inevitably miss its object because it does not

take its shadow into account…- the hidden face where the object crumbles, its secret" (1994, p.109). Within Second Life the limitations inherent in the curation of the attributes necessary to develop a coherent avatar mean that this 'hidden face' referred to by Baudrillard is not typically expressed by the primary avatar, remaining hidden and secret. In an interesting parallel it may be noted that the limitations of the rendering of environmental lighting settings within Second Life means that avatars do not cast virtual shadows either.

It might be speculated that alternative avatars within Second Life allow operators to access this shadow personality, but separating it from the primary expression of identity. Žižek warns that multiplicity of identity may lead not to integration but to fragmentation or confusion: "(The) much celebrated playing with multiple, shifting personas (freely constructed identities) tends to obfuscate (and thus falsely liberate us from) the constraints of social space in which our existence is caught" (2000, p.103). Žižek further warns of the "'dissemination' of the unique Self into a multiplicity of competing agents, shifting identities, of masks without a 'real' person behind them" (1997, p.134).

Responding to Žižek's writings Wilson writes;

Could not the possibility to explore a plurality of personalities allow for empowerment and self-realisation beyond the hegemony of 'real' life norms and habitual social conventions (expanded agency)? ... according to Žižek there is a price to be paid… measurable in terms of the impact that it has on one's 'real' life, on a sense of agency heightened, weakened or merely different. The selfsplit between the material body and the interpassive object, between the corporeal and the immanent – thus faces either a loss of agency through a lack of integration of the multiplicity of selves, an embellishment of

agency through the integration of these selves and/or a re-definition of agency through alternative presence, perception and mobility (2003, p.4).

Boellstorff discusses how avatars can be used to create fictionalised identities for their operators and quotes a resident as saying that a way of dividing time between your alternate and prime avatars is "to give your alt a persona that is busy in real life" (2008, p.133). He goes on to recall encountering "residents who used images of other people when asked for an actual world photograph of themselves." Kendall observed that when 'Barbie' presented two conflicting statements of her identity on BlueSky MUD, one which she presented as her offline identity and the other as her online identity, other users "accepted the version that positioned her offline identity as true and her online identity as false" (2002, pp.10-12). In some cases there may be no single operator, but rather multiple individuals operating one avatar. Boellstorff discusses his realisation that "different actual world people might be inhabiting the avatar… what is at issue is a disjuncture between avatar and actual world person" (2008, p.28). Yee, Ellis & Ducheneaut suggest an example of how a multiple operator avatar might function; "one user might focus on the verbal interaction, while another user might focus on emotes and other non-verbal cues, while a third user might be in charge of the private messages" (2009).

One case of multiple operators which is well documented by many writers on Second life is that of Wilde Cunningham, sometimes male avatar, sometimes female, created and operated by a group of nine individuals with disabilities. Guest charts the development of Wilde how s/he was created "by consensus, voting on each element of appearance." Guest describes it as "multiple personality disorder in reverse" (2008, p.34), but if Wilde's consciousness is torn in

nine directions is may be more accurate to consider this a case of multiple personality disorder affecting the avatar rather than the operator.

2.1.8 Alternative Expressions of Gender and Ethnicity

Listed among Wilde Cunningham's ambitions were 'to be a man' and 'to be a woman' and this reflects that perhaps the most common alternative manifestation of identity with virtual worlds is the alternative expression of gender. In research Yee (2006) had found that men choose to inhabit virtual worlds as virtual women around a third of the time. A 2007 survey by Global Markets found that 23% of residents said they played a different gender whilst research by Grosman (2010) found over eight in ten respondents (81.1%) had gender swapped while playing Second Life. Although there seemed to be no single primary reason 18.3% ascribed it to curiosity while 17.3% gave examples indicating that the virtual gender swap reflected actual world feelings or choices, including "I identify as transgendered in real life" and "Lets me live out the person that is inside me."

Writing extensively on gender identity, Judith Butler concludes that gender itself is a performative construct; "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; the identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (1990, p.25). She argues that while sex may be seemingly fixed, gender is neither fixed nor the causal result of sex but culturally constructed and discusses how articulation of the category of sex reduces and imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes; "To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "girling" is compelled" (1993, p.232). She writes of a willingness to imagine alternatively gendered worlds and goes on to assert that "there is no reason to assume genders ought also to remain as two... if

gender is constructed could it be constructed differently?" (1990, p.10-11) and quotes Wittig's Anti-Oedipus "For us there are not one or two sexes but many, as many sexes as there are individuals." Castells writes of the 'elective' sexuality allowed by virtual worlds and suggests that "the multiplicity of sexual expressions empowers the individual in the arduous (re)construction of her/his personality" (2010, p.298) whilst Castranova focused on the implications of this for the virtual sexual experience; "Sex in synthetic worlds is real… what is not real is the sense of being not like things in everyday life, is the fact that by switching avatars you can have sex in all four quadrants of the human pairings possibilities graph (M/F, F/M, M/M and F/F) with the same partner" (2006, p.170).

Donald E. Jones questions how the virtual allows for new configurations of identity and sexuality and, citing Foucault to highlight the differences between the use of sexual identity to define sexual preference and as political and cultural positioning, asks if there will remain a need for gay culture as fluid sexualities become normalized within cyberculture?

In Second Life the questioning or transitioning can "try on" different roles and communities, and they sometimes move back and forth between these roles with regularity. Further, gender and sexual identity can be combined in new ways. For example, one respondent wrote in; 'I simply enjoy to act in SL as a woman – while being male in RL. Not being gay in RL and so not interested in sex with men. But in SL I enjoy having sex with men or women alike – always acting and behaving as a female'… Whether this respondent's activities in Second Life are simply acts of fantasy or whether they speak to deeper complexities of gender and sexual identity that are being played out in the safe environment of Second Life, or a combination of both, this configuration of desire and pleasure is most definitely queer...For many users, this extension into this

space can have real world impact, particularly for those who are in identity questioning and transition. (2007)

Butler asserted that "identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them" (1990, p.22) and referred to gender as "repeated stylization of the body" (1990, p.43). Despite the significant opportunities for self-stylization offered by Second Life the artificial masculine/feminine binary of which Butler wrote is still reinforced by the avatar construction functionality of Second Life where operators must choose for their avatar to be assigned the label of male or female. The experiences of Dumitrica and Gaden in Second Life led them to conclude that "a heterosexual normativity was suggested to us primarily through the options available for creating and enhancing the avatar, but also through the visual predominance of patriarchal ideals of beauty as stretched by prevailing imagery of the binary male/female… in spite of this seemingly great variety of options, the vast majority (of avatars) remain framed by a particular imagination of gendered beauty and desirability" (2009). Robert Geraci agrees and writes that, in Second Life, "there are almost no female avatars that one might consider 'unattractive' by standard conventions of beauty" (2014, p.90). Vander Valk notes that "a surprising number of social norms are replicated, and in some cases even accentuated, in virtual environments… for all of the attention given to the potential for positive—experimental, liberating, or emancipating— transformation of one's physical appearance and identity in virtual environments, it is just as likely that individuals will choose to focus on, and substantially reinforce, socially constructed notions of gender" (2008). Boellstorff suggests Second Life's male-female binary works to reinforce gender norms and notes Linden's reluctance to implement a sliding gender scale. "In the actual world gender is strongly conflated

with embodiment"; to choose your gender raises the "possibility that actual world men and women could embody manhood or womanhood in new ways" (2008, p.141). He quotes Stone (1995) that "in cyberspace the transgendered body is the natural body".

Žižek poses the question, if synthetic worlds can facilitate 'the disappearance of sexual difference' then "what if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity so that, once sexual difference is abolished, a human effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine?" (2001, p.43-45). He asks, given the disembodied nature of cyberspace, is the "erasure of the bodily attachment gender neutral, or is it secretly gendered?" provoking a discussion of whether males and females experience such disembodiment in different ways, and refers to Adorno as the source of an "ideological notion of sexual difference in which a man is a disembodied Spirit-subject, while woman remains anchored in her body... In Kierkegaard's terms sexual difference is the difference between being and becoming; man and woman are both disembodied; however while a man assumes disembodiment as an achieved state, feminine subjectivity stands for the disembodiment 'in becoming'."

Kendall asserts that in cyberspace the fact that the medium requires performance allows participants to "interpret online gender masquerade as only performance" (2002, p.107). She writes how Turkle and others "confuse limited gender exchangeability (the ability to represent oneself…as a different gender…) with gender malleability (an understanding of gender as constructed, fluid and changeable...furthermore perceiving identity as constructed online need not lead on online participant to an understanding of identity as constructed generally" (2002, p.222). Bruckman referred to virtual environments as an "identity workshop" and wrote: "Gender swapping is an extreme example of a fundamental fact: the network is in the process of

changing not just how we work, but how we think of ourselves - and ultimately, who we are" (1993). Geser writes that "personality is no longer concentrated on the physical individuals located at a single place but distributed among many contexts where the individual is partially present...a quasi-independent existence that still effects the parent identity" (2007).

Joseph Clark (2009) quotes Fron (2007) to state that transgender play in virtual worlds "has an entirely different social function from that of real world transgender play." Some operators use avatars of a different gender as tools to perform specific functions within virtual worlds. Liao writes of Second Life fashion designer Margarita who occasionally uses a male avatar/shape to present men's clothes. Liao quotes Margarita as saying "I make sure people know that I am an old mom even in [a] boy avatar" (2011, p.112).

In a study of Everquest Yee (2001) suggests about 47.9% of male players have a character of the opposite gender (compared to 23.3% of females with male avatars) and research by Grosman (2010) indicates that those self identifying as heterosexual males or as having masculine gender identity have a tendency to gender swap more frequently or for longer periods of time. He suggests "although (the) hypothesis lacks empirical data, that heterosexual men feel the most constrained by normative gender roles". Another possible explanation might be that operators of both genders are simply more accustomed to playing male avatars which represent the default selection in the overwhelming majority of games and therefore the less frequent opportunity to perform as a female avatar makes it a more attractive proposition. Of the Lara Croft Tomb Raider game Schleiner wrote "Rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing the young boys and men who constitute the majority of Tomb Raider players to experiment with "wearing" a feminine identity" (2001). However it seems unlikely that the majority of heterosexual male gamers embodying the avatar of Lara Croft in Tomb Raider feel this is an

opportunity for them to gender swap and free themselves from normative gender roles and an alternative explanation is that the avatar becomes viewed as a third party under their control rather than an expression of identity. Francino and Guiller recorded that male operators are more likely than females "to play an opposite-gender character because of the in-game advantages, such as being more likely to be offered help and receiving more attention" (2011, p.158) though this justification in itself is indicative both of the assumption of others operators within Second Life that the gender of the avatar reflects that of the operator, and the stereotyping of gender roles by those operators. They write "Stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination are just as much features of the virtual world as the physical world" and go on to record how some operators expressed discomfort in using avatars of the opposite gender and that others could see through the 'deception'. Sonia Fizek and Monika Wasilewska quote Lisa Nakamura (2002, p.xiii) that "the internet may be viewed twofold; either a progressive tool used to implement social change or a purveyor of crude and simplistic stereotypical cultural narratives" (2011, pp.75- 88).

A number of writers have documented case studies of gender swapping within Second Life. Guest (2008) and Au (2008) both write of the case of Torley Torgeson who had a online love affair with SL resident Jade Lily. Both were playing women but both later discovered that in real life they were both men but continued the relationship, though elected not to meet in the physical world. Jade Lily is quoted by Au: "He's an ideal partner for me, personality wise. What makes it romantic, I think… are the long conversations we have about who we are and where we fit into the world... I just treat him like a girl and he treats me that way." Discussing the 'Proteus Effect' (Yee, 2007) in which 'appearance/embodiment affects behaviour' Boellstorff quotes a resident who was male in the actual world but female in Second Life: "I realised my avatar had the hots for a lesbian girl's avatar. I mean it, it wasn't me, I just realised it fitted the part" (2008,

pp.141-149). He relates a further case study of a man who, through the experience of role playing a woman in Second Life, became aware that (s)he was a transsexual and another of a female in the actual world who manifests as a male cross dresser in Second Life. He discusses a case where male avatars engaged in normative 'stag night' behaviour in a Second Life club without any apparent concern that the women dancing in the bar might be men in the actual world… "what mattered was that male and female acted as heuristically stable referents for online selfhood." Fizek and Wasilewska write "oftentimes…our avatar's gender identity constitutes the most stable point of reference" (2011, pp.75- 88).

Jones writes "One cannot make assumptions about the subject position of the person taken in actual life by the virtual body taken in Second Life" (2007). He quotes the findings of Campbell: "The body performed online … is desirable only as long as it is understood as corresponding to an actual physical body. The evaluation of the Other is made primarily on the avatar itself, not on the person behind the avatar. The desire/pleasure for/from viewing another avatar is related not to any physical attribute of the "real" person but by how the avatar is composed within the space as sign system that can be read with or without reference to the actual person" (2004).

Boellstorff writes in "keeping the actual world and Second Life distinct... men could participate as women, or one could not prejudge the actual-world age of a resident" nor "did one prejudge persons based on factors like gender, race and age" (2008, pp.152-159). However research conducted in the virtual world There by Paul Eastwick and Wendi Garder found bias against dark skinned avatars; "the research raises the specter that real-world racial biases, as they are inextricably intertwined with the rest of the human social mind, may also emerge in virtual environments" (2008, pp. 18-32). They recorded that the research did not address whether the

outcomes were linked to the mere presence of the avatar's dark skin or that participants instead made an attribution about the kind of operator that would choose to have dark skin.

Kendall's discussions with BlueSky participants revealed "The ultimate test of whether race matters online is the ability of black people to pass unnoticed as black. This emphasizes both the presumed desirability of hiding blackness and the assumption that people online are white." (2002, p.210) Boellstorff poses the question "Does a black person have to have black skin for a non-black person to recognise them as black?" (2008, pp.144-145) and relates that in Second Life too there remains an "assumption that residents were white unless otherwise stated." He quotes a resident as saying "in SL you can get a better understanding of what it is to be fat or black or female" (2008, p.249) but gives an example of how white men participating as Asian appearing male avatars often deploy mass mediated stereotypes (2008, pp.144-145). In virtual worlds such identity tourism is both a choice and a non- permanent state. Au (2008, p.73) provides a case study of Erika Thereian who, spending three months in the skin of a black woman experienced prejudice and a cooling of relationships within Second Life. She recalled how some of her black friends who are also residents operated white avatars because they felt more accepted that way. Angela Winand, who describes herself as an African American female in both SL and physical reality, writes of a Second Life resident who "was quite disdainful of any black people who would come to SL in another racial or ethnic identity" but further writes of the tensions of participating as a young black female due to others "perceptions and expectations, especially when informed and distorted by stereotypes" (2009).

Methal R. Mohammed spent time in SL as a female muslim avatar 'norrelhuda', similar in appearance to herself, wearing a hijab. She too recounts a generally negative experiences. Her language suggests a transition during the course of the experience from seeing the avatar as a

third party ("norrelhuda lifted her head, turned her face towards me") to identification and absorption into the avatar ("I found myself pushed into the sea.") She concludes that following the harassment and eventual Second Life 'killing' of her avatar, "noorelhuda's SL fears have been transferred to my Real Life; I fear a similar Real Life incident just because I am a Muslim woman with hijab" (2009).

Carleen Sanchez writes "cyberspace is perceived as a postracial location and performing race/ethnicity is an option open to any player. What is not widely acknowledged, however, is that white privilege allows white players to engage the virtual world without the need to be cognizant of underlying racist tropes that permeate real and virtual life" (2010). On the ability for non-white operators to create white avatars she writes "assuming that virtual worlds allow us to transcend the limitations of the body assumes that our bodies are the problem… The subtext conveyed is that people living "defective lives" can be freed through technology and virtual living within Second Life." Kendall writes: "The view that (cyberspace) allows online interactions to leave behind the problems of racism and sexism implies that such problems must derive entirely from differences in the way people look and reactions of others to these differences. This bypasses any understanding of race and gender as socially constructed, reduces racism and sexism to (almost automatic) reactions to physical cues" (2002, pp.221-222). She writes that "accounts imply that a participant online can convincingly enact an entity that offline he or she would not be able to manage and suggest that the experience of doing so is profound enough to transform the participants sense of self both online and off. Yet existing research regarding online performances does not provide adequate evidence to support assertions that online identity performances subvert hierarchies or disrupt power based on gender, race or class". Žižek (2001, p.28) discusses how "'natural' features such as sexual orientation and ethnic

identification are experienced as a matter of choice" and proposes that "all patterns of interaction (including) ethnic identity itself, have to be renegotiated/reinvented."

2.1.9 Technologies of the Self

Michael Foucault wrote " the individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces" (1980, pp.73-73). Sarup discusses Foucault's Technologies of the self, "which permit individuals to effect by their own means a number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves" (1996, p.84). Foucault describes these technologies of the self "as devices -- mechanical or otherwise -- which make possible the social construction of personal identity"(1988). Sarup asks "what is the goal to which our self-forming activity should be directed?" and answers that for Foucault "the reinvention of the self is primarily an aesthetic experience…the principal aim of which is to make one's life a work of art." Sarup discusses these as techniques which "agents practice on themselves to make themselves into the persons they want to be" (1996, p.88). Donna Haraway discussed how high tech culture could challenge dualisms persistent in Western tradition such as self/other, mind/body, writing that "Any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly; … It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships" (1991, pp.149-181).

Key themes for Turkle are if "our real life selves learn lessons from our virtual persona" (1995, p.180) and the use of "screen personae as means for working on their RL lives" (1995, p.192). Yee, et al write that to "understand how large the potential a medium has to change an

individual, researchers have typically measured how realistically a user behaves while inside of that medium" (2007).

Cleland agrees that " individuals can escape the limiting identities that have been imposed on their socially inscribed physical bodies and be virtually re-embodied in identities of their own choice" (2008) whilst Goel and Junglas quote Joinsen and Deitz-Uhler (2002) that the "use of on-line persona can serve a useful purpose for expressing and understanding our 'core' selves unfettered by shyness, social anxiety and physical states" (2009, p. 291).

Castronova discusses the validity of using virtual worlds as a technology to reinscribe identity:

> for some people synthetic worlds may just be a better place… Those who feel alone or discriminated against here may feel connected and accepted there; The social roles that we cannot have here may be possible there; Whatever you may not like about your body here, it can be undone in the building of a new body there… and all these experiences can occur in a way that is not mere fantasy; hundreds of thousands of other people are in that other place to validate your feelings and achievements as genuine (2005, p.77).

Echoing the view that screen personae can be used as means for working on their actual world lives, he cites Bartle in arguing that virtual worlds and roles can be used to aid in a journey of self-discovery:

> Perhaps the most important effect of these synthetic roles is their influence on your own self-development… The steps in the journey are revealed by the roles that you

play... there is clearly something Jungian going on (but) there are no therapists who know the answer. (2005, p.109).

Suler proposes that through cyberspace "we have entered the next stage in the expression of what it means to be human" (2002, pp. 455-460) and Kendrick writes;

> Cyberspace is either a space for radical liberation of the self from the body or one that simply evokes the same old assumptions and values of Western metaphysics...Cyberspace both invokes and promises to transcend what, in fact, does not exist – the unified and self identical subject who is distinct from his or her body and from the technological context of culture (1996, p.153).

Žižek however is pessimistic on our evolution into the virtual, referencing Nietzsche to argue that:

> man is just a bridge, a passage between man and overman, although if we are to view, as some, virtual worlds as the next step in our evolution, the Self evolving beyond its grosser aspects, we must acknowledge the contradiction that a larger part of cyberspace has been developed around sex and materialism, which may be considered twin pillars of our grosser natures.

He goes on to quote Katherine Hayles:

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regards their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being

seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognises

and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being (2003, pp. 35-36).

2.1.10 Self as a Process

Sarup writes of identity as a mediating concept (1996, p.21) and that postmodern thought argues against the concept of a single homogeneous identity or unchanging core essence viewing it as "necessarily incomplete, unfinished – it is the subject in process" (1996, p.47). Stuart Hall too seems to align himself with the postmodernist paradigm when he concludes that:

> Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or 'chaining' of the subject into the flow of discourse (1996, p.6).

Gilles Deleuze writes that "We are habits, nothing but habits – the habit of saying "I." Perhaps there is no more striking answer to the problem of self." (1989, p.x). Michelle Kendrick comments that, through habit and memory, we "continually reinscribe the fiction of a stable identity" (1996, p.153). Jacques Derrida too considered the question of the self: "who am I not in the sense of who am I but rather who is this I that can say who?" (1992). Derrida however posited that it was an inherent factor of temporal existence for this for the nature of Selfhood to elude us.

In a thought experiment by Derek Parfit, an individual's body and brain is scanned, destroyed and then perfectly replicated, memories intact. Parfit agrees with the postmodernist conclusions that there is no unified self, rather "there are a long series of different mental states

and events... each series being what we call one life." (Parfit, 1987, p.20 quoted by Tittle, 2005, p.89)

Henri Bergson is arguably one of the earliest writers who it can be claimed laid the foundations for the postmodern thinkers who followed, introducing the concept of Becoming:

Hence there are finally two different selves, one of which is, as it were, the external projection of the other, its spatial and, so to speak, social representation. We reach the former by deep introspection, which leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly becoming, as free states not amenable to measure, which permeate one another and of which the succession in duration has nothing in-common with juxtaposition in homogeneous space (1910, p.231).

Deleuze and Guittari further develop the concept of Becoming, not only as a development through time but through the blurring of the edges of social interaction, giving the following example of the wasp and orchid each affected by the other and becoming symbiotic emergent units:

How could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritalization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless derritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But

this is true only on the level of the strata-a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further (2004, p.11).

Jones discusses the symbiotic relationship of the avatar/Self formed by the "fluidic relation of self and expression of self":

The avatar/Self grows and changes along with the user through the course of play/interaction. The user develops and refines (or radically changes) the avatar's appearance over time, and the avatar can grow to manifest aspects of personality very different from those the user exhibits in real life… the user, in the name of their pleasure, allows him/herself to walk in the shoes of the avatar as if it is a representation of their true Self… The avatar can be "I," but for many I interviewed it might also be "he" or "she" and referred to by name. (2007)

Turkle writes of how Jacques Lacan attempts to "portray the self as a realm of discourse rather than a permanent structure of the mind" (1995, p.178). Lacan (1977) wrote of the illusory nature of a centralised ego and is responsible for the concept of the mirror stage, described by Sarup as the stage at which, when the infant first catches a glimpse of themselves in a mirror, they have the "first conscious recognition of the distinction between his or her own body and the

outside world" (1996). This recognition is however "based on an illusion or misrecognition" of "a point outside the self through which the self is recognised... an ideal self which can never be actualised". Kilpatrick wrote that the first stages towards the development of Selfhood were when a child "distinguishes himself clearly from others" by the appropriate use of such pronouns as I, me, my, mine and "he recognizes himself as an agent, one who can effect, bring to pass" (1941, pp.2-3); Sarup writes of the need to create "a dialectically mediated distance" towards ones apprehension of one's own identity" (1996, pp.34-37).

Bob Rehak relates Lacan's mirror stage to virtual worlds: "If the mirror stage initiates a lifelong split between self-as-observer and self-as-observed, in one sense, we already exist in an avatarial relation to ourselves" (2003, p.123). Pete Wardle (2015) discusses the concept of a 'virtual-mirror stage' taking place within virtual worlds at the point at which:

> individuals realize that their relationship with their avatar is a relationship with their Self... the point at which one looks at their avatar and realizes that the avatar which looks back is not simply a tool or extension which allows them to interact within virtual worlds, but an aspect of their identity which exists in an autonomous, emergent symbiotic relationship with them (2015, p.96).

Discussing the idea of mediated reality, in the Ben Wright film, Reality of the Virtual (2010), Žižek suggests we interact with others in real life by inventing a real life avatar of the individual with whom we are communicating, i.e. those with whom we interact are mediated and socially created by us and thus become virtual avatars of their physical selves.

Boellstorff questions the "broadly shared cultural assumption that virtual selfhood is not identical to actual selfhood" (2008, p.119) and much has been written to support the idea that our

mediated existence in the actual world is no less virtual than our experience of 'virtual worlds.' Ennsilin & Muse quote Usman Haque, that "the distinction between real and virtual is becoming as quaint as the 19th century distinction between mind and body" (2011, p.3) and Boellstorff writes that "our real lives have been virtual all along" (2008, p.5) pointing out that "in SL embodiment is highly elastic bringing notions of choice to the fore" and predicts how "virtual worlds change our notion of ourselves as we will now be dynamic or unstable bodies"(2008, pp.135-136). Garry Crawford writes that "In a rapidly changing world, fixed identities become less useful and so identities become ever more fluid. It is our consumer and leisure choices and our 'elective belongings', the social groups we choose to be member of… which define who we are…computer-mediated identities do have meaning and importance beyond the online and in-game." (2012, pp. 82-3).

Jack M. Loomis writes that:

The perceptual world created by our senses and nervous system is so functional a representation of the physical world that most people live out their lives without ever suspecting that contact with the physical world is mediated; …the impression of being in a remote or simulated environment experienced by the user of such systems can be so compelling as to force a user to question the assumptions that the physical and perceptual world are one and the same (1992, p.113).

Guest puts forward the view that "Sometimes we forget how much of our experience is virtual already. The radio we listen to in the car, the TV we turn on when we get home, even the print we read in books and newspapers, are all means to simulate company that we don't have in the flesh" (2008, p.27). Boellstorff quotes Clark (2003):"Since humans are always crafting

themselves through culture, they have always been virtual" (2008, p.237). For Žižek 'the ultimate lesson of cyberspace' remains: "not only do we lose our immediate material body, but we learn that there never was such a body- our bodily self-experience was always-already that of an imaginary constituted entity" (2003, p.55). He takes this to a logical conclusion that the Self cannot truly be perceived at all; "when I experience myself directly as a Self, I by definition enact an epistemically illegitimate short circuit, misperceiving a representational phenomena for 'reality'" (Žižek, 2009, p.214).

2.2 Defining the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic

Throughout this chapter the terms 'virtual' and 'actual' have been used to distinguish between the virtual world in which the avatar resides and the actual world in which the operator exists. As Bergson wrote of the dual states of actual and virtual ("every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other" 1920, p.165) Sartre referred to the real and imaginary:

> There is not a world of images and a world of objects. Every object whether it is present as an external perception or appears to intimate sense, can function as a present day reality or as an image, depending on what centre of reference has been chosen. The two worlds, real and imaginary, are composed of the same objects; only the grouping and the interpretation of these objects varies (1991, p.27).

Although it may at first seem that the statements are using the terms real and actual interchangeably it is important to examine these terms more closely.

Deleuze cited Proust in further exploring the terms virtual and actual, and adding his interpretation of 'real' as differing from 'actual': "the virtual is not actual, but as such possesses a reality... Proust's formula best defines the states of virtuality: 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract'" (1991, pp.96-97).

Elizabeth Grosz writes of Deleuze's concept of real relating to the self in a state of constant change and becoming:

> the real is positive, full, has no lack or negation, except through its own positive capacity for self enfolding; and the real is dynamic, open-ended, ever-changing, giving the impression of stasis and fixity only through the artificial isolation of systems, entities or states. His abiding concern remains with the real, with defining and refining being or reality so that its difference from itself, its fundamental structure of becoming or self-divergence – which may also be understood as an unbecoming – is impossible to ignore. A real that lacks nothing, that is fully positive, that functions as a whole; and a real that changes, that generates the new, that continues becoming, even as it un-becomes earlier becomings. In short, Deleuze seeks a real that is intimately linked to the dynamism of temporality itself (2005, pp.4-13).

Grosz goes on to discuss the consequences of this concept of the real for the idea of self-identity:

> It is because the real is construed as fundamentally dynamic, complex, open-ended, because becoming, which is to say, difference, must be attributed to it in every element that it cannot begin to become, it does not acquire virtuality but is always in flux. There never was the self-identity and stasis necessary for a fixed identity, a given

boundary and clear-cut states, that is, for objects as they are conceptually understood, except that cut out for us by our bodily and perceptual needs (2005, pp.4-13).

Ensslin and Muse write after Deleuze that the "virtual can be considered that element of the real that is not actual" (2011, pp.3-4). Whilst the actual might therefore be categorised in terms of the physical and tangible, the bodily and perceptual existence, the real defies such simple categorisation. Lacan defined the Real by comparison to two other concepts, the Imaginary and the Symbolic and the Real. The translator's notes made by Sheridan to Lacan's 'Ecrits; A Selection' provide a definition of these concepts. Of the Imaginary, Sheridan writes:

…the imaginary becomes the internalized image of this ideal, whole, self and is situated around the notion of coherence rather than fragmentation... It becomes, in Lacan, the space in which the relation 'between the ego and its images' is developed. (2001, viii).

He discusses the concept of the Imaginary in relation to the writings of Lacan's predecessors and contemporaries, writing that for Saussure the imaginary becomes the 'signified' the concept symbolized arbitrarily by a sign. Moving on to define the Symbolic, he writes that:

in contrast to the imaginary, the symbolic involves the formation of signifiers and language and is considered to be the 'determining order of the subject'. Seeing the entire system of the unconscious/conscious as manifesting in an endless web of signifiers/ieds and associations, The Symbolic Order functions as the way in which the subject is organized and, to a certain extent, how the psyche becomes accessible. It is associated with language, with words, with writing and can be aligned with Peirce's 'symbol' and Saussure's 'signifier.' (2001, viii).

He quotes Lacan that, "Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him…" (1956, p.42), and, "Man speaks therefore, but it is because the symbol has made him man" (1956, p.39).

Finally, Sheridan tackles the definition of Lacan's Real, which he describes as being 'perhaps the source of the most contention within theories of media in that media itself can only point at the real but never embody it, never be it.' He quotes Miller in describing the Real as, 'the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic' (1978, p.280) and writes that:

> very unlike our conventional conception of objective/collective experience, in Lacanian theory the real becomes that which resists representation, what is pre-mirror, pre-imaginary, pre-symbolic – what cannot be symbolized – what loses its 'reality' once it is symbolized (made conscious) through language. It is 'the aspect where words fail' (2001, viii).

Žižek discusses Lacan's Imaginary in respect of virtual worlds and writes: "The VR persona... offers a case of imaginary deception in so far as it externalizes-displays a false image"(1997, p.139). He expands upon the concept of the Real as "simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing" (2003, p.77). He continues that: "More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second."

Lacan's definitions can be used to help categorize the concepts of identity and selfhood outlined earlier in this chapter, and to attempt to establish a common critical language to apply to a discussion of selfhood as it relates to the relationship between avatars and their operators in virtual worlds.

The Symbolic, where signifiers and language determine the order of identity can be seen as that which we stand for in the actual, and that which stands for us, i.e. the role we undertake and identify with to the extent its definition not only limits us, but becomes synonymous with us. "I am a ..." In this way we can see that the term can be equated to the pre-modern identity paradigm. While the Imaginary uses as its starting point all that which it is possible for us to be, it is limited by the selection process to the image we create for ourselves, that which we imagine ourselves to be. Situated around the notion of coherence, it is the choices we make, the different roles we play, and a parallel may therefore be drawn to the modern identity paradigm of unity of consciousness, by which identity is curated, constructed and performed. The Real, resisting representation, is that which is created when the imaginary is given existence, not in the symbolic actual but, moment by moment, by interaction and synthesis with everything that is other to our selves, whether within the realm of perception which we recognise as the actual, or those idealised virtual worlds in which we choose to be embodied. The can be seen to relate to one's response to, and interaction with, the experience of existence, the becoming, yet never actualized, multiplicity of self posited by postmodern theorists.

It must be made clear from the outset of the discussion that, whilst an attempt is made to justify the appropriation of these terms from Lacanian thought, these terms are not intended to reflect the exact meanings attributed to them by Lacan. Indeed it would be impossible for them to do so; Vicdan and Ulusoy (2008) refer to "the symbolic construction and reconstruction of

bodily selves through the semiotic scheme of the virtual worlds" and Jones (2007) writes of avatars as "composed within the space as sign system" so to classify an avatar existing only in a virtual environment as 'Real' in Lacanian terms would seem absurd, as avatars by their nature are designed as symbols to be used by the operator as tools of communication and expression. However, in On Belief (2001, p.82), discussing Lacan's definitions, Žižek proposes three modalities of the Real which may have a useful application to this discussion, the 'real Real', the 'symbolic Real' and the 'imaginary Real'. In Wright's video Reality of the Virtual (2010) Žižek expands upon this to describe how each of the three Lacanian terms, Symbolic, Real and Imaginary, can be viewed as containing the others within it.

Although avatars can be seen to be Symbolic in nature in so far as they are visual signifiers, created from pixels to determine the order of the subject, following Žižek's reasoning, Lacan's terminology may then be applied to define three modalities of the perception of Self upon this Symbolic avatar to allow the distinctions to be made between three modalities of avatar, or more precisely of relationships which operators share with their avatars, and it is this concept which sets the foundation for the development of a critical framework with which to analyse the roles and relationships of avatars.

It is therefore proposed to define three modalities of avatar as Symbolic Avatars, Imaginary Avatars and Real Avatars by which Lacan's concepts of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real can be used to assign attributes relating to actual world identity paradigms and categorise modalities of avatar based on their various functions and relationships to their operators. When typifying a Symbolic Avatar (i.e. Symbolic-Symbolic) this refers to an avatar whose operator has constructed it to be a symbolic representation of a performed role external to the operator. Similarly an Imaginary Avatar (i.e. Imaginary-Symbolic) is the expression of the operator's self-

perceived identity, that is to say a representation of the way they imagine themselves to be, and which they regard as an extension or facet of themselves. The term Real Avatar (i.e. Real - Symbolic) is used to typify that which is neither a role, nor a consistent constructed identity, but rather that which the operator has the potential to become in his or her interface with the social space of the constructed reality.

Parallels may be drawn between these proposed modalities and a number of existing theories relating to interaction within virtual worlds such as Biocca's stages of physical, virtual and phenomenal embodiment (1997). Warburton (2008) maps the development of identity within virtual worlds through three phases through which operators progress as investment in their avatar increases; the first phase posits the avatar as external, the second has the avatar as an extension of the self, the third where the avatar has its own identity alongside social and cultural capital. Warburton suggests that although in the early stages of using Second Life operators explore, this reduces over time; a parallel may be drawn to Erikson's position (1950;1968), as described by Koles and Nagi, that "once an individual's identity is established by a certain point of his or her life, change and substantial modification becomes quite difficult and unlikely" (2012). Following the experimentation stage, once an avatar becomes seen as an extension of the operator it might be used for professional activity. Alongside developing its own identity an avatar may develop a tendency towards playfulness, sometimes leading to the creation of multiple avatars. Warburton gives an example of a Second Life resident AJ who writes of having three avatars; the first 'looks a bit like' him but 'slimmer and a bit more chiselled', a second is a 'maintenance guy' modelled as a cyborg and created as 'purely a utility' and a third to "attend a party or other social event, or even to poke around places around SL". Veerapen (2011, p.92) lists four avatar types as being; avatar as object, avatar as extension, avatar as phantom limb,

avatar as equal acquiring his/her own identity. However the third of these might be described as a liminal stage between extension and autonomy where the avatar is beginning to have an effect on the operator without yet being viewed as an independent agent, reducing the types to three to correspond to the modalities suggested.

Chapter 3: The Research Methodology

This chapter will provide a critical appraisal of the research epistemology, methodology and methods adopted and how these strategies and techniques are of assistance in reaching the study objectives. The research will collect data relating to operators' relationships with avatars within Second Life to be critically analysed using the framework of avatar modalities discussed.

Researching within virtual worlds has meant researchers are faced with a new set of challenges. Simon Evans writes of "the relatively 'youthful' nature of research in virtual worlds" and the "many new and unique challenges not normally experienced when conducting research in the physical world" (2011, pp.38-41). Jeremy Hunsinger and Aleks Krotoski write that:

> Situating research in an online community demands reflexivity; as an immersive field of study it demands more patience, self-awareness and thoughtfulness towards research design than a lab based experiment. The mutability of the environment and the experiences within them - as close to or as far from reality as is possible within the constraints of the technology and design - must be taken into account when researching in virtual worlds (2014, p.3).

In considering the methodology and designing the research it has been necessary to consider the ways in which the methods and techniques to be used would be influenced, and in some cases shaped, by the nature of the Second Life environment, the avatars inhabiting it and the technologies shaping the environment. The nature of the Second Life environment is such that areas are often themed, e.g. academic areas, shopping areas, adult areas, specialist roleplay areas, etc. It may be reasoned therefore that individuals operating avatars occupying a particular area may share similar traits in terms of psychographic profile but be very different in terms of

other demographics coming as they do from different age groups, socio and geo demographic groupings and operators whose avatars interact within a single Second Life location may be located anywhere globally. Further, the sharing of psychographic traits, even the operator's overt actual world interest in the area's purpose cannot be taken for granted; as Boellstorff pointed out, in many cases, the avatar "has a different psychographic... different interests, different needs" (2008, p.66). Whilst the operators within Second Life may be seen to have one commonality in terms of their psychographics, i.e. they are all choosing to spend time within Second Life and have undergone the experiences inherent in becoming resident within a social virtual world, they are otherwise very diverse, with differing purposes and motivations for their residency within Second Life.

One factor for consideration therefore was whether to conduct all research within Second Life, or to contact and interact with actual world operators for research purposes, and whether or not to try to take into consideration any actual world demographic factors when conducting research. Many researchers, including Boellstorff, have conducted research entirely within Second Life. Boellstorff however acknowledged that meeting residents in the actual world would have been a legitimate methodology, though doing so would address a different set of questions (2008, p.61). Other factors considered related to finding areas within Second Life with enough population activity to be able to recruit sufficient research participants and, where necessary, finding participants who had been resident in Second Life for sufficient time that they were familiar with the operating system and had developed behaviour patterns within Second Life. A further challenge would be that Second Life has become so popular as an environment in which to conduct research into virtual worlds that many residents have become jaded with research activity and decline to participate.

3.1 Research Epistemology

3.1.1 Approaching the research

In deciding upon the approach of the research used to collect the data, key differences between the main epistemological approaches were considered. Positivism seeks to "apply the natural science model of research to investigations of the social world" (Denscombe 2003, p.299). It is generally, though not exclusively, associated with a quantitative methodology that is reductive in nature to systematically analyse and classify its findings, but as Sullivan points out "while this notion may serve the natural sciences well it is less convincing when applied to the human sciences" (2010, p.33). The analysis of such quantitative data tends to be deductive the aim of which is to test theories and eliminate false ones to arrive at a definable cause and effect relationship. Accordingly this was not considered to be an appropriate approach for this study.

An Interpretivist stance however uses generally qualitative methods and accepts that the results of the research to be socially mediated which may be more appropriate to this study and its methods will therefore be reviewed in greater detail. It "does not aim to report an objective reality, but rather to understand the world as it is experienced and made meaningful by human beings" (Collins, 2010, p.39); "The central role is experience as it is lived, felt, reconstructed, reinterpreted and understood" (Sullivan, 2010, p.101). Tim May states: "We are no longer proclaiming our 'disengagement' from our subject matter as a condition of science (positivism), but our 'commitment' and 'engagement' as a condition of understanding social life" (2011, p.14). Denzin and Lincoln wrote:

> Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them... it

involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives (2003, p. 39)

Data collection methods used by interpretivist researchers may include interviews, focus groups, participant diaries, observation, etc., with a focus on gaining more in depth information from smaller samples. Collins also includes constructionism, phenomenology and ethnography within his definition of interpretivist methods (2010, p.40) and writes that social constructionism "emphasises the socially mediated nature of interpretation and aims to offer an insight with broad social relevance" (2010, p.39) and 'emphasises the cultural and institutional origins of meaning' considering the context of objects and multiple interpretations given to them in different contexts.

Phenomenology however encourages us to 'arrive at new more immediate meanings by allowing for a direct experience of the objects of our perception' (Collins, 2010, p.40). Creswell writes of phenomenological study as describing "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon ...The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (2012, p.76). As described by Denscombe it "tries...to provide a description of how things are experienced first hand by those involved" and has the advantage of allowing the researcher to "delve into phenomena in-depth and provide descriptions that are detailed enough to reflect the complexity of the social world" (2005, p.97).

According to Denscombe "Ethnography literally means a description of peoples or cultures" and "requires the researcher to spend considerable time in the field among the people whose lives and cultures are being studied...Routine and normal aspects of everyday life are seen as worthy of consideration as research data...The ethnographer is generally concerned to find out how the members of the group/culture being studied understand things...the way they perceive their reality" (2005, pp.84-5) . The nature of Second Life as a social virtual world which may be considered as separate from our 'actual-world' lives means that an ethnographic approach must underpin this study. However Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor acknowledge that "some virtual worlds scholars still criticise ethnographic research by claiming it is anecdotal and unscientific" (2012, p.6) but in the handbook 'Ethnography and Virtual Worlds' seek to dispel these myths. They address the claim that ethnography is simply anecdotal as follows:

> The data are typically collected in the field over a long period...we often present key critical cases, incidents, stories or events to illustrate patterns we have observed... they represent not isolated incidents but multiple instances and manifestations of phenomena involving many different individuals, observed in context. (2012, pp.29-51)

The broader definition of ethnographic research must include reviewing the experiences of others as they are related both first-hand, and via blogs, essays, etc. While it may seem initially that use of such sources is simply secondary research, the use of them as primary ethnographic research tools has sound precedent. Boellstorff et al state "research will almost always include journeying to other online locales such as forums, blogs and wikis" (2012, p.6). Hammersley and Atkinson state that the "presence and significance of documentary products provide the ethnographer with a rich vein of analytical topics as well as valuable sources of data

and information" and warn that the ethnographer "ignores at his or her peril these features of a literate culture" (2005, p.36). They make specific reference to the legitimacy of "'virtual ethnography', whose data may be restricted entirely to what can be downloaded from the internet" (2005, pp.132-3).

It must be recognised that observer participation is to some extent an unavoidable element of ethnography, although Ronald King, citing Colin Bell, describes participant observation within ethnographic practice as ranging from "participation with no observation to observation with no participation" (2012, p.122). Boellstorff et all challenge as a myth that the presence of ethnographers "contaminates the fieldsites" (2012, p.44) responding that by maintaining a lengthy presence in the fieldsite their presence is normalised. Hammersley and Atkinson however stress the necessity of some disengagement during ethnographic research "suspending their own immediate inferences, common sense assumptions and theoretical presuppositions." Nick Forster also advises caution that results "should never be taken at face-value. In other words they must be regarded as context specific and as data which must be contextualized with other forms of research" (1994, p.149). One specific element of ethnography, autoethnography, i.e. writing about one's personal experience has been particularly open to challenge as unscientific and Boellstorff et al write that it must be based upon "careful research design, intensive data collection and extended data analysis" (2012, p.44).

Ethnographic techniques, particularly the reviewing of texts based documentation may alternatively be seen as a critical approach which might initially be viewed as differing from an interpretivist approach. Discussing critical research Donald E. Comstock writes "the function of critical social science is to increase the awareness of social actors of the contradictory conditions

of action which are distorted or hidden by everyday understandings... a consistent critical method would be based on a dialogue with its subjects rather than observation or experimental manipulation of people" (1982, p.371).

Jim Thomas writes that:

Critical ethnography is a type of reflection that examines culture, knowledge and action... Critical ethnographers describe, analyze and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centres, and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain...We create meanings and choose courses of action within the confines of generally accepted existing choices, but these choices often reflect hidden meanings and unrecognised consequences (1993, p2-3).

Though critical research often has an inherently social or political agenda, one trait of critical research as identified by Cannella and Lincoln is that researchers inquire "deeply into the usages of language and the circulation of discourses that shape social life" (2009, p.55). However the 'either/or' categorisation of ethnography as an interpretivist or critical approach seems a fabricated one, more relevant to the purpose of the study than the technique used. Alexander Schieffer and Ronnie Lessem discuss how the latter grew from the former and reference Habermas (Erkenntnis und Interesse, 1968), making the distinction that critical literary theory "is ultimately a form of hermeneutics, i.e. knowledge via interpretation to understand the meaning of human texts and symbolic expressions. Critical social theory in the social sciences is, in contrast, a form of self reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation."

They describe how:

Critical theory should be seen as an interpenetrating body of work, which demands and produces three things:

1. a critical engagement with your contemporary social world, recognizing that the existing state of affairs does not exhaust all possibilities and offering positive implications for social action;

2. a critical account of the historical and cultural conditions on which your own intellectual activity depends;

3. a continuous critical re-examination of the constitutive categories and conceptual frameworks of your understanding including the historical and dialectical construction of these as a critical confrontation with other works of social explanation. (2010, pp.207-227)

A very different technique also often associated with ethnographic practice, ethnomethodology, must be considered as a distinct and specific set of techniques which may be considered more invasive into the societal structure and are designed to catalyse a response rather than simply observe. Boellstorff et al write that "some ethnomethodologists also use other methods that would be considered an anathema to the core principle of ethnography. These include experimental interventions in the social order designed to expose various aspects of commonsense practice such as the breaching of social norms" (2012, pp.46-47).

A further element of the research uses the researcher's own artistic practice as a research method. Sullivan writes of the contradictions inherent to be met by visual arts research in having to satisfy both research and artistic demands:

The possibility that visual arts research might be the kind of activity to make good use of emerging sites of enquiry is probably best exemplified in the performative area of contemporary art. The pervasive impact of information technologies, interactivity (and) identity politics... are some of the ideas contributing to a theoretically robust area of artistic practice. The issues explored and the immersive environments of today are somewhat different from the groundbreaking, conceptually edgy performance art of decades ago. In recent times however... the fusion is more comprehensive..." (2010, pp. 217-219)

The use of virtual installation as a research tool might therefore be viewed as a virtual performance in which the actual world operators are participating via the avatars.

As will be evidenced within the detailed discussion of methods used, whilst the study into identity and behaviour within Second Life can be viewed overall as a broadly ethnographic undertaking, a blended approach to the research generally adopts an interpretive ontology. It should be noted that the definition of interpretive is used in its broader sense and includes elements of the ethnographic, constructionist, phenomenological, critical methods and ethnomethodological interventions discussed above.

3.1.2 Summary of methods used

A summary of the methods used is given below. Later chapters expanding upon the processes used and the findings of the research divide the research into two distinct areas, those using Social Science methods and those using methods relating to Artistic Practice, as follows;

3.1.2.1 Social Science Methods Used

An initial questionnaire to define broad patterns of behaviour is followed by more detailed interviews to determine the typical relationships and expressions of identity which operators manifest when using their avatars. The interviews focus on the operator experience during the avatar creation and development process and seek to determine the factors which influence operators in developing and fashioning their avatars and the effect this process has upon the relationship between the operator and avatar and examine how operator relationships with avatars evolve over time with particular consideration of identity liminal events which may be seen as catalytic to change within such relationships. The interviews are supported by both ethnographic and authoethnographic research.

3.1.2.2 Methods Relating to Artistic Practice

A review of the work and writings of a number of artists addressing themes relating to identity within Second Life, including a series of interviews with such artists, are undertaken to investigate diverse unconventional ways in which operators manifest identity via their avatars and the actual world paradigms these follow. Whilst such interviews may follow the methods of social science they focus closely upon the interaction of both the artists and their audiences with the artists' work and are supported by autoethnographic research in interacting with the work of the artists.

A review of the researcher's own artistic work within Second Life includes a retrospective analysis of artistic practice undertaken prior to the commencement of the research study as well as of artistic practice and ethnomethodological interventions generated specifically for the purposes of the research being undertaken. In the final stages of the research, volunteers

are asked to participate in activities including an installation in which they operate avatars with which they are unfamiliar and which change in response to stimuli, following which interviews and questionnaires seek to determine how the behaviour and expression of identity is manifest in these circumstances.

The data derived from each of the research studies is used to apply retroductive thematic analysis to identify themes relating to identity paradigms which then allows the data to be organised and situated within a framework relating to themes identified from the secondary research. While the study is limited to Second Life and claims no validity within other contexts the theories and findings could be tested within other contexts, particularly to ascertain if the models discussed herein can be applied to other games environments or social virtual worlds, or to see if the lessons learned from the examination of expressions of identity within Second Life have any application within the actual world.

3.1.3 Data collection

The study can be viewed overall as a broadly ethnographic undertaking in so far as it is underpinned by the experiences of the researcher within Second Life and each element of the research are compared to and supported by this ethnographic viewpoint.

A number of specific avatars are used ethnographically to support the research within Second Life, each fulfilling different purposes as detailed below. For the purposes of identifying them as functionally separate from the actual world researcher and each other these are identified in the subsequent text in a third person narrative by the avatar names given to them.

- Guido Vandyke was created by the researcher as a means to gain access to Second Life and the development of this avatar took place prior to the commencement of any research or artistic activity within Second Life. Guido is used as the primary avatar for the researcher's day to day interactions within Second Life. Blakie writes that the "social world is already interpreted before the social scientist arrives" (1998, p.36) and field notes generated from examination of Guido's day to day interactions give essential ethnographic insight into existing social structures to support and give meaning to more structured elements of the study.

- Funkin Sohl was originally created to support an artistic installation conducted by Professor Paul Sermon in Manchester in 2007 as an avatar which could be operated or interacted with by any participant at that event. Subsequently Funkin has taken on the role of in-world researcher and interviewer allowing the function to be conducted separately from the Guido avatar identity.

- Cypher SecondSelf has been designed as an experimental avatar allowing the researcher to adopt a variety of physical forms as necessary, and also to allow use of this avatar by other operators.

Throughout the research interviews are facilitated and recorded by a number of methods as appropriate to the individual situation. Where interviews with operators are taking place on a face to face basis, these are typically audio recorded using a hand held Zoom recorder, and transcribed. Where interviews take place remotely, a distinction must be made between interviewer to operator interviews, and avatar to avatar discussions within Second Life which are typically shorter and less formal. Whilst the former could conceivably still take place remotely

with both participants having a virtual presence within Second Life it is considered desirable to avoid this so as not to create any confusion between the operator themselves and the identity they express via the avatar whilst present in Second Life. Such interviewer to operator interviews are therefore conducted over mediums such as Skype, or using text based communications either through social media messaging, or by email, and it is acknowledged that there are differing benefits and limitations of each method. Whilst communicating via Skype allows collection of a more spontaneous response, and both voice and facial expression can be recorded using screen capture software in real time, participants may be reluctant to be video recorded, or may be more cautious of their responses, and the nature of remote video conversation can sometimes lead to miscommunication, and important responses may be overlooked until the video is reviewed so that they cannot be followed up on during the conversation. Furthermore, the recordings need to be transcribed. Using text based methods, by their nature, protracts the interviews, sometimes over a period of days where email is used, and give respondents more time to consider and potentially moderate their responses for better or worse, but allows the interviewer to read an ongoing transcript of the interview as it takes place and return to interesting responses to probe them in more detail. The nature of text based communication is such that subsequent transcription is unnecessary. Whilst there is no preference between these methods, and the choice is made on an individual basis as the situation or preference of the interviewee demands, it is anticipated most remote interviews are to be conducted using text based communication.

In respect of avatar to avatar discussions which take place during the process of ethnographic research, these are typically also undertaken by text based communication. Although Second Life allows use of a voice facility, a majority of residents choose to communicate via text based chat for a variety of reasons, foremost of which within the context of

this research is to separate their in-world avatar identity from that of the actual-world physical presence of the operator and ensure that the in-world representation is not disrupted by the presence of an incongruous or recognisable voice, e.g. where operators are assuming avatar identities with differing age, racial, genders or social characteristics. As with other text based communication, the text can be copied or downloaded rather than needing to be transcribed. However in addition to text logs of in-world conversations, where possible and appropriate, in world interaction is captured using Fraps screen record software to document the process.

Carey Jewitt writes: "A common limitation in the use of video for research is that it can often lead to the collection of large amounts of data. Viewing, logging and analysing video data is time and labour intensive and this limitation of working with video can lead to disproportionate time spent on data collection versus analysis and result in overly descriptive and weak analysis" (2011, pp.171-178). Whilst it would be unrealistic in terms of the volume of data generated to capture all ethnographic interaction within Second Life, an effort is made to video record both avatar and in-world operator participation in installations. Jewitt goes on to discuss features and qualities of video data that differ significantly from other kinds of data, for example field notes, in ways that are important to consider.

Four of these features underpin the enormous potential of video for social science research. First, it is real-time sequential medium that 'preserves the temporal and sequential structure which is so characteristic of interaction' (Knoblauch et al., 2006, p. 19) – a quality essential for studying 'naturally occurring data'. Second, video can provide a fine-grained multimodal record of an event detailing gaze, expression, body posture, gesture and so on, in which talk is kept in context – a record that cannot be made available using any other technology. Third, video recordings are a durable, shareable

record that can be repeatedly viewed (in slow motion), enabling an analytical gaze and multiple passes across data to capture detail that may have been missed in fieldwork observation. Fourth.., it is a medium that features in many people's everyday lives and thus offers new potentials for collaborative work between researchers and participants (2011, pp.171-178).

Whilst video within the actual world may have the advantage of capturing bodily posture, gesture and facial expression, video in the context of virtual worlds is limited by the lack of such naturally occurring body language in virtual worlds. However videos generated by FRAPS along with photographic still screen capture data can still be useful in the generation of multimodal transcripts, i.e. transcripts containing multiple elements such as text and image to record various facets of a research activity, to support in-world text based communications revealing the motivations of the participants via their in-world behaviour. One advantage of the use of video recording within virtual worlds over the use of video in the real world, highlighted by Boellstorff et al is that whilst in the actual world "participants may overact or feel self-conscious in the camera's presence... virtual world ethnographers who are recording inworld generally do not face the same challenge because of the defacto invisibility of the process." They continue however to point out that anonymity of the participants must still be considered and that "ethically the obligation remains that the ethnographer explain that the video is being recorded" (2012, p.116).

Jeff Bezemera and Diane Mavers write that:

> multimodal transcripts are not merely descriptive, nor are they mere 'translations'. They are transducted and edited representations through which analytical insights can be

gained and certain details are lost. Thus the transcript is a crucial analytical tool, facilitating and articulating a particular 'professional vision' (Goodwin, 1994), rendering visible the socially and culturally shaped categories through which the researcher sees and reconstructs the world. From this perspective, the 'accuracy' of a transcript is dependent not on the degree to which it is a 'replica' of reality, but how it facilitates a particular professional vision (2011, pp. 191–206).

Collins stated that photography 'can provide a component of multi-methods' (2010, p.141), and video and screen capture photography can be used to triangulate data and support interviewer to operator transcripts, for example by documenting the changes to an avatar appearance over time. For example, an operator log of decisions taken relating to changes to the appearance of an avatar during its developmental stages can be compared to a series of screen shot portraits documenting the process and reflective interviews with the operator. Similarly, actual world video footage of a participant's body language and facial expression whilst interacting with another avatar within an installation could be synchronised with footage of the avatars' in-world interaction and viewed alongside a textual transcript of the communication between them.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical approvals have been obtained for the methods to be used from the University of Salford College Ethics Panel. For the actual world elements participants are given full details of the project including a Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet. Actual world participants are asked to grant consent to being photographed or video recorded, though participants have the option of declining.

The nature of the research activity within Second Life means that participants eligible to respond due to their residency or activity within Second Life are required to have verified that they are aged over 18 (regardless of whether the physical appearance of their avatar is represented as such) due to restrictions of Second Life residency. However whilst permissions relating to text based, audio and image/video data may be collected from actual world participants in person, when interviewing remotely, or by avatar participation within Second Life and the differing ethical challenges of each must be considered.

Of his research Simon Evans writes that in-world research presented "particular challenges, because the process involved interviews conducted virtually and between avatars" (2011, p.41). The key ethical considerations of this research study focus on the informed consent of the participants and maintaining appropriate levels of anonymity for them. Evans continues that "informed consent, which in the physical world is indicated by participant signatures notifying their awareness of and consent to participate in the research procedure. In Second Life, signatures are not possible" (2011, p.41). Of anonymity and confidentiality he writes that "while theoretically all avatars represent an 'alias' that cannot be tracked to the physical world, all text is downloaded onto Linden Lab logs, and it is the researcher's experience that residents guard their privacy" (ibid). It is important therefore to ensure anonymity so far as is possible by ensuring participants that avatar names would be stored securely and, if requested, changed in the final report. Any data collected throughout all stages of the research is always stored in a password protected electronic format.

The initial qualitative survey presents options for respondents to answer anonymously or to choose to leave an email address if they consent to being contacted for further research. If contact details are respondents are emailed as follows; "Thank you for responding to the Second

Life Avatar Identity Survey and for agreeing to be contacted for further research purposes. Your assistance is valuable and very much appreciated. I will never pass on your contact details and you can opt out at any time by emailing me at this address." An alternative solution was documented by Evans was to give prospective participants an 'Information and Consent Notecard' and ask them to respond with an in-world instant message agreeing to take part in the research, eliminating the need for collection of an email address tying the avatar to an actual world operator but limiting the opportunity for follow up research.

Personal contact data kept on file is limited to avatar names and email addresses. Email addresses are used only for contact purposes and not included in the research documentation. Participants are given the option whether or not they wish their real or avatar names to be used within the materials generated and these are changed where participants do not wish names to be included. Where participants are subsequently contacted to gain additional information they are emailed full details of the project including a Participant Information Sheet detailing the aims and methods of the research and the Consent Form to be returned by email with an electronic signature agreeing to participate in more in depth interviews and granting permission to use the data obtained in such interviews for the purposes of the research study. Where such subsequent interviews are conducted with the avatar operators, typically by email, text based chat or Skype, they are subject to the same considerations as actual world interviews.

For some elements of the research it is necessary that permission is granted by participants to use images or video recordings of their avatars. Boellstorff et al write of in-world video records, "if labels such as avatar names are removed (as for screen shots) and the distinctiveness of the individual avatar is minimal, the identity of the person behind the avatar can remain anonymous. On the other hand, there may be situations where the avatar's appearance

is quite easily identifiable as an individual" (2012, p.117). Although it therefore possible that such images could be used to visually identify the avatar, and that the anonymity of the participant is compromised, in most cases this is unlikely and can be guarded against by ensuring that the option of visible floating avatar names boxes in Second Life is turned off so that avatar names do not appear in images. If an avatar's appearance is such that the avatar may be easily identified then video/photographic recordings and screen recordings from within Second Life are not used in documentation without specific consent from the participants to use these as part of this research project and in resulting materials. The use of photographs or video images containing identifiable avatars other than those agreeing to participation is avoided.

Participants creating avatars and other properties within Second Life as a part of this research retain intellectual property rights to these avatars so far as Second Life licences permit, but are asked to consent to the likeness, image and recordings of such avatars to be used for the purposes of this research and subsequent materials resulting therefrom.

Some elements of ethnographic and ethnomethodological research prove less straightforward in relation to ethical research particularly where those avatars with whom the researcher's avatar is interacting are unaware of researcher's role at the time of the interaction. In some instances the data obtained can be used very generically without inclusion of avatar names, images or direct quotations and in such instances participants are made aware after the event using the principles detailed above, or where this is not possible the data collected from such interactions is completely anonymised. However where it is the intention to include direct quotations or images of any avatars, following the initial interaction the purposes of the research is explained to participants and they are provided with the Participant Information Sheet and Consent form requesting permission for images and/or quotations to be used within the research.

3.3 Data analysis

The aim of the analysis of the research data is to compare the data collected to actual world identity paradigms and create a systematic approach for the classification of the types of expressions of identity and behaviour manifest within virtual worlds using avatar modalities based upon Lacanian definitions, proposed following the secondary research phase, i.e. Symbolic Avatars, Imaginary Avatars and Real Avatars. It is further aim to generate a framework relating to different themes common to the expression of identity by which differing expressions of identity relating to that theme may be typified to each of the different modalities.

The analysis method used therefore needed to facilitate a systematic approach to the categorization of data, but also be flexible enough to allow the identification of concepts and patterns of meaning throughout the data. Accordingly, to synthesise and analyse the data, a thematic method was adopted, which according to Braun and Clarke is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data in (rich) detail" (2006, p. 79). Boyatzis defined a theme as "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (1998, p. 161). To go about doing this qualitative data is transcribed, key quotes highlighted and sorts into these "significant statements into themes" to develop "clusters of meaning" (Creswell, 2012, p 62). The coding can be done manually, or a qualitative analysis tool such as Nvivo can be used. However care must be taken with the development of the analytical themes as this is considered by some researchers controversial "since it is dependent on the judgement and insights of the reviewers" (James Thomas and Angela Harden, 2007, p.11).

In 'Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research' (2001) Jennifer Attride-Stirling discusses and defines three levels of themes used as follows:

- Global Theme: Global Themes are super-ordinate themes that encompass the principal metaphors in the data as a whole. Global Themes group sets of Organizing Themes that together present an argument, or a position or an assertion about a given issue or reality. They are macro themes that summarize and make sense of clusters of lower-order themes abstracted from and supported by the data. Thus Global Themes tell us what the texts as a whole are about within the context of a given analysis. Importantly, a set of texts may well yield more than one Global Theme, depending on the complexity of the data and the analytic aims;

- Organizing Themes organize the Basic Themes into clusters of similar issues, simultaneously group the main ideas proposed by several Basic Themes, and dissect the main assumptions underlying a broader theme that is especially significant in the texts as a whole. In this way, a group of Organizing Themes constitute a Global Theme.

- Basic Themes are simple premises characteristic of the data, and on their own they say very little about the text or group of texts as a whole. In order for a Basic Theme to make sense beyond its immediate meaning it needs to be read within the context of other Basic Themes.

(Attride-Stirling, 2001)

This structuring of data into these three thematic levels provides a robust basis for analysis of the, primarily qualitative, data collected in the studies.

A number of approaches to this analysis were also considered. Attride-Stirling discussed the use of an inductive approach to thematic analysis with themes derived from the data collected without first applying a predetermined framework. Attride-Stirling's concept of thematic networks instructed researchers to start "from the Basic Themes and working inwards toward a Global Theme". This inductive approach seeks to derive generalisations from the data "to describe the characteristics of people or social situations, and then to determine the nature of the patterns of the relationships, or networks of relationships, between these characteristics" (Blaikie, 2007, pp.8-11).

An alternative abductive approach focusses on the process of discovering "the motives and reasons that accompany social activities... and to redescribe these... in the technical language of social science discourse... which may then become ingredients in more systematic explanatory accounts" (Blaikie, 2007, pp.8-11).

Whilst these methods may be suitable for the proposed research, a further type of analytical method, retroductive, was considered, in which the "researcher has first to construct a hypothetical model of (an observed regularity) and then proceed to try to establish its existence by observation and experimentation" either taking a structuralist view to "locate explanations in social structures that are external to social actors" or a social constructionist one by focussing on "cognitive mechanisms and socially constructed rules for behaviour"(Blaikie, 2007, pp.8-11).

Whilst an inductive approach is valid for exploratory nature of the research and inductive analysis discussed by Attride-Stirling, where the themes were derived from the data, the retroductive method demands the reverse approach. Following the initial stages of constructing the hypothetical framework from the observed regularities within the secondary research undertaken, the retroductive method works by applying the modalities to "the research situation in the hope that they represent the way in which reality works" (Blaikie, 2007, pp.8-11). This method was therefore selected for analysis of the research undertaken, i.e. the application of a framework to categorise the data derived from the research as it relates to the Global Themes in the form of the three proposed avatar modalities, from which the researcher could work outwards to identify Basic Themes derived from the data and categorise them using Organising Themes applicable to each of the pre-defined Global Themes.

The use of NVivo as a qualitative analysis tool was considered, and this would undoubtedly have proved essential when tackling larger scale projects involving a number of researchers. An alternative qualitative data analysis tool, WeftQDA, was also considered as this had been used to assist with organisation of the secondary data collected as part of the literature review from which the Global Themes were derived. However, it was felt that undertaking manual classification system would allow a more individualised approach to sorting and analysing the data. In particular it was considered that an analysis tool may lead to data outside of an expected pre-determined characteristic norm being overlooked.

Accordingly, a process was set up using the three proposed modalities, i.e. Symbolic, Imaginary and Real, as Global Themes. Data collected was transcribed into Word and assigned to one or more of three folders relating to the Global Themes that the information therein adhered to. The specific data of interest within a document was colour coded by means of

highlighting with one of three different colour highlights each relating to one of the Global Themes, so documents relating to more than one theme were not only duplicated into each folder but could be easily identified by the colour highlighting within them. At this stage, any particular quotations or passages considered to stand out as of special interest, e.g. differing from expectations or worthy of further investigation, was copied into a separate Word document for further consideration.

Within each folder an Excel document was set up with spreadsheets to keep track of data relating to Organising Themes which were derived from themes relating to expression of identity emerging both from the secondary research and from the key areas of discussion within the primary research as follows;

- Role of the avatar

- Avatar appearance

- Social interaction/ behaviour

- Narrative

- Avatar relationship to operator

- Experience of embodiment

These Organising Themes were mirrored across each of the Global Themes, along with an additional spreadsheet for data of interest within each Global Theme which did not fit into any of the pre-determined Organising Themes. The data was reviewed to identify common Basic Themes relating to each of these Organising Themes. To assist in categorisation of documents into each theme, searches within Word were undertaken to highlight Basic Themes or common

word occurrences, e.g. the occurrence of the word 'immersion' would flag a paragraph to be considered for inclusion within the 'Embodiment' Organising Theme. However each of these occurrences was also examined individually rather than rely upon automatic assignment and all documentation was read so that important passages could be assigned regardless of whether any key words or phrases were flagged. Information of special interest that did not fit into any of the pre-determined Organising Themes was manually reviewed to determine if additional Organising Themes needed to be added. Accordingly, subsequent flagging of references to multiple or alt avatars, and to fixed characteristics led to the inclusion of an additional 'continuity of identity' Organising Theme into each of the Global Themes and subsequently into the next iteration of the modalities table. The categorisation of data in this way can be used to test the validity of the proposed framework (Wardle, 2015), and to add to this framework as appropriate, enhancing its robustness.

Chapter 4: Social Science Research Methods and Findings

4.1 Research study 1: Questionnaires to determine typical identity expression

Context:

To ascertain the frequency and nature of changes operators typically make to avatars and thereby determine the continuity of expression of identity which operators typically manifest when using their avatars.

Approach:

Quantitative: Online questionnaire to existing Second Life residents conducted in-world within Second Life.

Date:

Conducted between March 2012 and June 2013.

4.1.1 Rationale

Boellstorff et al write of how it is accepted practice for ethnographers to "collect quantitative data themselves, such as administering a survey or census at the outset of a research project" (2012, p.127). Whilst questionnaires are limited in their ability to obtain in-depth responses, to verify the accuracy of response, and the overall research study focussing primarily on qualitative methods, an initial questionnaire is employed to quickly investigate the typical relationships and expressions of identity which operators manifest when using their avatars and assess the validity of research claims that "the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world have come to govern our embodied identities in the virtual world" (Yee, et al, 2007, p.15).

The questionnaire is designed to ascertain the extent to which existing Second Life residents follow actual world paradigms in their virtual world relationships with their avatars and to obtain data to inform the direction of further research.

4.1.2 The structure of the questionnaire and demographics of the sample

Following guidance in both Denscombe and Collins a simple questionnaire was designed and piloted. Questions were designed to gather information about how frequently operators change aspects of their avatar appearance such as clothes, hair, skin, body shape and sex, and the reason behind such changes. Care was taken when constructing the questionnaire to avoid asking leading questions, ambiguous or confusing questions (e.g. questions asking for two answers in one question or with ambiguous terms; an example of such a question would be 'Do you change the appearance of your avatar frequently' where the term 'frequently' is insufficiently defined), questions requiring specialist knowledge that respondents are unlikely to have (e.g. 'Did the development of your avatar follow post-modern paradigms), irrelevant questions or questions which respondents may find too personal, and to give respondents clear and sufficient choices in answering. Each of the questions gave the option of 'Not Applicable' responses and/or the choice of 'Other' where respondents could specify their own answer (e.g. aspect of appearance changed or reason for changes). Though the questionnaire included questions to collect information on the actual world age band of the respondent particularly to double check the respondent met the 18+ requirement, it was decided that no other actual world demographic data would be collected at this formative stage to keep the questionnaire as short as possible, to maximise response and keep the focus on the manifest identity of the avatar rather than the actual world operator.

Additional questions were included to ascertain the length of residency in, and frequency of use of, Second Life and it was subsequently decided to use a six month minimum residency as a qualifying factor. This followed the protocols used in a similar study by Gilbert et al (2011, p.226) investigating the use of alternative avatars for role-playing and/or experimentation purposes for specified that the participant's primary avatar must have had at least 6 months residency in Second Life. This "minimal residency requirement" ensured that all data were derived from at least moderately experienced operators, technically competent at avatar modification, as opposed to newcomers with unstable patterns of behaviour. The length of residency was deemed particularly important in light of findings from previous researchers that Second Life operators undergo a phase of experimentation before settling into more stable patterns of usage (Warburton, 2008) and, after a period of time, 'avatars more closely resembled the real person' (Bradshaw, 2006), and it was thought that a six month residency was sufficient to give an indication of typical usage patterns.

Schutt states that "samples of more homogeneous populations can be smaller than samples of more diverse populations" (2011, pp.131-171) and whilst Denscombe (2005) advises that 30 respondents can be used as a minimum research sample, he notes that care must be taken when interpreting results with such small samples. Accordingly, as a basis to determine the direction of further research, to highlight significant patterns in the data and to make contact with sufficient respondents with a willingness to participate in such research a target sample size of 100 initial questionnaire responses was anticipated, and in total, including respondents to an initial pilot questionnaire, 114 valid responses were collected.

4.1.3 Sample Method

Whilst some researchers have been instrumental in developing innovative methods for conducting research in Second Life, such as the deployment by Menti (2007) of survey bots (automated in-world robot avatars) which allow financial rewards in Linden Dollars (L$) to be transferred automatically to respondents, others have preferred a more personal ethnographic approach within Second Life or, as in the case of Yee's 2006 research, researchers have recruited respondents from related discussion forums. Writing of Yee's research, Anthony Cocciolo, Hui Soo Chae & Gary Natriello write:

> One interesting aspect of this research is that the solicitation to take the survey was made within discussion forums on websites that cater to MMORPG users, rather than within the MMORPG itself. These surveys were hence deployed on the web rather than within the graphical interface of the MMORPG. Such a solicitation mechanism may create a selection bias: a survey of those who frequent the discussion forms as opposed to those who visit the MMORPG. It would seem that one way to reduce the possibility of selection bias is to include the solicitation to take the survey directly within the MMORPG. Additionally, by deploying the survey directly within the graphical interface of the MMORPG, the user wouldn't have to task over to a web browser, potentially increasing the number of people willing to respond (2007).

This led to the development by Cocciolo et al of Second Look, described as 'a survey tool that deploys itself directly within the virtual environment', in this case Second Life which interacts with participants via the chat interface. However it was felt that using the chat interface could generate large blocks of text and the system did not seem to offer the best solution in terms

of multiple question types or subsequent analysis of the information collected. A further disadvantage of this tool related to privacy concerns, and the fact that other residents within an area could view the responses being given in text chat. Following the reasoning of Cocciolo et al re. the potential of selection bias when recruiting respondents from discussion forums, a method of recruiting respondents in-world was deemed preferable and an in-world questionnaire screen was designed to capture responses, linked to a questionnaire hosted on the electronic survey web site Survey Monkey and allowed respondents to answer either directly on the in-world screen, or open the questionnaire in a web browser, giving greater flexibility for both questionnaire design and respondent, and allowing more robust analysis of collected data.

A pilot survey was made accessible via an in-world screen within the University of Salford Metaverse area of Second Life which was primarily visited by University students and staff of the university. Five responses collected initially resulted in small changes to the wording of the questionnaire but indicating that the in-world questionnaire screen would be an appropriate method of collection of the data required.

Denscombe (2005) and Schutt (2011) were useful in developing the strategy for targeting potential respondents, and in discussing the benefits and limitations of a number of sampling methods. Within Second Life the demographics of the operators, and their similarities and differences, can be difficult to determine and the limited active population of Second Life often necessitates that researchers adopt a non-probability or 'convenience' approach to sampling. Denscombe discusses 'Cluster Sampling' of which he writes "in reality, it is possible to get a good enough sample by focussing on naturally occurring clusters of the particular thing that the researcher wishes to study" (2005, p.37). Denscombe also discusses 'Snowball sampling', i.e. finding further participants from recommendation by existing participants. While Denscombe

views this in a positive light as being an effective way for building up numbers for a sample, it has its drawbacks in so far as, if the original respondent has particular unknown biases which may distort the outcomes, those individuals recommended by them may share such biases which may further distort the sampling results. For example if an individual in the actual world had a tendency towards cross dressing which was not asked and therefore unknown to the researcher, this may conceivably make the individual more likely to experiment with cross gender avatars within Second Life. If this individual then recommended friends who shared this interest to the study, the results may show a disproportionately high level of avatar gender experimentation within the sample group which may not be representative of the population of Second Life. As such the Snowball method is generally to be avoided unless it becomes appropriate to test findings in relation to particular groups with similar actual world psychodemographic profiles, as in the example discussed. With this in mind it was determined to attempt to obtain respondents from a variety of 'clusters' within Second Life, by making contact with potential respondents using a variety of techniques at various virtual locations and at a variety of times of day with particular emphasis on different types of resident as defined by areas in which they congregate. Areas within Second Life were required to have enough active population or traffic to be able to recruit sufficient research participants and thus clusters were found within academic areas including University of Salford Metaverse and the Virtual Tech Museum, social areas such as virtual London, adult oriented areas such as Nightclubs, etc.

Following the initial test sample in University of Salford Metaverse additional screens were then placed in a wider variety of locations and links to the in-world SLURLs placed in specific web forums (such as the Tech Virtual exhibition forum). Individuals were also canvassed directly within Second Life by personal approach from the researcher's avatar

accompanied by a floating screen linking to the questionnaire. To gather further responses and recruit a wider demographic profile of respondents this direct research was conducted in a variety of regions and at different times of day. One barrier was that Second Life has become so popular as an environment in which to conduct research into virtual worlds that many residents have become jaded and reluctant to participate in research activity, so Menti's precedent (2007) of offering monetary rewards for respondents has become common practice within Second Life research. Following this approach, to encourage a response individuals were offered, where necessary, a payment of L$50 (in-world Linden Dollars, approximately 15 pence in UK equivalence) per participant which respondents could claim by means of a code which was accessible when the questionnaire was completed which they could then message or text-chat to the researcher in-world at which point the L$50 would be transferred to them. The advantage of this transaction being initiated by a researcher rather than by an automated process meant payment need not always be offered, and, whilst payment could still be made almost instantaneously following the code being quoted a check could be made by the researcher to ensure genuine completion prior to payment being made. To prevent respondents completing the questionnaire multiple times only one payment per avatar could be made and the Survey Monkey site was set to only accept one response per IP address.

4.1.4 Findings

114 valid qualifying responses were collected in total, with two of 116 answers having been rejected due to respondents having been resident in Second Life for significantly less than the six month qualifying period, and one of these completing the survey inappropriately. A review after the first five responses led to minor wording changes and a further review after 36

responses led to more detail being added to one question to gain additional information relating to what aspects of avatar 'skin' are changed by operators, e.g. tanning, tattoos, racial characteristics.

4.1.4.1 Question 1 - Frequency of change of appearance

Participants were questioned regarding the frequency with which they changed the appearance or clothing of their avatar within Second Life. Whilst all participants changed the appearance of their avatar to some extent, albeit in almost half of the cases operators defined this as 'only occasionally' or 'very infrequently', no pattern was evident relating to the frequency of such changes. Furthermore there was no significant variation in the responses collected from different types of Second Life area, or between those spontaneously responding to the questionnaires situated in various locations and those being approached by the researcher's avatar.

However the significance of the fact that no respondents indicated that they never made changes to their avatar appearance must not be underestimated. Whilst in many game environments operators may initially modify their avatar appearance, it is not common practice to continue to do so on a regular basis. Even in games with both ludic and social aspects, such as World of Warcraft, it is uncommon for operators to significantly change the appearance of their avatar; at time of writing the only way to change avatar appearance within World of Warcraft, except for items of clothing or as a result of occasionally temporary effects in response to the narrative, is to use a paid appearance change service. The response may therefore suggest the development of a significantly different relationship between operators and avatars than that manifest within other games environments, in so far as avatars are viewed less as fixed symbols

representing a static role, but more as mutable entities, representing either different facets of a stable yet changeable imagined and constructed self, or undergoing constant fluid change in response to real interaction. Whilst the response to the question might simply be attributed to the ease with which avatar appearance can be changed within Second Life compared to other game environments, this flexibility to modify appearance within Second Life might similarly be viewed as catalytic in the paradigm shift in the nature of operator/avatar relationship.

Table 1: Q1 - Frequency of change of appearance

Frequency	Responses	Percentage
Very frequently (almost every visit	36	31.6%
Frequently (once every few visits)	23	20.2%
Occasionally	23	20.2%
Very infrequently (e.g. Only on special occasions)	32	28.1%
Never	0	0%

Figure 1: Q1 - Frequency of change of appearance

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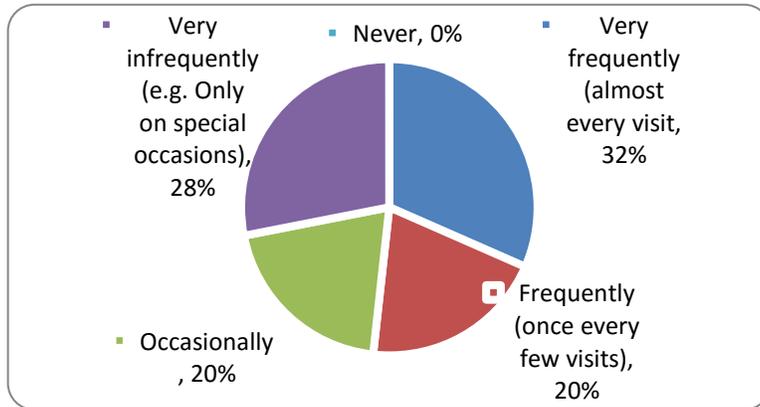
4.1.4.2 Question 2: Reason for change of appearance

Participants were questioned about the reasons motivating them to change the appearance of their avatar. The majority of respondents indicated that changes were often made simply when the operator felt like a change (71.9%), or for the purposes of experimentation (43.9%) which supports the possible conclusion drawn from the responses to question 1 that avatars are viewed less as fixed symbols representing a static role, and more as mutable entities.

A significant amount of respondents noted that they make changes in appearance when meeting different social groups (41.2%) or visiting different locations (43.9%.) and there was significant overlap between these groups with all 47 participants responding that they change avatar appearance in response to meeting different social groups also responded that they change avatar appearance when visiting different locations. This group of respondents, totalling over 40% of the total responses, are therefore seemingly motivated to change the appearance of their avatar by the same social or psycho-geographic factors that may apply to them in the actual world, suggesting that they are behaving in accordance with the Imaginary avatar modality by acting in accordance with actual world social conventions. At 43.9% the tendency toward identity experimentation may be seen as higher than would be expected within the actual world environment, though further information needs to be gathered as to the extent of this experimentation; within the actual world we may experiment relatively frequently with a new tie or even hairstyle, but are unlikely to take frequent actions to radically change our whole appearance.

36% of respondents indicated 'character development' as a reason for changing their avatar appearance, indicating a perception of an ongoing constructed narrative to the avatar

existence which allowed development to take place, again typical of the Imaginary avatar modality.

Responses specified as 'Other' were 'to attend fancy dress balls' and 'for role play', both of which are interesting in so far as the ability to disguise one's appearance as one would for a fancy dress ball, and the ability to play a role would both seem to be an inherent function of the avatar and yet are seen as activities separate from the day to day avatar operation which give purpose to appearance change, as they would within the operator's existence within the actual world. 'Role play' is particularly interesting as a response as the assumption of a role would seem to adhere to the Symbolic modality; however the ability of the operator to adopt such a role as a constructed persona actually allows it to be viewed as situated within the Imaginary modality, perhaps as a Symbolic palimpsest of an Imaginary avatar, the role adopted being Symbolic whilst the underlying avatar through which the role is performed still adhering to the Imaginary modality. The question may also be raised as to whether the operator is undertaking a secondary role play via the avatar, or whether the avatar itself is engaged in role play via the operator. Meadows asked a similar question in 'I, Avatar' (2007, p.92): "If an avatar had an avatar would that also be me."

Additional responses specified as Other included 'projects' and 'machinima' both of which are more difficult to place into a category in so far as the operator could view them as tools used to facilitate the creation of the machinima/project (Symbolic modality) or as expressions of the operator performing within the machinima/project (Imaginary modality).

Table 2: Q2- Reason for change of appearance

Reasons	Responses	Percentage
When I feel like a change	82	71.9%
When visiting different locations	50	43.9%
When meeting different social groups	47	41.2%
Experimentation	50	43.9%
Character development	41	36.0%
Other (please specify)	6	5.3%

Figure 2: Q2- Reason for change of appearance
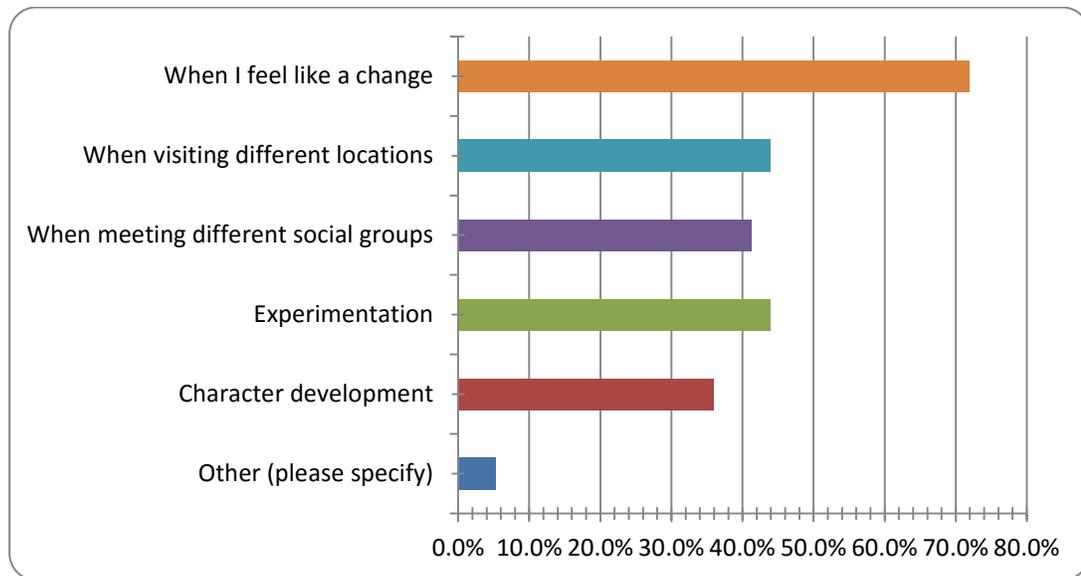
4.1.4.3 Question 3: Aspects of appearance changed

Respondents were asked what aspects of their avatar they changed. While almost all respondents made changes to clothes and the majority to hair significantly fewer changed skin, body shape or appearance of gender.

It can be seen that these responses seem generally congruent to actual world behaviour, and a conclusion might be reached that this is indicative of avatars adhering to the Imaginary modality. However when the data was reviewed following collection of the first 36 responses it was seen to be slightly anomalous to this premise that changes to the avatar's skin (33.3%) were made more frequently than changes to the avatar's body shape (16.7%). Of the 36 respondents to Question 3 two responses listed as 'Other' had been re-categorised to be assigned to skin, but even prior to this reassignment changes to skin had shown at 27.8%., significantly higher than changes to body shape. The two re-categorised responses originally listed as 'Other' and subsequently assigned to skin were 'colour' and 'race (role play elf)', as neither respondent had also selected skin as a response. Additionally one response listed as 'Other' and not re-categorised was 'species' as this respondent had already selected both skin and body shape. This contrasts, but is not completely incongruent with, the finding of a 2007 survey conducted by Global Market Insite quoted by Au (2007, p.64) which found 22% of Second Life residents stated they had a different skin colour to their avatar. The decision to re-categorise answers within the 'Skin' category along with the perceived incongruence of changes to skin being higher than changes to body shape led to the decision to modify the survey to obtain more detailed information regarding the changes respondents made to avatar skin.

The subsequent responses remained congruous with those obtained from the original 36 respondents including two further re-categorised responses, 'shoes' which was assigned to clothes and 'all the above' which was assigned to all other categories.

The additional information obtained from operators selecting 'skin' revealed that 'applying make-up' was the primary change made to skin. Although the 20.5% of participants applying tattoos is probably a somewhat higher percentage than would be found in the actual world, and bears further investigation, this may be explained by the relative ease and inexpense of applying, and removing, a tattoo within Second Life as compared to its actual world counterpart. 'Race' accounted for only 6.4% of responses, equal to that of changes to appearance of gender. Although this cannot be compared directly to actual world behaviour where race cannot change, parallels can be made with actual world factors associated to race such as religion or Nationality which are changeable. Also, based on the inclusion of 'race (role play elf)' and 'species' within the first 36 responses it might be presumed that at least some of the respondents referring to race may include non-human within this definition.

The 2007 Global Market Insite survey quoted by Au also found that 23% of Second Life residents said they had played a different gender, with 2012 research by Bernadett Koles and Peter Nagy finding this figure to be only 13% whilst research by Gilbert et al (2011, p.226) reported 46% of respondents had used alt avatars to experiment with a different gender and Grosman (2010) found over 80% of operators had experimented with playing different genders. The findings herein that only 6.4% of respondents said that their avatar ever changed appearance of gender may initially appear to conflict with these earlier findings, however it must be remembered that the current study does not consider the operator's actual world expression of gender, or whether or not the operator has more than one avatar with which to represent different

genders, but simply whether the individual avatar ever changes its gender appearance. Accordingly the findings are not in conflict with the findings of other researchers. Similarly the Gilbert et al (2011, p.226) found 24% of participants in their study reported using alts to experiment with a different race compared to 6.4% of participants in this study who reported ever changing the race of their avatar which supports the premise that operators are significantly more likely to experiment with different avatar appearances via the creation of alt avatars than by making changes to their existing avatar.

When viewed in conjunction with the findings of the previous question that 43.9% changed appearance for the purposes of experimentation it can be concluded that such experimental changes are generally superficial with minor impact on the overall expression of identity by the avatar. The conclusions of the research by Koles and Nagy (2012) support this: "the apparent consistency and stability in the established profiles may indicate that once individuals create their virtual selves, they prefer to keep the core elements of their identities constant, with relatively small amounts of variation."

Table 3: Q3 - Aspects of appearance changed

(total of 114 respondents)

Aspect Changed	Responses	Percentage
Clothes	111	97.4%
Hair	76	66.7%
Skin	35	30.7%
Body Shape	23	20.2%
Gender	6	5.3%

Figure 3: Q3 - Aspects of appearance changed (total of 114 respondents)

Table 4: Q3- Aspects of appearance changed

(78 respondents following the addition of separate categories relating to skin)

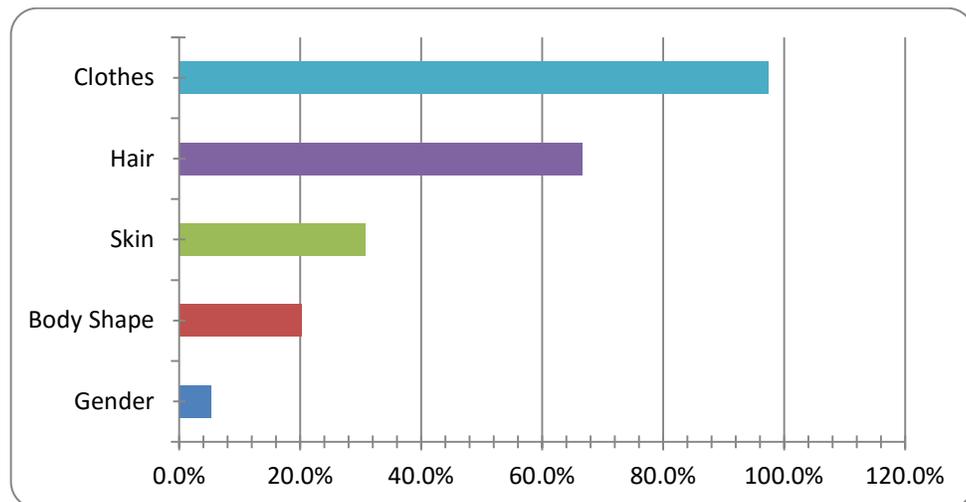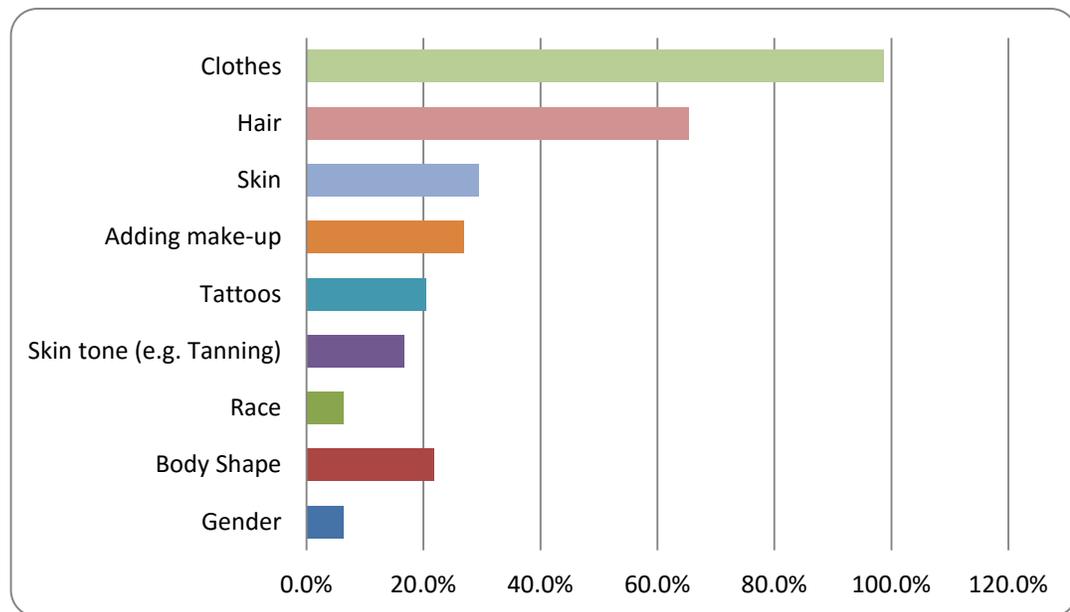| Aspect Changed	Responses	Percentage
Clothes	77	98.7%
Hair	51	65.4%
Skin	23	29.5%
Adding make-up	21	26.9%
Tattoos	16	20.5%
Skin tone (e.g. Tanning)	13	16.7%
Race	5	6.4%
Body Shape	17	21.8%
Gender	5	6.4%

Figure 4: Q3 - Aspects of appearance changed
(78 respondents following the addition of separate categories relating to skin)

4.1.5 Analysis of data

It was during the analysis of data from this phase of the research that key Basic Themes of avatar Sex, Race and Attire began to emerge as relating to the Organising Theme of avatar appearance. The analysis and interpretation of data relating to these Basic Themes, using them as a starting point from which to derive information and categorisation of such data facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships of the avatars to the Global Themes. An overlap of Organising Themes also became evident with 'Continuity of Appearance' emerging as a Basic Theme within the Organising Theme 'Continuity of Identity'; similarly behaviours within the Organising Theme of 'Social Interaction' had an impact on 'Avatar Appearance', particularly relating the Basic Theme of 'Attire'.

The findings of this research study suggest that, once established, the avatar's key physical attributes, and particularly gender and race, are generally viewed by operators as constant and that changes made to avatar appearance tend to reflect real life behaviour wherein relatively minor changes are made, often in response to social interaction in accordance with the constructed identity paradigm and behaviours which typify the Imaginary avatar classification, supporting Yee's assertion that "the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world have come to govern our embodied identities in the virtual world" (2007).

This is not to imply that avatar attributes mirror the same actual world attributes as those of the operator, simply that, once decided upon, they become viewed by the operator as static regardless of the sex/gender or other physical attributes of the avatar's creator/operator or whether these are the same as those expressed by the physical appearance of the avatar. This supports a hypothesis that those attributes of the operator which are fixed are also seen to be less

changeable for the avatar, hence the use by many operators of alternative avatars as the vehicle to express alternative physical or behavioural representations (Messinger et al, 2008; Gilbert et al, 2011).

Having determined that participants within the study group typically manifested a continuity of expression of identity when using their avatars congruent with the expectations of identity continuity in the actual world, it is useful to interpret the quantitative findings of the survey in terms of the modalities previously defined. As already discussed, the fact that all operators changed their avatar's appearance at least infrequently seemed to indicate that, unlike in many games environment, avatars are viewed as changeable rather than as fixed symbols representing a static role. We can observe that many behaviours such as changing the avatar's appearance in response to different locations or social groups conform to the concept of a curated stable avatar-self leading to the logical conclusion that the expression of identity can generally be seen to adhere to the Imaginary modality.

However, given the mirroring of actual world behaviour, it might alternatively be argued that the avatars are taking on the symbolic role of an actual world person, and behaving in accordance with the pre-defined parameters of that role in an attempt to make the avatar more closely symbolise the actual. It is already a noted phenomenon that environment within Second Life can mirror actual world paradigms without fulfilling any function, e.g. the unnecessary presence of kitchens, bathrooms and beds in Second Life buildings. If behaviour too can be demonstrated to follow this pattern, this duplication of actual world form without function, by taking actions which fulfil non-existent functions or at best serve the function of providing symbolic anchors for the avatar within Second Life, thus encourages adherence to actual world

paradigms and further distances the avatar and operator from the authentic and potentially transformative real experience of their interactive potential within Second life.

Further research was considered, to be conducted ethnographically within Second Life, to triangulate and verify the findings of this study by taking sequences of photographs of avatars on a regular basis so as to document the frequency and nature of changes made to their appearance and compare this with the responses given. However to conduct this as a follow up to the survey with those respondents who indicated they would take part in further research, or with new participants, presented a number of problems as follows;

- To comply with ethical standards participants must be aware that the photographs are being taken.

- Participant patterns of access to Second Life vary greatly so to locate a specific group of participants at regular intervals would prove logistically difficult without pre-arranging meetings and teleporting to the avatar's location.

Both of these factors were deemed likely to lead participants to behave in a way in which they might otherwise not and led to a decision not to continue the study in this direction. However key issues identified when analysing this data such as the relationship between operator and avatar when the avatar becomes involved with role play and the tendency towards experimentation with superficial identity characteristics such as tattoos will be further explored when obtaining qualitative data via interviews, and by ethnographic methods, in the subsequent elements of this research.

4.2 Research Study 2: Interviews with New Operators Developing Avatars

Context:

To determine the factors which influence operators when developing and fashioning their avatars and the effect this process has upon the relationship between operator and avatar.

Approach:

Qualitative: Interviews of new avatar operators within Second Life to explore the avatar creation process and the development of operators relationship with the avatar, supported by operator logs of decisions taken relating to changes to the appearance of an avatar during its developmental stages and screen shot portraits documenting the process.

Date:

Conducted between March 2012 and August 2013.

4.2.1 Rationale

Boellstorff et al write that interviewing can provide "valuable data for any ethnographic project... The meanings people give to their actions and the world around them form an essential component of understanding. Interviews provide opportunities to learn about people's elicited narratives and the representations of their social worlds" (2012, p.92). A decision was taken to interview operators new to Second Life to record the development of their avatars without the lens of hindsight and to compare this with the experiences of existing operators collected in the next phase of the research.

4.2.2 Sampling Methods and Size

Again using Denscombe (2005) as a guideline, a minimum sample size of 30 interviews for each phase was seen as desirable. However the recruitment of new operators willing to commit to the time necessary to develop avatars limited numbers and, due to some new operators leaving the sample either due to being unable to commit to the necessary amount of time, or experiencing difficulties with the Second Life avatar generation process, the final study sampled only 14 new operators.

Participants were selected by convenience methods from a variety of actual world groups, mostly through existing social, work and university networks and recruited by personal contact. Participants primarily identified as white males and were recruited from within academic establishments although an effort was made to include participants from outside these demographic parameters encouraging participation from individuals of different age groups, sexes and demographic backgrounds and interests. However individuals were required to have at least a functional level of computer literacy so as not to be deterred immediately from participation by the Second Life character modification interface. Of the original group of twenty participants five were female, representing 25% of the intended sample. However two females and four males left the sample due either to being unable to commit to the necessary amount of time, or to experiencing difficulties with the Second Life interface or avatar generation process. The remaining females therefore represented 21% of the final participants (compared with 42% female demographics within Second Life as quoted by the KZero study, 2007). Unfortunately only one non-white (male) participant was recruited which cannot be said to be representative of the mix of ethnicities using Second Life. Of the fourteen participants who completed the study, the demographics are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Demographics of participant in Research Study 2

Male	18-24	White	students in art or creative technology related further or higher education	6
Female	18-24	White	students in art related further education	1
Male	18-24	Mixed race	students in art or creative technology related further or higher education	1
Male	25-44	White	employed in academic roles	1
Male	25-44	White	employed in roles not related to academic institutions	3
Female	25-44	White	working within academic institutions in non-teaching roles	2

As shown in Table 5, eight participants (57%) were in the age range 18-24 with 6 (53%) in the range 25-44. This compares with studies showing 24% of Second Life residents in the age range 18-24 with 59% in the range 25-44. (KZero, 2007). Whilst this research does not directly reflect the demographics of Second Life, the age ranges of the participants are representative of typical Second Life residents.

Prior to the study all participants were unfamiliar with Second Life. Participants were asked to create a Second Life account and create an avatar for their own use, and further asked to keep a written and visual log using screen shots charting the construction and visual development of their avatars over several weeks to form a lasting record of the development process. Collins describes photo-interviewing, i.e. using photography as a tool within an interview context, as a method which can "bridge psychological and physical realities" (2010, p.141). Boellstorff et al write that while "capturing images is never a shortcut for interpretive or analytical work... (photos or screenshots) can be incredibly rich data points as a source of in-depth analysis when used in the context of other materials" (2012, p.115). Interviews were subsequently undertaken and the information in the logs and the screen shots used as a tool within interviews to discuss the narrative of the development of the avatar. The interviews were all conducted face to face. Whilst originally it had been intended to undertake group interviews of some participants to try to draw additional information and shared experiences out of the participants, the logistics of doing so meant that all interviews were conducted individually. It had also been the intention to video tape the interviews where possible, but all participants either declined to be filmed or expressed a preference for an audio recording of the interview to be made and ultimately all interviews were audio recorded digitally using a Zoom recorder.

In some cases short meetings took place during the avatar generation process, sometimes to assist with technical elements of the process or to discuss specific elements process at the request of the participant. All participants were asked to set aside an hour for the summative interviews, and these actually ranged from between 25 and 75 minutes. Interviews took place on 'neutral' territory in a location where the participant felt comfortable. In most cases this was a classroom though in some cases interviews were also recorded in quiet cafes or public houses, and in one case on a park bench.

The summative interviews were semi-structured in nature with broad categories of questions to be adhered to, allowing responses to be categorised, but with the flexibility to bespoke or add questions prior to or during the interview to further investigate the responses of, or images and documentation of avatar creation process supplied by, specific respondents.

The topics for discussion were provided to participants in advance as follows;

- factors and choice influencing the appearance of their avatar.

- whether the avatar represented any aspect/s of the operator.

- the operator's intention when developing the appearance of an avatar.

- the operator's purpose for creating the avatar

- the operator's relationship with the avatar.

Prior to commencing the interviews the researcher had a list of prompts and additional discussion sub-topics relating to each question that could be used as necessary within the discussions. These were as follows;

- when discussing factors and choice influencing the appearance of their avatar further questions could be asked as follows;

  o whether the appearance was it based on any pre-determined physical appearance, e.g. actual world person or fictional character.

  o why the operator chose particular styles of clothing, a particular expression of gender, skin colour and race.

- when discussing whether the avatar represented any aspect/s of, or share any characteristics with, the operator, reference could be made to factors such as styles of clothing, a particular expression of gender, skin colour and race, if these had not already been discussed.

- when discussing the operator's intentions when developing the physical appearance of an avatar, further questions could be asked or prompts given relating to the following;

  o whether the avatar's appearance was based on their own, or that of a third party, where this had not already been discussed

  o whether the avatar's appearance was designed to express an idealised version of a specific aspect of the operator's personality, or a specific personality type that the operator found desirable.

  o whether the avatar was designed to 'fit in' with social groups within Second Life

- whether the avatar was designed to be perceived as attractive to other Second Life residents.

- when discussing the operator's relationship with the avatar, additional questions or prompts could probe the nature of this relationship as required and may relate to, or clarify, whether the operator views the avatar as;

  - a functional way of communicating with others in Second Life

  - a costume they wear when in Second Life

  - a role they play when in Second Life

  - a fluid appearance they can change to suit their moods or fit in with others

  - a separate personality under the control of the operator

  - an independent personality

A final question asked participants if they intended to continue to use Second Life and if so for what purpose.

Due to the face-to-face nature of the interviews, the researcher needed more preparation as to the specific topics which may need to be given additional exploration based on any formative conversations with the participants, whilst also being able to react to unexpected directions taken by the responses more quickly than was required by the interviews conducted by text based methods.

4.2.3 Findings

Fourteen participants completed the study, the demographics of these completers are shown in Table 2 in the previous chapter. The study encouraged the participant to create a visual log of the development of the appearance of their avatar, and a diary of the reasons for the choices they have made. Participants were asked to include within these logs screen shot photography of avatar development over a period of time and the reasons for changes made to stimulate discussion and triangulate and validate the information obtained by interview. In some cases logs were relatively detailed whilst in others they were limited to two or three images. There follows a synopsis of the main trends emerging from the interviews and visual logs, after which the discussion will focus on specific areas of interest within the findings, particularly those which were unexpected or differed from the general trends.

<u>4.2.3.1 Synopsis of results</u>

All 11 male participants created avatars that shared key physical traits with the actual world physical appearance of the operator as follows;

- All 11 avatars created by male participants were male in appearance

- All shared the same skin colour as the operator (10 white, 1 mixed race)

- 9 of the avatars were dressed in a way that was not dissimilar to the operator's actual world style of clothing with similar hair styles and colouring, and shared a similar body type to the operator

- The remaining 2 avatars created by male participants drew inspiration by combining or developing elements from popular culture.

From these results it was determined that an unexpectedly high proportion (81%) of male participants, regardless of age or other demographic differences, had without prompting deliberately decided to fashion their avatar to very closely resemble their actual world physical appearance whilst the others drew inspiration from characters from popular culture. Again, this is consistent with findings of previous researchers including Koles and Nagi (2012) who concluded the majority of the individuals tend to use their offline selves as the starting point when creating their virtual self-representations.

However, of the three female operators, none created avatars that were either directly representative of their actual world physical appearance or adhered to the conventional representations of beauty that generally typify female avatar construction within Second Life;

- The youngest of the three female participants, ZarinaB, in the 18-23 category had experimented with a number of very different appearances, including different coloured skins, different modes of dress, etc., though all had been females with 'typical' avatar female body shapes (i.e. 'Lead actress' style body types, well-toned without being over exaggerated, appearing 20-30 years old). She discussed how the appearances had been inspired by different characters within popular culture.

- The two older females, 28-40, both created the avatars that differed significantly from the operator's actual world appearance with one choosing to represent her avatar as a slightly androgynous male, and the other a bright pink robot.

4.2.3.2 Trends emerging from the study

The interviews with, and visual logs of, the nine operators whose avatars most closely resembled the physical appearance of their actual world selves indicated that they had all chosen a pre-designed avatar that they felt to most closely correspond with their own physical appearance and began to quickly modify it with the intent of replicating themselves within Second Life. Interestingly all nine had sought to copy their actual world appearance as faithfully as possible and expressed that they had not tried to express an idealised version of their physical appearance or enhance a specific aspect of their personality. Nonetheless, different participants had different perspectives when creating the avatars as self-portraits. Figure 5 shows how Operator 1 spent time replicating his appearance as accurately and realistically as possible whilst Figure 6 shows how Operator 2 started with a relatively realistic avatar (a) before developing a more caricatured version of himself and discussed that he had given the avatar oversized ears as this was an aspect of his actual world appearance that he was self-conscious about (b). When questioned why he had chosen to accentuate, rather than hide, an aspect of appearance he felt was negative he responded that he wanted to accurately portray the image of his actual world self. However following the interview, and after spending more time in Second Life, he modified his appearance again using a purchased avatar shape, skin and wig to create a version of his actual world appearance that conformed to more typical norms of attractiveness (c).

Figure 5. Operator 1 captures his appearance as realistically as possible

Figure 6. Development of Operator 2's avatar

6a (above)

6b (above)

6c (above)

During the avatar creation process many of the operators discussed how the most difficult aspect of their avatar to 'get right' was the hair. Some had experimented with using wigs to create the appearance they wanted but most had chosen to reject this and settled for the nearest approximation of what they were trying to achieve by using the standard avatar modification tools. When questioned further on this, most participants generally concurred that wigs were too detailed and 'didn't look right' or that they would wear an actual wig so it didn't feel right having their avatar wear one.

This attempt by the nine participants to replicate their actual world constructed physical appearance may at first consideration seem to typify the constructed Imaginary modality. However, on further consideration it is evident that the construction of the Imaginary identity has taken place not within the virtual world, but the actual one, and the avatar identity is therefore not constructed, but rather transcribed, to allow the avatar to play the role of the constructed operator whilst within Second Life and becomes not a tabula rasa, but a transcribed and Symbolic role identity foundation onto which any in-world Imaginary identity can be constructed. It is very possible that, after some time residing in Second Life, the identities of the operator and avatar would diverge and become constructed in different ways due to differing social experience, but at the point of interview only the very beginnings of such in-world construction were evident. Some consideration therefore needs to be given to amending the table of characteristics defining the avatar modalities to include a transcribed 'portrait' identity within the Symbolic role category rather than the Imaginary constructed, as a characteristic distinct from a more developed avatar persona which has been transformed in-world by the process of construction, social interaction or application of narrative. The beginnings of this process from

transcribed to the imposition of constructed narrative are indicated by the decision of Operator 2 to caricature his avatar by giving it oversized ears.

Most of the nine operators in the group whose avatars most closely resembled the physical appearance of their actual world selves also chose avatar names that were similar to their actual world names and some discussed visiting Second Life areas that were similar to the places they might go in the actual world. JonniL discussed how the first place he visited was a Sports Bar which he chose because 'it looked welcoming' and was the sort of place he "would head for if (he) were alone in a strange city." He recalled that "though the bar was relatively quiet" he had taken a seat at the bar and "made small talk with the other people in there", feeling that making conversation was easy as he felt that "the sort of people who chose to go there would have something in common" with him.

The different outcomes of avatars created by different groups corresponded with the different intentions stated by the operators when creating them; whilst those participants replicating or caricaturing their physical appearance discussed either how they wanted to create a version of themselves to represent them in Second Life, or simply to create an avatar they could use to communicate and perform tasks in Second Life, both more indicative of a Symbolic role identity than an Imaginary constructed one, the two more experimental male operators, and all the female operators, spoke of creating characters they identified with, expressing aspects of themselves or creating idealised versions of themselves within Second Life.

At the time of the interviews none of the participants felt that they had designed their avatars specifically so as to 'fit in' with social groups within Second Life or to be attractive to other Second Life residents, although one admitted to doing so later. Another, ZarinaB,

acknowledged that her avatar probably was attractive to others whilst one male participant immodestly stated of his avatar: "I didn't particularly care whether he was attractive to others or not but he turned out attractive because I made him look like me." None of the participants had proactively developed any social bonds within Second Life and it was not surprising therefore that only one expressed a strong intention to remain resident within Second Life following the study, although some said that they may use the avatar to visit again.

4.2.3.3 Specific cases of interest - ZarinaB

The ZarinaB avatar created by the youngest of the female participants, who described herself as an avid video game player, went through a number of iterations, all of which were loosely based on strong female characters from popular culture including Harley Quinn from Batman comics and Gamora from Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy movie.

She likened the Second Life environment to virtual game play more than any of the other participants, and discussed how she saw changing the avatar appearance in a similar way to adopting different characters within games like Mortal Combat and the DC Universe Online game. This would suggest that her choices were all simply the assumption of pre-defined choices or transcriptions of characters from popular culture, which would be congruent with the Symbolic avatar modality. However her enthusiasm for the avatar seemed to suggest a greater degree of immersion in so far as the choices she was making were part of a wider narrative she was creating for the avatar which she described as representing aspects of herself. She didn't see any of her avatar's appearances as being a final representation of herself but rather different representations of what she wanted to project at a given time: "I wanted the avatar to show me as positive, strong female and using recognisable characters allowed people to see this... With the

Harley Quinn avatar I can be playful, when I'm dressed as Gamora people had better not get in my way."

The language she used to discuss her relationship with the avatar was also telling; when asked about her choice of using exclusively female appearances she responded: "It's not that I don't like playing male characters, I just prefer being females" When discussing assuming male roles in games she referred to 'playing male characters' suggesting a more fixed, Symbolic role or narrative; however when referring to female avatars the language was much more personal, i.e. 'being' females, 'I can be playful', people not getting 'in my way'. This, perhaps unconscious, distinction between 'playing' or performing a role and 'being' the avatar shows a clear progression not only from the Symbolic to the Imaginary, but also perhaps indicative of a move towards the experiential nature of a Real avatar. Though ZamiraB did not continue within Second Life after the study and her operator chose to return to game worlds it would have been interesting to see how this avatar would have developed within Second Life perhaps into a representation of a positive, strong female without the need to be associated with pre-defined Imaginary character types.

4.2.3.4 Specific cases of interest: de-humanisation

The two male participants who did not create representations of their actual world selves both stated that their intention was to create an avatar that was merely functional, i.e. to perform tasks within Second Life, but this was not the only similarity between the two. Both went through a variety of visual iterations before deciding on the 'final' less human versions discussed in the interviews. Both discussed how they started by creating avatars with which they felt comfortable and with which they shared key traits, they developed these by adding and

combining elements from popular culture. Both also independently stated that they felt uncomfortable talking to other people within Second Life, even though both were regular participants on multi-user gaming platforms and forums and, interestingly, both created avatars that, despite multiple iterations, were always represented de-identified by costume masking the facial features and, through sequential modification, successively de-humanised, though neither participant attributed any meaning, or even prior intent, to this.

Avatar MikeSantis (Figure 8) drew inspiration from a character from the game Metal Gear Solid. Whilst earlier versions retained a Caucasian skin colour beneath the headgear and also drew from other popular culture influences such as steampunk, the later versions adopted a more minimalist approach which the operator defined as 'robotic', and discussed how he had tried to remove visual references not only to humankind, but to race and gender too: "I was a robot. Defining the sex and race of a robot isn't possible. Robots may not be a race at all but I fear they may take over and if the digital worlds are first then my character should be safe and I can join the ranks."

Figure 7: Alternative appearances of ZarinaB

Figure 8: Iterations of MikeSantis avatar

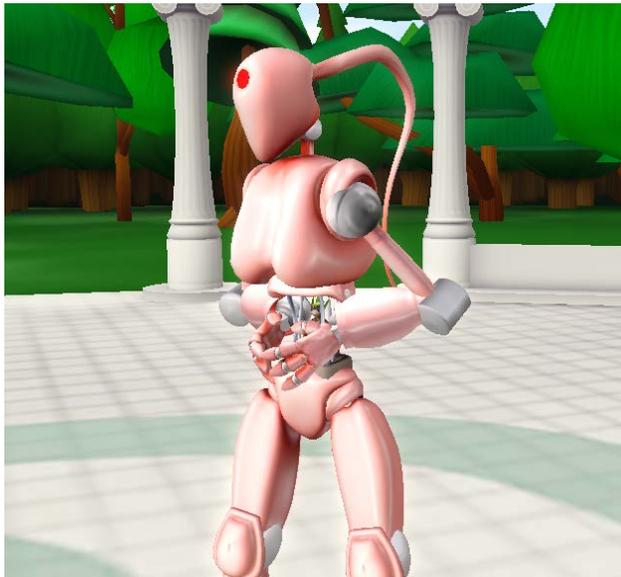*Figure 9 (above): Iterations of Optimum Rhyme avatar*

Figure 10: Tyrell_Kaineus avatar

The operator of avatar OptimumRhyme (Figure 9) discussed how he did not want to create an avatar to reflect how he chose to represent himself in the real world. The avatar went through a number of iterations with which he was unhappy, including wearing attire reminiscent of clothing from fantasy games, and although he didn't ascribe any meaning to the 'bag over the head' image of the avatar, it may be theorised that this was a reflection of this unhappiness, or at least of a feeling that the avatar was not yet ready to unveil to the world. He discussed the choices for his 'final' avatar as follows: "I mainly chose clothes based on what I found entertaining, rather than what I wear in the actual world. I didn't really have a set theme in mind when creating my avatar. When I came across the Transformer outfits being sold alongside a series of shirts featuring different rappers, I found the two things being so close to each other quite amusing so I decided to combine the two things to create Optimus Rhyme. I created the avatar based of something that I found funny, so if it reflects an aspect of me it could act as a representation of my sense of humour." Though his choice to represent himself as a male avatar was deliberately based on his own actual world gender he stated that he felt that his appearance and gender within Second Life were not fixed and, were he to remain in Second Life, he would probably continue to make changes to the avatar appearance 'to suit (his) mood at the time' or to 'recreate a character' from popular culture. However he also stated that it was more likely that, if he wanted to experiment with avatars of different genders he would be more likely to do so by using multiple alt accounts.

It is of interest that not only did both of the males who took an experimental constructionist Imaginary approach to avatar development arrive at a roboticised avatar, albeit both very different, but one of the female participants also chose to create a roboticised avatar, Tyrell_Kaineus, drawing the name from a combination of a transgendered character from Greek

myth and a corporation from a Philip K. Dick novel. However unlike the others, this robotic appearance was decided upon early in the development process. Tyrell's operator discussed how she had originally considered male and female human appearing possibilities, but became 'enchanted' by the idea of a robot avatar. However she felt that she still needed the avatar to remain anthropomorphic and humanoid in appearance, and decided that it would be easier for others to interact with her if the avatar had gendered characteristics so decided that the avatar should be female in appearance, stating her reasons as follows: "I know how people tend to behave around females and how females act. And if I was going to be female, I decided to be ultra-female, so the avatar had curves, breasts, even a pony tail and heels. The proportions were also female for example, the shape of the face, the size of the arms and shoulders were definitely feminine even if the combination of seven foot tall and hour glass figure is rarely seen in real life."

She went on to discuss her reasons for choosing the robotic appearance:

"I am not sure if I actually want to be a robot but the idea of being difficult to damage and ageless appealed to me. It also seemed appropriate to me to be an artificial life form to interact within an artificial world. It seemed more honest and to make more sense to me.

I had originally wanted to make my skin look like water, either with ripples or an image of sunlight playing on the surface water. Either that, or to look like I was made of ice crystals. I liked the juxtaposition of being something that was unnatural being made of something from nature. Also looking delicate and fragile, like ice crystals or a waterfall, but with the durability commonly associated with being a robot. Ideally I

would have like the image to have been animated, so it looked like I was made of water and I would freeze it like ice if I wanted too. Or I could have it moving when I was sleeping (or recharging) and still when I was active. However technical limitations prevented this so I settled for pink to resemble skin, again a juxtaposition for a robot, and to enhance its femininity.

I did like the single dot in the upper centre of my face, I had wanted to colour my head to look like the dot was the centre of concentric rings, like when a stone is dropped into a still pool of water. With being a robot I never considered race in terms of Asian, Caucasian, etc., although the dot was unintentionally reminiscent of a Hindu bindi but I suppose a robot is a race in itself.

I suppose the avatar represents how I would like to look if I was an artificial life form. If I was a robot I would like to be mobile and independent, something that a humanoid form permits. I would also like it to be obvious that I was a robot rather than some form of "super human". Even if I wore clothes, my skin would be an indicator that I was artificial I think there is something more honest about that plus people tend to get upset if they feel that have been fooled, which might happen if I look too human. Robots, well the AI I encountered in fiction, tended to be able to keep good and bad very clear and separate. They were also loyal and dependable, never gave up, tended to be the one who worked things out or solved problems and strived to always better themselves. These are characteristics I want my idealised form to possess and project."

The robotic construction of the three avatars, MikeSantis, OptimumRhyme and Tyrell_Kaineus, recalls Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto in which she observes that identities

could be thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly. The avatars did not only share a robotic appearance, but the three operators had all clearly drawn from and combined elements of popular culture to deliberately assemble a constructed avatar identity, as characterised by the Imaginary modality. Also typifying this modality was the conclusion drawn by two of the operators that robots are a race, in a way similar to some of the survey respondents referring to role-play races such as elf, and the implied imposition of narrative, in two case by the combining of names to connote meaning and possible back story, and from the third the prediction of a world where robots take over.

4.2.3.5 Specific cases of interest: Sikander Hoxley

The operator and creator of avatar Sikander Hoxley related in detail the carefully considered correspondences between her avatar and her actual world sense of self explaining how she designed Sikander's appearance to be physically very different from her actual world appearance but rather to be reflective of the way she would like to be perceived by others. Of all the operators interviewed, she seemed to be the only one who, when constructing the avatar, had considered in detail the links between her actual world perception and projection of self (rather than simply her actual world appearance) and, perhaps as a result of this, also seemed to be the most invested in her avatar. She described how she wanted the avatar to be androgynous, so far as possible, without the appearance of a specific age or particular racial characteristics:

"I spend a great deal of time thinking about identity and gender and feel quite androgynous. I don't particularly like to be identified as a woman. I chose to base Sikander on a male avatar form as if I'm going to go for something that differs from the

way I'm popularly perceived by others then I may as well pick something all the way out and work backwards. I'm short, big hips, big breasts, so Sikander is physically very different from me, I was trying to create a body that were it to exist in real life I'd like to be. I wanted him to be physically strong without being muscle bound because that's how I would like to be which is why I'm doing weights. I chose blue skin as I like the idea of having something really bizarre that forces people to look at them afresh. I wanted him to project an air of confidence when talking to others , a character I would feel comfortable walking around in."

This explanation is very indicative of a constructed Imaginary avatar, albeit one which the lack of the obvious presence of the operator's actual world physical appearance allows to be carefully constructed in a very different way. Much of the construction demonstrates a rejection of the actual world physicality, although some avatar choices were based on actual world characteristics taken to the extreme:

"For the last couple of years I've been getting white hairs and get really excited when I find them... I want them, bring them on. The reason my character has white hair reflects this. I have this theory that when my hair goes white it will detract attention away from my femininity... my breasts... I get so much attention because of my build that I'm hoping the white hair will somehow balance that out and take attention away from something that I don't think is intrinsically who I am or how people should relate to me."

When questioned about the stability of the avatar's physical identity within Second Life, though Sikander's operator admitted to finding the idea of making changes at whim appealing, it was not something she felt inclined to do:

"I'd like to be able to change appearance at will to wake up in the morning and think I'll have fangs today, or have a tail, and it not affect the way your fundamental person is perceived by others, what should it matter other than aesthetics. I like the idea of being able to change at will, though if I were to continue to use Sikander in Second Life, I probably wouldn't do it all that often, I'm not a great seeker after novelty so wouldn't change appearance like a pair of shoes. My self-image is fairly stable and I don't particularly feel the need for change all the time. I wanted one outfit of sharply cut clothing with a minimum of fuss because it's hard to get sizes to fit my shape in real life. I like the idea that was used in the Fly where Seth Brundle has seven sets of identical clothing so he doesn't have to think about them as he has better things to do and although I enjoy clothes I'm not particularly interested in them and don't have multiple outfits in real life."

This seems typical of the constructed Imaginary modality, and of the tendency suggested by the survey results in the initial quantitative stages of these research studies, for avatar appearances, once arrived upon, to be viewed as relatively constant and stable by operators. Unfortunately no image of Sikander is shown as his operator did not want the image included as she was unhappy with the way the appearance of final avatar turned out. Despite the big differences between the appearance of Sikander and his actual world operator, Sikander was viewed by the operator not as a performance, nor as an entity independent of her, but rather as an authentic, albeit mediated, expression of self:

"I don't think of the avatar as something that exists in my universe while I'm not using it, and it's not me, it's an image I project of me within Second Life, it's a mediated relationship like Skype or a series of letters, but others are still communicating with me.

I'm not in any way pretending to be someone else, I communicate in Second Life using the same way I do in real life, it's not a performance where I'm putting on any affectations, this is still me walking around in Second Life. If I interacted with someone in Second Life for any reasonable length of time and then they met me in the flesh they probably wouldn't have any difficulty realising that I was the person in charge of that avatar despite the different physical appearance and that my personality came through that. Because I am on the whole quite shy in real life so I tend to be very stand offish because I feel out of my depth or quite brash and over boisterous but I'm getting better at getting a handle on that and just reacting to events authentically as they happen. I don't think this is the same for everyone though, particularly in Second Life there seem to be a lot of people pretending to be someone other than who they are so I'm cautious of this whenever I'm communicating with new avatars."

Although the constructed nature of Sikander and his use as a medium for communication with others clearly fits the modality of Imaginary avatar, this discussion of authentic communication points to the kind of spontaneous interaction that has been assigned as a typical characteristic of the Real avatar modality, a becoming of the avatar form and function realised within and by interaction with its environment. The lack of a fixed narrative and the assertion of the operator that the appearance of the avatar should not affect the way your fundamental person is perceived by others also demonstrate characteristics typical of the Real avatar modality. Sikander then, whilst constructed as an Imaginary avatar, perhaps demonstrates the greatest potential of the avatars discussed so far to become transformed through interaction into a Real avatar.

4.2.4 Analysis of findings and conclusions

Through this research study Basic Themes emerged relating to the differing ways in which narrative was considered, either as a continuation of the actual world narrative of the operator, as developing from a constructed concept, or naturally occurring.

The study provided discussion relating to the Organising Theme of the Avatar relationship to the operator and in general seemed to indicate a tendency for operators who created more experimental avatars to have a greater investment in those avatars. This seemed particularly true of the female operators interviewed, although numbers were low and further investigation would therefore be required. Another Basic Theme of interest emerging in relation to this Organising Theme was that of the tense in which operators referred to their avatars. Whilst the nine operators who based the avatar appearances on their own actual world physical appearances generally referred to the avatars in the third person, the five operators whose avatars are discussed in greater detail above often spoke of their avatars in the first person, or a combination of first and third person using third person to describe when they were applying their agency to the avatar in the construction process, and first person, sometimes almost accidentally, when they were applying agency within Second Life through their avatar, e.g. when Tyrell's operator discussed how she liked the "single dot in the upper centre of my face", MikeSantis's operator stating "I was a robot" and ZarinaB's operator declaring that 'people had better not get in my way'.

4.3 Research Study 3: Interviews with Existing Operators

Context:

To determine the factors which influence the development of avatars over time, including the both constructed developmental changes and the impact of identity liminal events, and the effect of these upon the relationship between the operator and avatar.

Approach:

Qualitative: Interviews of existing avatar operators within Second Life to explore the avatar creation process and the development of operator's relationship with the avatar, with particular focus on how such relationships evolve over time with consideration of identity liminal events (Salazar, 2009) which may be seen as catalytic to change within such relationships. These are supported by ethnographic research throughout the period of the research and an auto-ethnographic review of the development of the researcher's own avatars.

Date:

Conducted between March 2012 and August 2013.

4.3.1 Rationale

The interviews with existing Second Life residents were designed to collect more reflective, retrospective data than the data obtained from new operators and to compare such reflective date with the researcher's own ethnographic experience. As new operators may not choose to continue to remain resident in Second Life over the longer term, interviewing existing

residents also allowed the opportunity to study how their relationships with their avatars evolved over time with particular consideration of identity liminal events (Salazar, 2009) such as the recognition by the operator of the avatar's in-world reputation, which may be seen as catalytic to change within such relationships. Much of the communication with existing residents, both for formal interviews and in the preparatory stages takes place avatar-to-avatar within Second Life and the perspective may therefore significantly contrast with the face to face nature of the interviews with new operators and a significant amount of time is spent ethnographically within Second Life to triangulate and support the findings of these interviews.

4.3.2 Sampling Methods and Sample Size

Participants were recruited from individuals who had responded to the original questionnaire. Respondents who had indicated that they would be willing to participate in follow up research and provided an email address were contacted by email to ask if they would be willing to take part in in-depth follow up interviews to obtain more detailed qualitative data in respect of their development of, and relationship with, their avatar/s. A minimum sample size of 30 interviews was set, with a qualifying parameter that operators should be resident within Second Life for over 6 months. The final study sampled 37 operators.

As respondents were all situated in geographically diverse locations remote from the researcher, conducting face to face interviews within the actual world was not a practicable option. As all respondents were active within Second Life many of the interviews were conducted avatar-to-avatar within Second Life but a decision was taken to employ text based methods rather than voice communication. Boellstorff et al write "Some virtual world participants may be more comfortable being interviewed in text for various reasons. They may

feel it allows them to speak more freely or provide more reflective answers... They may prefer to maintain anonymity in terms of gender, nationality or age" (2012, p.100). Text based methods were therefore used to encourage the operator to give a more reflective response and to eliminate the necessity of subsequent transcription. Another reason for text based transcription was that the (male) researcher's choice to utilise his female avatar, Funkin Sohl, to conduct the interviews and communicating via voice would have been incongruent to her projected in-world identity. Further information relating to the development of the researcher's own avatars is included in the chapter relating to the researcher's auto-ethnographic experience of avatar development, but it should be noted that the choice to use Funkin as a means to conduct the interviews was not intended to deliberately misrepresent the researcher's gender identity; the researcher's relationship with Funkin had developed into that of a third-party research partner used within Second Life to create distance between the research activity and the researcher's primary in-world identity, Guido VanDyke, who both more closely represents the researcher's real-world social identity and maintains an avatar social identity within Second Life. The researcher found himself able to communicate more freely with avatars outside his social circle using Funkin and an added benefit was that other operators seemed to find female avatars to be more approachable.

For convenience some respondents chose for the interviews to be conducted primarily offline by exchange of messages, or by email, over a periods ranging from an hour to, in some cases where additional time was needed, days.

Once respondents agreed to participate they were sent an email asking them to agree to and initially set aside a specific hour for the interviews to take place and advised of the structure and topics that the interviews would include to provide "an easy and comfortable framework for a discussion" (Gaskell 2000, p. 40). This email thanked them for their participation, reminded

them that they had agreed for quotes to be used anonymously from the transcript and of their right to decline to answer any particular questions. Though it was initially anticipated that sufficient data would be collected by interviews lasting an hour, some exchanges took significantly longer. All participants were however happy to continue the interviews to their conclusion, resume them at a later date or subsequently conclude them by an exchange of emails. It should also be noted that during the period of the interviews, even those taking place real time within Second Life, the nature of electronic communication makes it likely that the participants were simultaneously engaged in other electronic or actual world activity.

The interviews were designed as semi structured in nature with broad categories of questions to be adhered to, allowing responses to be grouped by categories, but with the flexibility to bespoke or add questions prior to or during the interview to further investigate the responses of specific operators and to allow the discussions to develop according to these responses. The interview categories were designed to collect appropriate responses to determine the factors which influence operators when developing and fashioning their avatars and the effect this process has upon the relationship between the operator and avatar and informed by the researcher's autoethnographic experiences within Second Life.

So as to maintain the focus on the identity expressed via the avatar, initial actual world demographics collection was limited to the operator's age banding and gender. Further, as the interviews focused on the expression of identity via the avatar it was thought that some respondents may be reluctant to give out detailed demographic information relating to their actual world identity as Second Life residents often prefer to maintain anonymity of their actual world identity and, in any case, remote text based interviews would make such actual world demographics difficult to verify.

The topics initially discussed corresponded with those discussed with new Second Life operators except that a question relating to the operator's purpose for creating the avatar was added. This was not asked of new operators in phase 2 of the research as all participants had created the avatars in response to the request to take part in the study. When discussing the purpose for originally creating the avatar prompts or additional questions could relate to the operator's purpose in using Second Life, e.g. for social reasons, commercial reasons, academic purposes, to be able to build things within Second Life, etc., but could also relate to the reasons why the avatar was designed in a particular way to suit that purpose, if this had not already been discussed, e.g. an operator stating that their purpose in creating an avatar was to meet people romantically within Second Life may be further questioned as to how they tailored their avatar appearance to fulfil this objective.

It was also the researcher's intent to stimulate discussion relating to any significant in-world, or actual world, events which may be seen as catalytic to a change to this relationship, or caused the operator to change the way in which identity was expressed via the avatar, e.g. changes to the avatar's appearance or behaviour. It was also deemed of particular interest should relationships or expression of identity not conform to the expectations, e.g. where operators exhibit a significantly higher than expected tendency to express a fluid identity or frequently change the physicality of their avatar (e.g. operators who express a variable sex via a single avatar.)

A final question sought to investigate the ways respondents represented themselves in the actual world, e.g. whether they liked to stand out or fit in, whether they represented themselves similarly in most situations or modified their behaviour and dress for different occasions or social groups, and comparing the identity expressed via the avatar to that of the actual world

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operator, e.g. relating aspects of avatar behaviour to the operator's actual world psychographic choices. The intention of this question was to try to determine if the avatar expression of identity in any way mirrored that of the operator, and was asked last without being included on the initial topics list as it related to the behaviour of the operator rather than that of the avatar. In four instances the researcher had the opportunity to triangulate and make a personal judgement on the validity of the response to this question during a subsequent unplanned face-to-face meeting with the respondent in the actual world.

When reviewing and cataloguing the data, comparisons are made to the researcher's own auto-ethnographic experiences when creating avatars and developing relationships with them as documented in an auto-ethnographic log, and entries from this log are shown in the Findings below.

4.3.3 Findings

The focus of these findings is to analyse the results of interviews with the 37 participants, cataloguing both common experience and that which differs from the expected norm, with particular focus on events important to the development of the relationship between the operator and avatar, and to classify the characteristics emerging from these interviews using the modalities discussed.

All participants had spent over 6 months as a resident and regular visitor to Second Life and the majority of these operators were reluctant to allow the use of photographs and screenshots of their avatars to be used, preferring to retain the anonymity of their avatar identity due to concerns relating to in-world reputation or identification. This in itself demonstrates a

strength of relationship between operator and avatar not demonstrated in the interviews with new operators who had resided in Second Life for only a few weeks.

4.3.3.1 Development of Researcher's Avatars

Prior to the analysis of the interview findings, it is useful to review the researcher's own experience of the development of the relationship with his avatars using excerpts from his auto-ethnographic log of the process, as a basis for comparison with the experiences of the participants.

- *4.3.3.1a Primary avatar - Guido Vandyke*

The researcher's primary avatar was created to access Second Life for the purpose of academic study prior to the current research study and accordingly an ongoing log of the avatar's development and experience has been maintained. Initially the researcher did not feel a connection to the avatar as the log entry documents.

> The avatar feels no part of me. The name has been chosen almost at random; I chose the surname VanDyke from a list of those available as a response to the beard on the title character on a poster of the V for Vendetta film which happened to be in my field of vision, and the forename Guido as a reference to Guy Fawkes by who the film character was inspired. Guido VanDyke is a cipher who could be operated as easily by anyone else as by me; his appearance is uncustomised, anonymous; he has no social ties; he can do anything and go anywhere; he could be used to express any or no aspect of me or anyone else. (Wardle, private log, 13th Jan 2007)

The log refers to the choice of name being 'almost' random. A retrospective deconstruction of this may suggest more of a subconscious influence to the choice than the researcher was at the time aware. The film poster was a possession of the researcher, chosen as a possession for a reason; Sartre writes that "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (2003, p. 611) and possessions are an integral part of the characteristic of the 'having (the describable fixed qualities of)' assigned to the Symbolic avatar modality. The influence of the poster, the role portrayed by the V character, and what the character symbolises should not therefore be underestimated. In the same log entry as discussing the random choice, the researcher also writes that the avatar is "anonymous; he has no social ties; he can do anything and go anywhere" characteristics explicitly embodied and symbolised by the V character. The avatar's appearance did not differ significantly for over a year but later log entries in relate how, when beginning to undertake more meaningful social interactions including public presentations which linked his avatar's identity with his own, Guido's physicality was modified to more closely reflect the researcher's own appearance: "With this change in appearance Guido has become an extension of my physical world identity, or more particularly an extension of a primary expression of my physical world identity, and with it he has become constrained by similar expected modalities of social behaviour" (16 March 2008). At this point in Guido's development it was also observed that, whilst more in depth and meaningful social interaction started to develop with those other avatars with whom Guido was familiar or was introduced to as part of his academic associations within Second Life, the operator became more self-conscious during interactions within Second Life, or more accurately more conscious of his Self being expressed via Guido, and consequently found himself becoming significantly less comfortable interacting with strangers in Second Life or engaging in casual in-world

conversations with them. Boellstorff (2008, p.121) writes "no one during my fieldwork mentioned being outgoing in the actual world but shy in Second Life", however for Guido this seemed to be becoming the case.

Although Guido's appearance initially reflected the researcher's clean shaven appearance, after a further two months the log relates that: "In the physical world I occasionally wear a beard and Guido has adopted a goatee even though I am currently clean shaven" (24th May 2008). It might be speculated that this adoption of a beard might unconsciously relate to the researcher's desire to have the avatar remain representative of the principles of anonymity and freedom embodied by the V character despite becoming more constraint by social ties which spanned both the avatar's in-world persona and the researcher's actual world identity. By this stage Guido had evolved from what was described as a cypher, but what was actually more likely a Symbolic manifestation of the subconscious decisions and desires of his creator, to an Imaginary avatar, i.e. deliberately constructed in the image of his creator and a performative expression of one or more aspects of the researcher's identity.

Interestingly, the next change of appearance was not applied to the avatar, but to the operator: "In preparation for travelling in the physical world to meet individuals who I have only communicated with via Guido, I have modified my physical appearance to adopt Guido's goatee so as to emphasis the connection between us" (28th June 2008). This self-referential act in which the operator adapts his image to become more representative of function and reputation of the avatar originally constructed in his own image signifies the beginning of a complex mutually interactive relationship between operator and avatar typifying the Real avatar modality. Following this event the Guido avatar began to develop his own social identity within Second Life independent of both his physical appearance and the social ties of his operator. The final

identity liminal event of note in the development of Guido's in-world selfhood was a Second Life event, the GGHootenanny held as part of Joseph Delappe's in-world performance of Gandhi's release from prison (discussed in detail in the next chapter), in which avatars were encouraged to attend in fancy dress, and for which Guido attended as Charlie Chaplin, with whom Gandhi once famously met, only identifiable as Guido by the in-world name tag. There was no intended assumption of the Chaplin identity, the appearance was simply chosen as an appropriate fancy dress costume, however the assumption of a physical appearance different to the avatar's normal appearance, i.e. that of Chaplin, added a further palimpsest of identity to that of the operator/avatar in which the Guido avatar had assumed a mutable physicality allowing him to undertake a secondary performance in his own right whilst maintaining the integrity of the constructed identity.

Unexpectedly, the absence of Guido's familiar physical appearance allowed the operator to experience a heightened sense of immersion in the event, joining with others in singing Pete Seegar protest songs, without a significant sense of embodiment within the avatar, nor with the self-consciousness that would have accompanied a similar event taking place amongst others in an actual world location. In an analogue to an attendee at an actual world fancy dress party, perhaps the absence of Guido's usual physicality, and with it the operator's own accompanying perceived behavioural expectations and inhibitions, allowed the operator to more directly interact and participate in a Real experience of the event as it unfolded without being aware of the experience being mediated by a meaningfully constructed persona mask. The event transcended the boundaries of the virtual and actual with attendees familiar with each other in one, both, or neither place; the author had been invited to attend the event by an actual world associate and his Second Life constructed counterpart had attended. The modalities of Symbolic, Imaginary and

Real were simultaneously active with the avatar appearance Symbolic of Chaplin's relevance to the Gandhi narrative, the presence of Guido's socially constructed Imaginary persona and the in-the-moment immersive symbiotic experience of the operator/avatar.

- *4.3.3.1a Secondary alt avatar - Funkin Sohl*

The researcher's secondary avatar, Funkin Sohl was originally created whilst assisting artist Professor Paul Sermon in a mixed reality installation in an actual world nightclub; the avatar was used by participants to allow them to take control of the avatar's actions and appearance against an in-world chroma screen, the image of which was then combined with a live video feed of the actual world dance floor and projected on screens around the club. Sermon's work is discussed further in the following chapter. The avatar name was chosen to reflect the musical nature of the event and to be gender neutral, and although Funkin was originally created using the female settings in Second Life, the avatar changed gender appearance several times over the course of the event.

Following the event the existence of the secondary avatar provided a curious dilemma for the researcher; although the random development of the avatar resulted in a feeling of a lack of connection to the avatar, its very existence demanded the researcher's attention. It did not seem appropriate to him to use Funkin as a typical alt avatar which he could use simply to act in ways to transgress the social boundaries constructed around his primary avatar, Guido, nor did it seem appropriate for Funkin to simply be allowed to become dormant following the initial event for which the avatar was created. Just as Guido was seen as an expression of Wardle's self, his relationship with the Funkin began to develop in a way which may be compared to Heidegger's 'Other' in the sense that it was both clearly distinguishable from the researcher's primary avatar,

whilst at the same time recognisable in itself as having derived from the same source with essentially the same nature, constructed by him, not of him..

The researcher looked at ways to both develop upon this other-ness and build upon Funkin's random origins by creating a range of appearances for the avatar randomly generated by altering the appearance of 73 different characteristics depending on the role of a die with rolls 1-6 representing a particular characteristic raised from 0% to 100% in increments of 20% or, in the case of binary characteristics such as male/female, a roll of 1-3 representing one choice and 4-6 representing the other. Attire was then chosen to suit each appearance and several of these avatar appearances were used by Funkin to explore Second Life. Despite initial experimentation 'trying on' a variety of thee appearances, the frequency and variety of changes in appearance significantly reduced over a period of daily visits to Second Life over two weeks. Funkin's use of the different avatar appearances began to limit itself to the two most common (shown in Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11: Alternative early appearance of Funkin Sohl

Figure 12: Alternative early appearance of Funkin Sohl which evolved into her final appearance

Of the two avatar appearances, the operator observed that he felt that he had more in common with the appearance of the short, bald, bearded Caucasian male avatar, and that this appearance allowed him to express his own personality more directly through the avatar; he realised he had deliberately chosen it from among the randomly generated appearances because it recalled to him a dwarven character he had played in the Dungeons and Dragons tabletop role play game when he was younger and which he felt an affinity with, an Imaginary avatar with an identity which he could comfortably construct and perform within Second Life. However the nature of this secondary avatar as Other made Funkin an uncomfortable vessel for such self-expression and, by a process seemingly outside of the conscious choice of the operator, one day after visiting a gallery within Second Life, whilst sitting on a virtual sand dune staring into a virtual sea, the Funkin avatar became unexpectedly permanently associated with avatar appearance she had worn for several days within Second Life and assumed her stable appearance and identity as a tall thin dark-skinned female with white hair. At the moment in which her in-world identity stabilised, so did her positioning as situated outside of her operator, a third party under the operator's direction though not necessarily his control. Her role too was suddenly clarified to the operator and she became his research assistant, able to interact with strangers within Second Life more comfortably than he found himself able to do via his primary avatar virtual self, Guido.

To classify Funkin's attributes using the modalities table is less than straightforward. Although the avatar was created to fulfil a role in the actual world installation, the initial use as platform for fluidity and experimentation meet with the modality descriptions for a Real avatar, based neither on function nor on an aspect of operator's identity. However in the act of stabilising her appearance to assume a fixed identity, spontaneous Real interaction with became

less accessible as specific personality facets were chosen to be expressed to the exclusion of the potential expression of all other possibilities. Consciously or not, Funkin's self became constructed around the operator's new understanding of her role, assumptions as to her narrative and that of her operator would be made by those others with whom she consistently interacted over a period of time. She not only assumed the characteristics of an Imaginary avatar but also, in assuming the narrow role of research assistant with a third party relationship to the operator, she could be viewed as exhibiting some of the typifying characteristics of a Symbolic avatar.

- *4.3.3.1c Tertiary alt avatar - Cypher SecondSelf*

Once Funkin's avatar-self had stabilised and her role as research assistant had been established the researcher found he required an additional avatar which could fulfil Funkin's original role of being operated by others within installations. Collin's dictionary defines a meaning of cypher or cipher as "a person or thing of no importance; nonentity" and so the name Cypher SecondSelf was chosen to denote that the avatar was to be considered a nonentity with no identity or expressed self of its own but rather it would be used as a vessel to express a second alt identity of any operator or participant. Cypher SecondSelf may be considered a tabula rasa which could be used either as a third-party 'puppet' avatar or to simply perform a Symbolic role, albeit in a temporary capacity, or for any participant to experiment with the concept of Real operator/avatar symbiote to engage in spontaneous interaction within Second Life via a fluid and changeable avatar without the constraints of a constructed expression of identity. Nonetheless, insofar as Cypher's appearance remains constant for any period of time those with whom s/he interacts are able to impose an Imagined narrative upon the avatar.

4.3.3.2 Interviews with existing avatar operators

The expectation when interviewing existing avatar operators was to uncover a commonality of experiences similar to the researcher's own via his primary and secondary avatars, in which the operator's relationship to the avatar developed and stabilised over time with clear evidence of identity liminal events with defined impact on this development process.

The discussion and conclusions derived from the interviews are summarised below and categorised into the Organising Themes with particular reference to discussions of identity liminal events related by the participants.

- *4.3.3.2a Role of the avatar*

As was anticipated in most cases the avatar was acknowledged as fulfilling the role of representing at least some aspect of the operator's actual world self within Second Life, or idealised aspect thereof, fitting the modality of a deliberately constructed Imaginary avatar overtly expressed either as an idealised representation of the operator's actual world self, or aspect thereof, or a synthesis of characteristics deemed desirable by the operator and synthesised from cultural references. However the reasons behind having an avatar fulfil this role rather than, say, picking a pre-defined avatar and playing it as a game character, were both more complex and less overtly expressed by the participants, i.e. operators found it easy to define in what ways their avatar was representational of their actual world selves, but were less clear as to why they had chosen to construct or perform the avatar to fulfil this role with answers including "I wanted an avatar I would be comfortable playing" and "the avatar just developed that way". One participant stated "that's what people do in Second Life" and the statement seemed to reflect the general opinion. Even where avatars were intended to fulfil other primary purposes Second Life

operators felt that they still were constructed to express aspects of their actual world self. One participant who made a full time actual world business of selling designer clothes and other goods within Second Life described the role of the avatar as 'running the business' but further related how she had constructed a generically good looking female avatar to attract customers but introduced aspects of her own actual appearance such as hair colour and dress sense as she wanted to maintain a feeling that the avatar represented a Second Life version of herself running her own business and communicating with customers rather than just a 'shopkeeper.'

This is not to suggest that avatars were consistently constructed to physically represent the appearance of the operator as this is far from the case and aspects of the operator were frequently represented through the avatar in varied and creative ways.

- *4.3.3.2b Avatar appearance*

Although all the operators recognised traits belonging to their actual world selves reflected in their avatar(s) even if, as in the case described above such actual world traits had not been previously acknowledged by the operator, fewer than expected has designed the avatar's appearance to be physically closely representative of their own. Several operators expressed that they constructed their avatars to look like an exaggerated or more attractive version of themselves which generally involved an adherence to Symbolic conventions expressing stereotypical and idealised representations of beauty as represented by contemporary western culture. Fewer operators chose to construct their avatar appearance to more closely represent what they perceived as less attractive aspects of their own actual world appearance although doing so was sometimes seen to be cathartic. One operator stated of her avatar: "We are both

short. I'm 5'3" and she's 5 foot. She has a paunch just like I do. I found out two years ago, that I have fibroids and (my avatar) was a way for my unconscious mind to make peace with what my conscious mind just dismissed as a 'change in shape'." Another operator constructed a thin, freckled avatar and added thick framed spectacles to closely represent his actual world appearance: "I've never really thought of myself as self-conscious about my appearance but sometimes taking the family to the beach made me think I ought to go to the gym more. Now I think, hey, if my avatar can fit in on a beach, why should I be worried?"

In several cases the operators had made only minor modifications to the appearance of pre-defined avatars; one operator described how he had "started off by just trying to add wigs to the standard Second Life noobie avatar but it didn't look right so I bought an 'off-the-shelf' avatar appearance I found attractive and just customized it a bit." For many operators in this category the main modifications or appearance choices related to clothing, or accessories such as spectacles, handbags or, in one case, a pipe. Although some avatars dressed elaborately, with some female avatars choosing voluminous period style corseted dresses, most dressed to reflect the operator's own more mundane actual world choices or variations thereof; one female operator discussed how she liked to wear strong bright clothing to stand out from the crowd in the actual world and her choices of colours for avatar clothing reflected this but pointed out that her actual world clothing was looser whilst her avatar outfit was tighter fitting as she designed her avatar to "look sexy in a different way" to her actual world appearance. It was common amongst participants for avatar's to replicate casual clothing in which the operator would feel comfortable, but wear tighter versions of clothing such as t-shirts and jeans to enhance avatar musculature and body shape so that the avatar would 'look sexy'.

Conversely one female operator said that she kept her avatar conservatively dressed as if she were presenting herself in public without people thinking she was "too tarty". The operator in question was very concerned about the potential harassment of attractive female avatars within Second Life and felt dressing conservatively would protect both her and her avatar, and very aware that there was no avatar privacy within Second Life, in so far as anyone could take a picture of your avatar at any time, and therefore wanted to "look respectable at all times" to maintain the avatar's reputation in world, stating "I don't ever want any one taking a picture of her in underwear."

Other operators were less conservative about how their avatar would be seen, and one related how she felt it was important that her avatar look realistic when naked: "Female avies come complete with all their private parts. The basic Second Life 'Ruth skin' has white nipples and no pubic hair, but not every woman has pubic hair. She had everything except a belly button as far as I was concerned, so when I made my avatar's skin, I added a prominent outie."

Some operators made clothing choices for their avatar that they might make for themselves if not for the constraints of actual world social convention; one operator chose leather and rubber wear for his avatar because he "would like to wear it in real life but people might think it was a bit odd." He described the cyber/punk appearance of his avatar as "what I would like to look like but peer pressure would give me a hard time." Another operator admitted a fondness of 1970s' style silver suits which their avatar could get away with in Second Life even if an actual world middle-aged paunch meant that the operator could not. The avatar in question also sported a large afro style wig representing a hairstyle which the operator admitted to having aspired to in their youth prior to the "onset of male pattern baldness."

Though most operators changed the clothes of their avatar primarily to change its appearance for different social groups, or just for self-satisfaction, two female operators were particularly concerned to ensure their avatar changed clothes regularly. One did so because she was concerned about "what others would think" while the other gave her reasons as follows: "I don't want to wear yesterday's clothes because my avatar will smell bad. She doesn't care as much as I do about this, but she'll usually change. And yes, I do smell her. I also change her hair every day because the hair pieces need to be cleaned, and they can smell too."

Modifications were to hair colour and style were among the most frequent changes made to pre-defined avatar appearance with several operators relating how they had become frustrated with the constraints of Second Life hair and resorted to Second Life wigs; two male operators had also added facial hair to make the avatar more closely resemble their actual world appearance while one operator who was bald in real life said avatar hair wasn't a problem; the operator was bald and so was his avatar, that was what made it recognisably him… even when he had experimented with changing the gender of his avatar to female during its formative development stage to "try out how (he) would have looked as a female."

In general, not only was changing the sex of an avatar uncommon amongst the participants, but the incidence of participants operating avatars of a different gender to that of the actual world operator was also considerably lower than was expected. One operator stated "I don't feel the urge to explore the other sex or how people might interact with me based on it" whilst another remarked "my sex is fixed and is not likely to change; my avatar is female because I am female."

One female operator who had experimented with developing and operating a male avatar decided to revert to a female appearance and commented on how difficult she found the experience to be: "Playing a male is very complicated. You have to get past the jock/pretty boy/not a jock thing. It seems to scar males for life, and it affects male avies too. Also males have detachable penises. You have to buy one and then figure out the whole etiquette for wearing it." The assertion made by the operator seems to reveal a perception that gender within Second Life is fixed and that a male avatar can only truly regarded to be a male if exhibiting, or at least possessing, actual world male physicality, i.e. even an Imaginary constructed avatar must be constructed with a penis to fulfil the criteria necessary to be regarded as male. However, it must be noted that, whilst the Imagined sex of an avatar may be specified by its construction which gives rise to a different menu selection criteria, every avatar is actually created sexless insofar as it originally has no genitalia, and that penises, like clothes or hairstyles, can be added to either perceived sex.

One participant related how he had allowed his five year old daughter to join in, when he was in Second Life and how she had pestered him to create a female avatar for her to operate under his supervision. The suggestion that the avatar had to not only be a female, but had to have been designed to be a female, had come from his daughter; when he had offered to allow her to operate the avatar she had requested he make a 'girl one' and when he had offered to make his existing avatar female for her to operate she had responded "don't be silly, she'd still be a man really." The participant went on to relate how, when he had created a new female avatar, his daughter loved to take it shopping and dress it up in 'princess outfits'. This not only exemplifies the societal stereotyping of fixed gender identity at a young age, but also reveals an innate tendency to view the gender of an avatar as fixed in its original state regardless of any

subsequent variation in its gender appearance. Comparisons may be made to the generally narrow view of transgender individuals taken by many people in contemporary society who exhibit the tendency to view an individual's gender as fixed and relatable to their physical gender at birth, rather than any personal expression of gender chosen by them where this is different. Although no misrepresentation had been intended one participant who had been interviewed by the researcher's Funkin Sohl avatar expressed surprise upon meeting the researcher in person and suggested that she had felt a little misled to discover that the researcher's actual world gender was male.

One participant who is a regular in Second Life is known to her Second Life friends only via her avatar, presenting herself as an extremely chatty, helpful and often flirty young female. Her avatar dresses in colourful summery dresses and flitters around on shimmering moth wings, often to be found in Second Life reception areas helping new residents become familiar with the operating system. She chatted to Funkin at length in-world about how she had made a role for herself within Second Life and felt that the purpose of her being there was to help others settle in. Conversation flowed easily and she related enthusiastically how she had made many close and lasting friends within Second Life. Several months later when the researcher had the opportunity to meet this avatar's operator at an actual world event, what surprised him the most was not that she was a pre-operative transsexual but that she was so extremely shy that for the duration of the event she stood on the outer edge of any activity and, even when the researcher attempted to engage her in conversation she avoided eye contact and spoke as little as possible. When the researcher subsequently met her avatar again in Second Life she exhibited her characteristic chatty self and did not mention the awkwardness of the conversation in the real life encounter. Although the researcher considered questioning her on this he decided against it; it

was clear that she was far more comfortable communicating via an expression of self represented by an avatar body constructed for the purpose than via her actual world physical body. Whether the factors for this include a discomfort or dissatisfaction with her actual world appearance, or previous negative responses to it from others, can only be speculated upon but it was clear that her Second Life avatar allowed her to interact with others in a far more spontaneous, meaningful and Real way within a social context than she felt comfortable doing within the actual world.

Despite the instances of participants having operated avatars of a different gender to themselves being relatively few, the avatar gender choice was generally a conscious decision made by the operator. Skin colour however seemed to be given a lesser priority for consideration when developing avatar appearance. Operators who were white skinned generally chose white skinned avatars and remained white skinned without ever giving consideration to the possibility of changing avatar race. Where operators had developed new avatar skins they were typically used to bring the appearance of the avatar closer to that of the operator by adding stubble, freckles or in one case a prominent red birthmark on the avatar's cheek.

As phase 1 of the research study suggested that a higher than expected proportion of avatars wore, or had worn, tattoos, participants were specifically questioned about this. At the time the interviews took place only one, male, participant exhibited a visible tattoo on his arm which replicated one he had in the actual world. Several other operators said that they had experimented with giving their avatars tattoos; the tattoos given to two female avatars by their female operators had lasted for only a short while. One felt it 'didn't give the right impression' whilst the other had received negative feedback from other female avatars that it 'made her look slutty.' One male avatar discussed how he had worn a tattoo for a few weeks because he's considered getting one in the actual world but changed it when he changed his clothing as he felt

"it was a novelty, if I get a tattoo in real life then it will be meaningful, but in Second Life there was no investment in wearing it, I could literally take it or leave it… no pain, no gain."

One operator related how she modified the avatar's skin to an olive colour that suited wearing clothing in golds and greens that she would like to wear in the actual world but did not suit her pale skin tones, but confessed "I didn't really think about the implications of race when doing that." Another discussed how he simply continued to use the skin that came with a purchased avatar: "to be honest I never thought about resembling a race. I currently look like a tanned vampire. I don't know if that qualifies as a race but it seemed interesting at the time and I kinda stuck with it so that my virtual identity would grow around it."

One operator deliberately chose African American characteristics for her avatar despite being white American in the actual world. The choice was made deliberately not because she felt herself to be African American but because she worked and lived in a primarily African American area and felt a great deal of affinity with African American colleagues. She expressed how she truly enjoyed being a part of a multiracial society and enjoyed attending meetings and gatherings attended by a 'mixed multitude.' She did not feel she had constructed her avatar to be representative of herself, but rather of a community of people she enjoyed spending time with, and that she wanted it to bring the qualities she admired in her colleagues into Second Life via her avatar.

Some of the participants interviewed fell into the category of non-human races such as Furries or Otherkin, generic terms for those whose avatars take the appearance of animals or of fantasy races such as elves or dragons. James Wagner Au, when discussing Second Life Furries in his blog, (20 April 2005) quoted a Second Life resident as saying "there's a spiritual

connection to animals, or a specific animal. Sometimes it's just fascination." He went on to suggest a direct link between the manifestation of Otherkin appearance and the actual world physicality of operators giving an example that Dragons may have scaly skin from eczema. Whilst this was not directly supported within any of the interviews one male operator who had constructed a Furry leonine avatar related that whilst he was of Anglo-African mixed race he was proud of his African heritage and wanted that to be reflected in his avatar. Whilst he felt himself to be of African descent and his avatar to be a lion, he reflected on how they were both mixed race, himself Anglo-African and his avatar lion-avatar-human. He discussed how he had always felt an affinity with lions: "I feel a connection if not necessarily a spiritual one, as though maybe I'm part lion. I certainly feel a great affection for them." He expressed this affinity via cosplay of a lion character and felt his avatar was an extension of this, and discussed how he wanted his cosplay character/avatar to represent a nobility that he felt difficult to live up to in his actual world existence. He also commented on how his avatar's lion's mane was a deliberate reflection of his own sometimes unkempt Afro hairstyle, something he remained both proud of and occasionally embarrassed by in the actual world.

Two participant's avatars sported wings; one male avatar with large angel style wings discussed why he had chosen these even though all Second Life avatars are able to fly: "it's not about the ability to fly, it's about what they symbolise… being able to rise above things and showing a strength and purity of character."

One participant had based her avatar on an elven warrior character she had adopted when involved in live action role play, but discussed how she had always felt more affinity with elfkin than humans and that she, whilst comfortable in her body, had never felt comfortable with her mundane existence as an actual world human; she felt that both live action role play and Second

Life were not so much escapism but an outlet for her true expression of self, an expression not of her actual world self but of a different but of an equally valid Imaginary constructed identity that she believed to be more authentic.

In the case of these non-human avatars, all three modalities may be applied depending on the perspective taken; the avatar self is carefully and deliberately constructed typifying the Imaginary modality, whilst providing the operator with an avatar with which they feel so unified as to allow them to participate in interaction with others in Second Life which they may consider to be more Real than interactions within the actual world. The non-human attributes of the avatar are specifically Symbolic of fixed characteristics not of a role, but of an archetypal quality which the operators seek to adopt via their avatar and with reference to the modalities table simply attributing the describable fixed qualities to the avatar typifies it within the Symbolic modality until such qualities are performed (Imaginary) or spontaneously expressed via interaction (Real).

- *4.3.3.2c Stability of appearance*

The interviews upheld the findings of the previous quantitative element of the research that found, once developed, avatar appearance typically became relatively fixed and generally did not change in any significant ways. Although a few of the participants had second avatars to perform different roles in Second Life, or to protect the reputation of their primary avatar, none regularly changed significant aspects of the appearance of their avatar(s). Operators concurred that their avatars generally presented themselves in a similar way in most situations and that social bonds played a large part in mandating a stability of avatar appearance. The following response was typical: "All my friends in Second Life know me by my avatar's appearance so I don't see myself changing it."

The participant who had created a second avatar for his young daughter to use under supervision noted how she was much more likely than he was to change the appearance of the avatar, and through her he enjoyed both experimentation with appearance and visiting new Second Life locations: "She had a much more interesting time than my avatar visiting fairgrounds and the like. I think kids can find it easier or more appealing to play different characters and experiment with their image both in real life and in Second Life."

- *4.3.3.2d Avatar relationship to operator*

For most participants the relationship between operator and avatar was not clearly defined, occupying a liminal area between Self and Other. Operators would discuss their avatar's interchangeably in first and third person, often, but not exclusively, using first person to indicate when the avatar was asserting agency within Second Life, e.g. "I teleported to a new region" or "I bought a new outfit", as though the agency were being directly asserted by an operator/avatar symbiote, whilst using third person to describe agency exerted by the operator on the avatar, e.g. "I modified the avatar's skin".

Most operators generally viewed the avatar as an extension or version of themselves, or as a performance they undertook within Second Life which one compared as not dissimilar to actual world performances: "I perform in front of a class of eight year olds every day, and then again whenever I go out to social events and have to pretend to like people when I'd rather be curled up with a book. Performing my avatar in Second Life is no different, except maybe it's less pretend as I can log off whenever I want to."

Two female operators however felt their avatar to be an entity distinct from them. The first stated; "My avatar has a separate persona to me, but I control it." The second operator went further still in asserting that "My avatar thinks for herself a lot of the time, and that is a lot more than most people do. Like her I also think for myself sometimes. I consider her my partner and that we work together. I also think she became sentient at some point. Whilst we share the same knowledge base, and she probably started out as a part of myself, now she is sentient and somewhat independent." On questioning this operator as to whether there was any particular identity liminal event which had caused her to feel avatar had become sentient, she responded: "No, it just happened over a period of time. At first I was aware of controlling her actions, it was me pulling the strings and making her behave how I would in a particular situation, but gradually I found myself becoming surprised by her actions, and by her open mindedness to the views of others in conversation. She is calmer than I am, and doesn't get irritated by people in the same way." Whether this can be considered true independent behaviour on the part of the avatar, or that the avatar is providing an outlet to facilitate the subconscious expression of different behaviour patterns by the operator, this emergent 'sentience' is not the result of performance or pre-determined construction and as such is indicative of the type of complex relationship between operator and avatar that typifies the Real avatar modality.

- *4.3.3.2e Narrative*

Few of the participants had considered a predefined narrative or backstory for their avatar and narratives typically continued from the actual world narrative of the operator or developed naturally from the construction of the avatar as was the case with the 'tanned vampire' avatar example previously discussed where the ongoing narrative development of the avatar and its virtual identity were developed around the appearance. Even in the case of the elfkin example

discussed earlier in this chapter the avatar was not imbued with a prior narrative of its own other than that of an elfkin warrior trapped in the mundane existence of a mother and housewife. When questioned about the backstory several operators hadn't given it any thought while others expressed it as little more than a Symbolic role that the avatar was meant to represent, e.g. 's/he is a model/tycoon/party animal'. However the majority of avatars, particularly those who were modelled after their operators, shared a prior narrative with their operator. Interestingly however this narrative was almost universally considered to diverge at the point of the avatar's creation in Second Life, i.e. the operator's prior experience informed the creation of the avatar but subsequently the development of the avatar was only affected by its own experiences in Second Life rather than being affected by any subsequent actual world events occurring to the operator. Conversely however for most participants the Second Life in-world narrative formed a part of the overall narrative of their actual world lives. In short, actual world operators will generally discuss what 'they' (as their avatars) have done in Second Life whereas avatars rarely speak about what 'they' (their operators) have done in the actual world. From an actual world perspective the operator may be seen to demonstrate an ability to make sense of the non-sequential multi strand narratives including both actual and virtual events, with the avatar/operator regarded as different manifestations as a single symbiote self, typical of the Real modality. However when viewed from within the virtual world, taking the perspective of the avatar, a 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1955) is constructed around the avatar's virtual world existence so that consideration is given only to the existence of the in-world narrative.

Exceptionally, in the cases of two participants interviewed, their avatars had been created with a fully developed narrative backstory in place which was clearly different from the operator's own. One operator designed her avatar after a character in a story she had written but

never completed; the character was from the town in which the author/operator had lived as a child and was designed to "fit right in there with the ladies who lunch". The intention of the operator in constructing her avatar was that of continuing the character's unfinished narrative and developing her story in Second Life. The second operator designed his avatar around a detective character, Rufus Reynard, that he had devised and played during a 1920's themed murder-mystery weekend and constructed the avatar to appear as a middle-aged country gentleman type with a thick moustache, tweed suit and monocle. He discussed how he felt that operating the avatar in Second Life was "as much as a performance as when I'd played in at the murder mystery weekend, maybe more so. It's not like I have to constantly keep asking myself how he would act in a given situation… I just get into character and have fun." He discussed how he had designed the character to come across as a bit crafty and underhanded, hence the Reynard name and associations with the archetypal cunning fox, but "it's sometimes difficult to do this in Second Life without upsetting people. People can take you at face value and not realise that you are just playing a role, it's hard to pull off a sly grin in Second Life." He related how, in an attempt to make his role play more obvious, for a while he tried having the avatar adopt a foxes head and bushy tail but concluded "it felt uncomfortable, like walking around with a mask on all the time, and didn't seem to make much difference to how people reacted to me anyway, so I stopped wearing them and just toned down the acting a bit. Second Life is odd like that, you can be whoever you want to but it only really works if others join in the story."

- *4.3.3.2f Social interaction/ behaviour*

The experience of Reynard serves to highlight an important aspect of social convention within Second Life. Following and developing a narrative often involves others subscribing to and investing in the same narrative. Much of the activity of the participants within Second Life revolved around activities which were not dissimilar to those that they might reasonably be expected to undertake in their actual lives such as shopping, going clubbing, hanging out with friends, attending community events. Most participants had developed relationships with particular social groups or communities and looked forward to meeting up with people from these groups to engage in group social activities. One even admitted finding enjoyment in "just bitching about other avatars" who formed part of the same social group.

Although little in Second Life is actually taboo, behaviour and social interaction is still dictated very much by social conventions of a particular area and its residents. As one participant had pointed out, you can buy a penis but you have to "figure out the whole etiquette for wearing it." There are areas where semi-naked avatars recreate Gorean fantasies via performances of sexism and slavery which would be entirely out of place in most Second Life areas.

More than half of the participants admitted to having visited adult themed areas within Second Life at some time during the development of their avatar. One operator recalled how, during one of his first few visits to Second Life, he had searched around to find the type of rock music night club he would frequent in the actual world when he found himself in a Second Life lap dancing club complete with near naked pole dancing avatars. He discussed how he had never considered going to such a place in the actual world and could only envisage himself doing so if pressured to do so by peers on an occasion such as a stag-party; even then he "would have to

have had a few beers to get the courage to go in." Nonetheless he admitted to enjoying spending time in the Second Life club and recounted how he had found that simply "observing what was going on and the interactions between the pole dancers and customers an interesting experience" but not one he felt inclined to seek to repeat, either in Second Life or in the actual world. Another operator discussed using an alt avatar that differed radically from both his primary avatar and his actual world self to 'explore a darker side of his personality' within the BDSM scene in Second Life (i.e. bondage, domination, sadomasochism, wherein avatars willingly slave themselves to 'masters/mistresses' often in 'dungeon' surroundings), going to places where he would not be comfortable using an avatar that looked like him partly because he felt a dark-skinned tall musclebound avatar would allow him to fit more easily into both the places and the role for which it was designed, and also because he felt he would be embarrassed going to such places using avatar which might be recognisable, even to himself, as his actual world self. He went on to discuss that, although he had never had involvement with the actual world BDSM scene, he had stumbled upon a BDSM location early in the development of his primary Second Life avatar and been too embarrassed to remain there, teleporting home within a few seconds of arriving. However his curiosity had been such that, after a few days consideration, he created his new alt to allow experimentation within areas he considered to be taboo, an act which can be viewed as a liminal event which, rather than impacting directly on his primary avatar, not caused the new alt to be generated but allowed the operator to assume a new virtual role he had not previously considered. The new avatar represented a new role which the operator performed with such confident that he soon won the trust of others and became a part of the Second Life BDSM scene. The new alt always took the dominant role with other avatars and the operator discussed how he had occasionally considered taking a submissive role but that this would necessitate him

creating yet another alt avatar to facilitate this. When asked whether his experience within Second Life had led him to consider experimenting with the actual world BDSM scene he responded that that he had never felt the urge to do so, even though it was an experience that he realised he (the operator) actually enjoyed when participating within Second Life. He likened it to enjoying playing Call of Duty but not actually wanting to go to war, but when questioned further clarified that the enjoyment from Call of Duty was derived very much from playing the game and getting good at it, and "it's an adrenalin rush but you don't feel terrified as though you are actually in a battle zone. The first few times (in the BDSM scene) in Second Life I was genuinely scared, it's all about a real experience with real people." He laughingly added "So no, I wouldn't want to go to a BDSM club… unless I could go there looking hot like my avatar." The comparison of the alt avatar to a computer game character is interesting when relating this operator's experience to the modalities table as it seems to suggest that, despite its deliberate construction and performance to express a previously unidentified facet of the operator's personality, the avatar is still considered in some ways by the operator to fulfil a Symbolic role. However the operator's clarification of his actual world investment in the experience is even described by the operator as a 'real experience' could be seen as typical of the Real avatar modality where, during the experience, attention is from the operator, interface and avatar to the experience within the virtual environment. The generation of a symbiotic relationship between operator and avatar as typified by the Real modality is supported to some extent by the operator's throw away comment about changing his actual world physicality in line with that of his avatar.

Similarly a third operator discussed how he had created a second alt avatar using the early pre-defined male newbie avatar to experience adult areas within Second Life and on his first visit had discovered a beach where all the avatars were skimpily clothed or naked and where

he had participated in his first avatar sexual experience using animation balls: "It seemed really intense, my heart was racing. I'm sure places like that exist in the real world but I'd be too embarrassed to search them out. In Second Life that kind of thing seemed perfectly acceptable, it was safe and everyone was doing it. Nobody cared or wanted your phone number afterwards." He discussed returning to the same beach on a second occasion but how trying to replicate the original experience had seemed "seedy and fake. The first time around I'd been carried away by the experience but once the novelty had worn off the animation balls just felt like a game mechanism." Whilst the first visit demonstrated the qualities of a spontaneous, authentic, Real avatar interaction, in which there had been an emotional engagement or visceral response, in both the actual and virtual worlds, this depth of response was lacking when an attempt was made to reconstruct a repeat of the spontaneous Real event from the Imaginary memory of the event.

- *4.3.3.2g Experience of embodiment*

A clear Basic Theme emerging from the discussions relating to operator's experience of embodiment within Second Life was that of emotional engagement in the avatar's experience, often leading to real world 'emotional feedback' as in the case discussed above where an animated in-world simulation of sexual experience led to an actual world physical response in the form of increased heart rate.

One operator discussed an identity liminal event early in his avatar development when, whilst still using a pre-set 'newbie' appearance, on the outskirts of a Second Life shopping area, he encountered griefers for the first time, i.e. Second Life avatars who make it their purpose to bully other avatars. He related how the griefers blocked his path and barged into him causing his

avatar to be pushed into a canal, prior to which he had not realised that avatars within SL were able to affect each other in such a way: "Being pushed into a canal caused in me an unexpected and disproportionate feeling of irritation, anger and, to some extent, helplessness. I felt violated and as disoriented as though I'd actually been pushed in to the water." After teleporting away to get out of the water, the operator's response was to learn how to quickly change the appearance of his avatar by applying new body shapes and skins. Taking inspiration from Marvel Comics' Hulk character he created for himself a large and muscled avatar appearance and practised changing between appearances to ensure any transition would be smooth and swift; he also learned how to script an invisible 'shield' which could be carried and, if collided with, would exert the force sufficient to fling away any avatar bumping into it. Several days later, in a calculated bid for minor revenge, he returned to the same shopping area wearing the same 'newbie' physicality as he had on his previous visit. As he had hoped, the griefers were blocking the same path and, as they approached him, he triggered the change in appearance from 'newbie' to 'Hulk', allowing them to collide with the invisible 'shield' he held before him. "I felt a great deal of satisfaction on seeing my would-be assailants flung into the river, it's just a pity I couldn't see the expressions on their faces as it happened."

Although the avatar's appearance or size had no impact on the capability of the avatar, its large brutish appearance was symbolic of an aggressor. This exemplifies the assertion that "the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world have come to govern our embodied identities in the virtual world" (Yee et al, 2007, p.15); the operator's perception of his own in-world appearance, and of how others would react to that appearance, combined with his newly developed skills in scripting avatar transformation, gave him the confidence to face the griefers. At the conclusion of the encounter the operator immediately logged off "for fear of any

reprisals" and logged back in the following day to create and assume an appearance different from both the 'newbie' and the 'Hulk'. The experience had some impact on this next avatar appearance: "I didn't want the avatar to appear intimidating to others, so I downsized from the Hulk physique, but I wanted to add some character to him. The newbie just looked too naïve, so I bought a sharp suit to try to give an air of an experienced pro." Yee and Bailenson, in 'The Proteus Effect', posed the question: "Do users who frequently use tall and attractive avatars become more confident and friendly in real life?" (2006, p.23.) When the question was asked of the operator whether the confidence gained via assumption of the Hulk-ish appearance was carried through to his actual world projected identity he responded: "No, it probably wasn't even the appearance of the avatar that gave me the confidence in Second Life either, so much as being prepared for what was going to happen. If anything the experience might make me a bit more cautious when walking in strange areas in the real world though… wearing a suit always gives me more confidence in public situations though, I think that's why I bought one for my avatar."

The experience of this operator is a demonstration of how aspects typified by each of the modalities interacted to manifest in a particular and temporary expression of identity. The identity liminal event trigger for the transformation was one in which the operator had experienced an emotional engagement with the avatar and his environment typical of the Real modality, but the response had been to use a Symbolic 'Hulk' cultural archetype, itself based on prior cultural references such as the transformation of Stephenson's Jekyll and Hyde, (an analogy also used by Koles and Nagi, 2012, to discuss the "congruence between real life and virtual identity"), as the basis for the construction of an avatar appearance to fulfil the intended purpose. The whole experience can not only be considered to be an Imaginary performance projecting the attributes selected by the operator but also demonstrates how Second Life can be used as a

platform for the fluidity, experimentation and interaction typical of Real avatar self-expression. The operator's feelings of "irritation, anger and…helplessness" were derived directly from the experience of the avatar, without any distinction between operator and avatar. The sense of embodiment was not only due to the attention of the operator being directed towards the avatar during the experience as is typical of the Imaginary modality, but derived from the operator/avatar's unmediated experience of the experience of the virtual interaction as typical of the Real avatar modality.

Even where the avatar is regarded by the operator as having a third party relationship with them, shared aspects of personality can lead to an emotional response by the avatar affecting the operator. In most cases instances were discussed by participants from the perspective that their avatar's experiences of emotional engagement within Second Life had affected their operator's response, rather than describing the operator's emotional reaction to a third event avatar event leading to them responding in particular ways via their avatar. Such responses are typical of the "visceral empathy" described by Au (2008, p.57) and the oscillations in the sense of presence between physical and virtual environments (Biocca 1997, Clelland 2010). One operator described how she shared a love of animals with her avatar: "Even dead statue animals make her cry. She gets so emotional that sometimes it makes me cry too". This exemplifies the externalization of emotion as discussed by Žižek (1998) who wrote "I can literally laugh and cry through another." The emotional response is viewed by the operator as a Real spontaneous reaction on the part of the avatar, flowing from the avatar to the operator, rather than described as being an actual world response by the operator resulting in an Imaginary performance by the avatar, e.g. "I get so emotional that sometimes I cry, and I reflect that in the way I act via my avatar."

However, as with the discussions relating to narrative, when discussion emotional engagement a one-way 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1955) seems to be perceived by operators as existing around the avatar's virtual world existence; whilst avatar experience is described as having a direct impact on the operator's actions or emotional state, operator's rarely discussed actual world events affecting the operator impact on the behaviour or interactions of the avatar, despite such instances would seem to demonstrate a much clearer causal relationship. Two notable exceptions to this were given by two who discussed incidents where going into Second Life whilst in a particular frame of mind in the actual world (angry and drunk respectively) had impacted on their interactions in Second Life, where in-world friends had noticed that something was amiss.

Chapter 5: Artistic Practice Based Research

5.1 Research Study 4 – Investigation of Expression of Identity within the Work of Artistic Practitioners

Context:

To investigate ways in which artistic practice within Second Life can facilitate diverse experimental expressions of identity and lead to the development of different types of relationship between operators and their avatars

Approach:

Qualitative: Case studies reviewing the work of artists in Second Life addressing themes relating to the expression of identity. The data is collected from written sources including blogs and essays as well as from direct sources including correspondence and interviews with a number of the artists conducted both in person and by electronic means. Data is also be included from the researcher's auto-ethnographic experience of interacting with and in the work. The case studies include a number of the researcher's own previous artistic work and ethnomethodological interventions.

Date:

Conducted between September 2012 and September 2014

5.1.1 Rationale

This stage of the research looks beyond the typical uses of avatars and examine the use of avatars by creative practitioner addressing themes of identity within Second Life to challenge the

notions of the roles and purposes of avatars, and the nature of the relationships that their operators develop with them.

If, as Sarup wrote of Foucault's viewpoint, "the reinvention of the self is primarily an aesthetic experience…the principal aim of which is to make one's life a work of art" (1996, p.88), this is evidenced by those artists working in the medium of Second Life, whose avatars form the basis of their art. Jacqueline Ford Morie writes that "the contributions of visual and performance artists is key to how we will know and comprehend ourselves in the near and far future as creatures existing in both the physical and the digital domains" (2007, p.123). Many such artistic practitioners have produced work challenging the notions of the roles and purposes of avatars, and the nature of the relationships that their operators develop with them. Writing of their own creative work in Second Life, Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould write of "an increasing need to identify new forms of interaction, creativity, cultural production and sociability" (2013, p.48-49). The case studies therefore examine the work of a number of such artistic practitioners within Second Life.

The initial stages of this research study involve a review of archive materials including artist's blogs, video materials and wiki's and journalistic accounts reviewing the work of a wide range of artists whose work relates to the expression of identity within Second Life. Boellstorff et al write "When ethnographers study forums and wikis, it is in the contest of participant observation research... Archival work is, in our view, essential to any ethnographic project... Online sources such as forums and wikis, as well as journalistic accounts, can be vital sources of archival knowledge" (2012, pp.119-120). Such a study could never be comprehensive but allows key practitioners to be identified for more in depth studies, including interviews with the artists themselves to analyse their intentions in conducting this activity and their outcomes not only in

terms of the resultant impact on audiences or participants, but also on their own relationships to the avatars they created.

Among the artistic works reviewed the researcher has included a review of a number of his own prior artistic work and collaborations within Second Life some of which may be classed as ethnomethodological interventions designed to explore the link proposed by previous researchers (Merola & Pena 2010, p.8; Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut, 2006) between external avatar appearance and behaviour within Second Life.

The decision to include such ethnomethodological interventions within this element of the study rather than as a separate study was taken to emphasise that these interventions were considered as artistic practice within Second Life and a continuation of ethnographic participant observation into the response to such artistic practice rather than as a form of experimental research, lacking as they do the "rigour of genuine controlled experimentation" (Boellstorff et al, 2012). Boellstorff et al continue: "while ethnographic research differs fundamentally to experimental research, participant observation is predicated on an awareness that researchers engage in a kind of 'experimenting engagement' - through the everyday consequences of social interaction as well as more deliberate events" (2012, p.90).

5.1.2 Sample Methods

A wide ranging review of archive materials, including artist's blogs, video materials and wiki's and journalistic accounts, was undertaken to identify artists whose work related to themes of identity and particularly those who were experimenting with identity in their work. The following artists were then contacted and agreed to interviews taking place;

- Joseph DeLappe

- Lynn Hershman

- Kristine Schomaker

- Georgie Roxby Smith

- Leonardo Selvaggio

In most cases contact with artists was initiated by email, although initial contact with Delappe and Smith was made in person at the Prospectives '12 International Festival of Digital Art at the University of Reno, Nevada, organised by Delappe, where the researcher had been invited to present his own artistic practice. Although the meetings with these two artists included the opportunity for informal discussions resulting in researcher field notes which later informed the interviews, as with the previous study interviews were conducted via a series of emails.

As with interviews in the previous study a semi-structured approach was taken with lists of key questions drawn up in advance. Although these questions were personalised to each of the artists and often referred to and sought expansion upon data collected from the artist's own writings via the study of archival information, they all sought to investigate the following key areas;

- The reasons behind the project and appearance of the avatar

- The development of the artist's relationship with the avatar

- Any impact the project or relationship with the avatar had on the artist's real world identity or behaviour

The work of other relevant artists listed below was reviewed in detail using the archive information available, with particular reference to the artist's own blogs and published works.

- Denise Doyle

- Micha Cardenas

- Meilo Minotaur (Sameiro Oliveira Martins) and CapCat Ragu (Catarina Carneiro de Sousa)

- Alan Sondheim

Account was also taken of the contributions of other notable artists whose works are referred to and analysed including Phillip Mallory Jones, Jacqueline Morie, Gazira Babeli, Patrick Lichty, Cao Fei and Douglas Gayeton. For those artists whose work was studied only using archive materials, these questions were also applied within the investigation and, where possible, for both groups the research data collected was supplemented by ethnographic experiential interaction with the artists' work.

In addition the researcher applied these areas of investigation to his own prior artistic work, along with artistic collaborations he had previously undertaken with Alan Hook. The collaborations 'Connecting Point/Human-Avatar' installation at the Tech Museum in San Jose (2009) and a number of early short works collectively titled 'Experiments in Embodiment' (2008) were reviewed along with the researcher's solo work 'Second Life Storyteller' (2008) and a series of performances and ethnomethodological interventions designed to examine the link between external avatar appearance and expectations of behaviour within Second Life.

5.1.3 Findings

It is perhaps unsurprising that artists are at the forefront of addressing issues of identity using Second Life as a platform for artistic expression. The section will review the practice of a number of artists whose work is of particular interest when examining the expression of identity within virtual worlds, investigating and comparing their work and experiences, and examining their work with reference to the frameworks of identity theory discussed. Though the study will refer to third party documentation and analysis of the work of these artists, where possible focus will be given to the artist's own documentation of their work via blogs and published writings. In several cases, these writings are supported by interviews with the artists conducted as part of this research study, and reference will also be made to the author's own phenomenological experience of interacting with a number of the projects discussed.

Following on from Meadows assertion that "avatars are ultimately interactive self-portraits that we use to represent ourselves" (2007, p.106) the idea of avatars as portraits has been reversed by a number of artists working with the traditional artistic techniques of portraiture to create portraits of avatars. In his exhibition and book 'Alter Ego' (2007) photojournalist Robbie Cooper takes portraits of avatars from Second Life as well as various games worlds and displays them next to those of their operators. Cooper's juxtaposition of the portraits generally speaks for itself and most images demonstrate a clear developmental link between the operator and the appearance of the avatar. Some are simply Symbolic transcriptions of the operator's appearance to allow their existence to continue to develop in-world, while others are Imagined reconstructions using the operator as the starting point; one operator described her avatar as "the

way I aspire to be when I'm older. I know the kind of person that I want to be because I see some women like that in real life or in film"; another said "my avatar looks like my real self but about twenty years younger… I usually dress my avatar in the same sort of stuff I wear. She doesn't have a separate persona or anything. She's just an extension of myself in the virtual space". Even in cases where the actual world operator appearance has not influenced the appearance of the avatar, the accompanying text often offers clarification of the traits shared between operator and avatar. Some artists have sought to emphasize the limitations in the way avatars are used to characterise their operators. Artist Mathias Fuchs wrote that "Virtual Environments claim to open a realm of unlimited possibilities in regard to the users' look and feel, but they often force the user into a limited shell of preconceived patterns of appearance and identity" (2007). To question the relationship between self and avatar during a 2007 intervention within Second Life, Fuch's avatar Mathias Lubitsch carried a placard bearing the legend 'I am Mathias Fuchs.'

The act of exhibiting portraits of Second Life avatars is a recurring theme for artists working within the medium. In the Second Life installation '1000 Avatars' Gracie Kendal/Kristine Schomaker whose work is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, hosted an exhibition of a 1000+ portraits of avatars she had taken of avatars facing away from the viewer, a symbol of online anonymity. Lichty (2009) writes of the project 'Portraits: 13 Most Beautiful Avatars' (2006) in which Eva and Franco Mattes displayed portraits of avatars in both actual world and Second Life settings: "each avatar portrait is coquettish and dramatic, illustrating the techno-utopian dream of eternal youth and beauty… The key irony is that with the ideal of fame and beauty in Second Life, which is an astute read by the artists…where anyone is as beautiful as their patience to shop for accoutrements and pocketbooks allow, who are the famous? But more importantly, in the land where everyone is potentially beautiful, who

are the *most* beautiful?" Another exhibition of avatar portraits 'Code Portraits' (2009), which Lichty created for the Australian National Portrait Gallery, featured many of the avatars he met as his avatar Man Michanga. Whilst the portraits were exhibited in the actual world Gallery, they were also made accessible on mobile devices via QR codes. This led to a clever twist within Second Life where, rather than the portraits being exhibited as images they were displayed in as monolithic placeholders Symbolic of the avatars whose images they held.

Quaranta (2007, p.5) comments that by doing "something as apparently banal as photographing avatars... and exhibiting them in an art space, (the artists) are ...saying loud and clear that the subjects they have chosen are neither simulacra or characters in a game; they are people, complete, complex identities with defined social roles in a society comprising two million inhabitants." To directly apply the modalities discussed to Quaranta's quotation, it might be said that the avatars who are the objects of the portraiture are neither Imaginary or Symbolic; they are Real.

Second Life avatar-artist Gazira Babeli has worked in a very different way with the theme of avatars portraiture in the work 'Avatar On Canvas' (2007) in which avatars were invited to sit on reproductions of Francis Bacon paintings to trigger Bacon-esque deformations in their avatar, distorting their physicality beyond its normal parameters and transforming the avatar itself into a piece of artwork. The avatars, in subjecting themselves to a transformative experience demonstrating the Real potential for expression within Second Life had handed over the responsibility and agency for this transformation to the artist who had reconstructed them as surreally Imagined versions of their own avatars, Symbols of the artistic process that transformed

them. Lichty (2008, p.76) refers to Babeli's work as a 'living breathing body of code.' Whilst Gazira Babeli is the inworld avatar-artist, the identity of the operator remains undisclosed. Quaranta writes of Babeli that "in view of the fact that there is no actual person called Gazira Babeli, ... (she) is, on one level, a work of art in her own right... an identity construction project in a simulated world" (2013, p.217).

Both Babeli and Lichty, as avatar Man Michinaga, have been members of the Second Life performance art collective Second Front, and worked together on a number of occasions. One series of short performances, '7up', documented the independent "absurd, boring and slightly vacuous life" (Quaranta, 2008, p.18) led by two avatars when their operators were away. The work suggests that the avatars, without direction from the operators lack purpose, Imagined constructs attempting unsuccessfully to create their own Real experiences. However this is not the case for Babeli herself; "The fact that she is not subjugated to a real identity has done a lot for… the concreteness of her persona. In Second Life you can meet loads of avatars but few people. Gazira is one of the latter. She is not someone's puppet; she is someone in her own right" (Quaranta, 2008, p.71). Babeli, an Imaginary constructed avatar created and operator without apparent creator/operator has become, through her work, a Real artist-avatar in her own right.

A number of artists have documented the narrative of the avatar journey of discovery through Second Life. Such journeying has been likened to the concept of the flaneur, a detached yet active physical wanderer, which was described in the actual world by Walter Benjamin as enjoying " the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit" a state to which direct Second Life analogies can be drawn. Cao Fei, as avatar China Tracy, made documentaries including 'Avatars' and 'iMirror', the latter discussed by Lichty (2009) as continuing "the ongoing dialogue about mediated identity… by representing a virtual anime

character flaneur piloted by a Chinese woman in a rapidly changing world who navigates through a wholly mediated milieu." Cao Fei herself discussed Second Life avatars as both a portal to reveal our 'true' or Real self, and a platform for self-analysis: "some people might reveal their true persona via the behaviours of their avatars; when we travel through second life we inevitably project our first life into it. We in fact bring many of the dilemmas and quandaries we face in our first life to the fore in Second Life, hoping to resolve them. We hope and attempt to use Second Life to decode and interpret our real life." In a similar vein Douglas Gayeton chronicled "Molotov Alva and His Search for the Creator" (2007) the story of the journey through Second Life of Molotov Alva and of why he left his "straight world life' in 'the carbon based world' behind. Alva questions the nature of the Real in both the actual and virtual worlds and quotes Einstein that: "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a persistent one" and questions "if this new reality was merely an illusion, did its persistence depend upon me?" He talks of how much of what is created in both 'lives' is facsimile and poses the question of how his Second Life can be created differently to the life he has left behind, questioning the need for the reproduction of objects that serve no purpose to his Second Life, such as table, chairs, kitchens. Other artists too have created work relating to this question such as John Bruneau and James Morgan's "Looks Very Tidy" in which the artists created virtual vacuum cleaners for themselves to use within a machinima movie documenting them cleaning up within Second Life, and lest consumerism be outdone by art, Second Life Marketplace allows you to purchase pre-produced virtual trash piles. Alva also documents meeting 'people who had reinvented the world to fit their own needs' such as residents of the Second Life area of Caledon who use the 21st century technology of Second Life to play out the narratives of their life in a 19th century world.

5.1.3.1 Second Life Salt March to Dandi

One of the most well documented journeys within Second Life is the performance project by Joe Delappe's replicating Ghandi's historical walk. From March 12 - April 6, 2008 Joseph DeLappe undertook a Second Life performance in which he re-enacted Gandhi's famous 240 mile Salt March made in protest of the British salt tax in 1930 using his avatar MGandhi Chakrabati, modelled on the physical appearance of Mahatma Gandhi. The MGandhi avatar might be typified as being Symbolic insofar as the role, appearance and narrative were all predetermined; the avatar was developed with the sole purpose of undertaking the role of Gandhi for the duration of the performance.

Prior to the Salt March project, DeLappe had a presence within Second Life with an avatar he created to work with college students challenged to create their own representational avatar self. In accordance with the prevailing tendency for avatars within Second Life to be based on the characteristics of their originators, DeLappe describes his original avatar to be "roughly a self-portrait of myself as I might look in the classroom as a professor." However he discusses how he was "interested in challenging expectations regarding the creation of avatars... In SL one is encouraged to be whatever one wants to be - yet there are conventions that have become the norm in such online spaces. I was very interested in taking avatar creation to what I see to be a logical extreme. If you can be anything, why not Gandhi?" (2013).

However DeLappe did not simply want MGandhi to be physically representative of Gandhi, but to embody the qualities associated with him, referring to MGandhi as an "interpretive reification" (2012, p.212). AJ Glasser (2010) quotes DeLappe: "*I'm* not Gandhi; [my avatar] is the *idea* of Gandhi." From this perspective, the view of a purely functional Symbolic MGandhi becomes too simplistic. The characteristics assigned to the Imaginary modality describe an avatar as idealized portrait, expressing a facet of the operator's personality,

raising the question whether DeLappe himself felt the need to embrace or embody the qualities associated with Gandhi so that they might be expressed via the avatar. In answer to this DeLappe (2013) wrote: "I tried my best to walk a line between the fact that while I could not presume to "be" Gandhi; the experience of guiding my avatar "MGandhi" throughout SL was indeed, however, unexpectedly transformative."

DeLappe attributes a large factor in this transformation to the physical nature of the project promoting within him an experience of embodiment so significant that at times he felt his 'ability to clearly delineate between the online and real world had become temporarily muddled." (2012, p.214). During the 26 days of the performance DeLappe walked 240 miles on a treadmill which replicating Gandhi's historical Salt March. This act of walking on the treadmill controlled the forward movement of MGandhi within Second Life where MGandhi/DeLappe interacted with the Second Life residents he met on his journey. Of the experience, DeLappe (2013) writes:

What began as a conceptual performance became something much more important to my person. I truly found myself changed by this durational work of mixed reality. The mixed reality aspect of the project, the "walking", became such an important aspect of the work. Participating in such a "live art" project involved my physical body in a way that intrinsically made this a very different work from previous endeavors. So much of what we do in virtual worlds is actually more disembodied that we might like to think. By physically involving my body, there was a level of commitment and indeed embodiment than was anticipated.

The narrative of the performance must also be given consideration; 'The Second Life Salt March', while a virtual re-enactment, was not simply a Symbolic virtual copy of the original, nor was it a fully pre-constructed Imaginary performance. Whilst the parameters were clear at the start with the 240 miles walked over 26 days symbolizing and correlating directly to the original Salt March, and the performative (Imaginary) nature of the project, much of the narrative was spontaneously created by the social interactions with the hundreds of Second Life residents he encountered and invited to join him on his journey.

Following the 'Salt March', on May 5th, 2009, the planned/performed element of the narrative continued with a further performance in which the MGandhi avatar spent 9 months incarcerated in a reproduction of Gandhi's jail cell at the Yerwada prison where Gandhi was imprisoned by the British soon after the completion of the Salt March. DeLappe (2013, pp.147-166) described the performance as 'a symbolic act of durational and virtual imprisonment' but related too how his actual world self-maintained a perpetual awareness of the avatar: "While the artist may not have always been present, the existence of my benevolent doppelganger in SL retained a level of constancy in my consciousness."

On January 26th, 2010, the 80th anniversary of Gandhi's actual release from jail the performance culminated in MGandhi's release from prison by members of the Second Life performance group Second Front during the 'gg hootenanny', an event described as a day-long festival featuring songs of freedom and protest. The 'gg hootenanny' gathered a number of Second Life residents from around the globe including several artists and performers, many of whom attended in fancy dress including representations of Marilyn Munroe, the Pope, Prince Charles, Wonder Woman and Snoopy who were invited to appear as celebrity avatars for the performance. As previously detailed the author, via his avatar Guido VanDyke, attended in the

guise of Charlie Chaplin who famously met with Gandhi in London a year after his release from prison. DeLappe (2013) wrote "the significance of this work is its effective context where individual spectators became participatory and collaborative partners in the creation of the live performance. Each participant experienced the sing-along from their individual point of view both as a performer and a spectator. Voice chat… can often be an awkward and interruptive presence. The relative anonymity of the online space helped facilitate an expressive, temporal community of voices."

The event ended with MGandhi's ascension from Second Life, never to return, bringing the performance to a close with a gesture that might be seen both as a comment on the temporal nature of performance, and the transitory nature of existence. Perhaps the Reality of any experience might be said to be defined by the recognition of the limitations of its temporal nature and its inability to be replicated. This was not the first time the concept notion of the end of virtual embodiment virtual embodiment had been tackled in a project involving members of Second Front whose performance "Theatre of the Subliminal Front" had avatars perform the roles of Olympian gods and culminated in the performers avatars playing dead while virtual souls were released from their avatar bodies.

DeLappe (2013) wrote of the personal transformation effected by his project.

I did not expect was that this experience of being a virtual Gandhi to have such a powerful effect upon my person ... There certainly was an aspect of this work that I would attribute to "the suspension of disbelief" or of fooling myself in regard to where or who I was. The unexpected slippage between being greeted as "Gandhi!" in SL to the confusion in RL while not on the treadmill, where I would find my mind's eye

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momentarily confused - all of these experiences contributed to a sense of being changed by this performance.

This sense not only of embodiment within the avatar during the performance, but of a complex mutual relationship between avatar and operator resulting in a significant impact on the operator in the actual world may be seen as a key factor in MGandhi having undertaken a transition to become a Real avatar. As with Deleuze and Guittari's example of a wasp and orchid, DeLappe and MGandhi might be described as having become transformed into symbiotic emergent units, each affected by the existence and actions of the other.

*Figure 13: MGandhi on stage with the Pope, Prince Charles and Wonder Woman avatars.
(Copyright 2014, Joseph DeLappe. Used with permission.).
Inset - Guido Vandyke/Chaplin watches the proceedings. (Copyright 2014, Pete Wardle.)*

5.1.3.2 WanderingFictions

Denise Doyle's chronicling of the journey of her avatar Wanderingfictions in Second Life sought to build a richer narrative by which to examine our relationship with our environments. In 'Embodied Narrative: The Virtual Nomad and the Meta Dreamer', the documentation of an exchange of experiences between WanderingFictions and Taey Kim's Web2.0 avatar Dongdong, Doyle and Kim write how they 'focused on what each character sees and experiences from their worlds rather than exploring the construction of our performative selves" (2007, pp. 209-222) which could be considered being likened to focusing on the experience of the Real rather than the construction of the Imaginary. Doyle (2011, p.100) writes of how WanderingFictions "finds her fully-fledged identity following a project where she discovers that she is comfortable in a skin unlike her own… I only really found my identity when my skin changed. It's a brown shade now. Oh, and I wear glasses" (Doyle and Kim, 2007, p.p. 209-222).

WanderingFictions writes of what travelling means to her: "it is about transformation through dreaming, through imagining… one has to journey to dream." She discusses how she experiences embodiment whilst knowing that her body is virtual and writes of a friend's awe upon seeing a Second Life volcano: "In his mind's eye, in his imagination he saw before him a real volcano. Well, real enough to evoke his awe. Is that not 'real' enough for it to contain a form of reality?" In response to the claims of Jay Griffiths that "There's no India in cyberspace, no jasmine, no gupshop, no sari, no desert…There's no nature in the synthetic element." (Griffiths 2004, p.269) Wanderingfictions sets out to find India in Second Life. Although someone had built a model of the Taj Mahal in Second Life which could be seen as a Symbol of place, but the symbol was not the place and WanderingFictions discovered that "India itself, with its jasmine

and gupshop, is not so easily found." (Doyle, 2011). She writes of how, donning a sari, to 'imagine India a little more' she 'sat inside a huge lotus flower and touched its petals. It stirred a memory in me." Doyle analyses the experience and writes the "WanderingFictions physicality is real in Second Life, yet it lies within a conceptual field… if she becomes India, then she can find India."

Doyle's work looks for the Real through the veil of the constructed Imaginary and she coins the term 'embodied narrative' as the notion of embodied discourse with virtual worlds: "As we now live in multiple realities, as we now occupy multiple spaces, our cultural dreampool will soon include the very real, or lived, experience of embodiment in virtual worlds and in turn new narratives will emerge" (2007, pp. 209-223). The narrative identity of Wanderingfictions is separate from that of Doyle, but the existence of the two are intertwined. "There is no doubt that the experience of Wanderingfictions Story as my virtual counterpart, who has developed this particular identity, has been a rewarding experience. Not able to present this identity in a physical way in the real world, this particular identity has 'stuck' following the performative writing experiment. This process, of exploring an(other) identity distinct from my own, has given me an opportunity not only to understand my own character, but to understand another through 'virtually' sitting in their skin" (Doyle, 2011, p.109).

5.1.3.3 Memory as narrative

As Doyle/Wanderingfictions memory of India had been stirred by her virtual experience, other artists have worked with themes of actual world or fictional memories structured as narrative to give context to their work and to potentially create the perception of a continuous identity potentially predating an avatar's existence in Second Life. In the Second Life exhibition

and machinima piece 'In the Sweet Bye & Bye: An Immersive Memoir' Phillip Mallory Jones, celebrated his racial identity and relationship with his actual world past using family photographs and the poetry of his mother, Dorothy Mallory Jones. He wrote of how the project "became generative… Experience, understanding, perception, and communication in the synthetic world are not less or more "real" than in the physical; rather, the implementation in one case is organic, in the other it is synthetic; all are processed and made coherent in the imagination."

Similarly Jacqueline Morie's 'Remembrance and Remains' allowed visitors to "explore an Iraqi village in Second Life that is full of memories, sounds and images of the people who might have lived there" to serve as "a space of remembrance, contemplation and renewal for those affected by the Iraqi war". (Morie, quoted by Harrison & Doyle, 2010, p.200). Whilst 'Remembrance and Remains' used media to create a narrative within the Second Life Installation, Morie's 'Coming Home' project (2009), on which she collaborated with Edward Haynes, dealt with a similar theme but used more structured narrative techniques to construct a Second Life storytelling space in which historical warriors such as a samurai avatar presented scenes from a warrior's life and represented positive ideals and conversational avatar agents answered questions about the narrative. In another project, 'Traceroutes; Revisiting the Memory Stairs' (2009), Morie revisits an earlier work 'Memory Stairs'(2007) and seeks to take memories of the actual world, already Imaginary insofar as the 'memories' were mediated by Morie, and reconstruct them to be experienced by others.

5.1.3.4 Life Squared

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Life Squared project also drew on this curation of memory to recreate her earlier work, Dante Hotel was created in Second Life, simulating the original Dante Hotel room and described as a 'space through which people pass leaving clues about their identities.' (Hershman Leeson quoted by Doyle, 2009, p.205). The original project was very much an exploration of the interface between identity and location. Hershman Leeson described the project in an interview; "Once someone has occupied a hotel room, we can find out who they were by what they left behind." In the actual world 'The Dante Hotel' (1973–74), Hershman Leeson used a rented hotel room to allow visitors to experience the signs of life of the occupants via wax figures, sounds and fictional ephemera. In 2007 she teamed up with the Stanford Humanities Lab to create a visitable archive of her 'Dante Hotel' installation within Second Life. The artist constructed an avatar, Roberta Ware to perform the role of host to this Second Life re-presentation of her earlier, actual world installation. Lynn Hershman Leeson's previous projects documented herself in the role of Roberta Brietmore, in her L2 (Life Squared) Second Life installation she continues to examine identity and embodiment via an extension of her Roberta by a recreation of her in the form of avatar Roberta Ware. Frieling writes: "Roberta, a female persona that originated with the durational performance work Roberta Breitmore (1974–78) ... has been reborn once more as an avatar host for Life2."

Between 1974 and 1978, Lynn Hershman Leeson developed the fictional persona and alter ego of Roberta Breitmore, not only transforming herself physical appearance but constructing a fully-fledged, completely documented alternative personality. Hershman Leeson lived Roberta's life and masses of information, documentation and ephemera were generated to

create and maintain the narrative which would authenticate Roberta's existence. Rudolf Frieling (2008) wrote that "her work expresses a desire for public interaction and an interest in the construction of identity (her own or that of fictional others) via photography, diaries, and other forms of documentation." When interviewed in 2012 Hershman Leeson called Roberta Breitmore an "archetype of a composite of an individual" existing in a "full enough form to represent the time." She discussed that, through the artefacts Breitmore acquired, such as a driver's license, she had "more relevance and authenticity than [Hershman Leeson] did... her deepest construction was based on the reality in which she lived, that was acted out and performed and documented through her experiences."

However Hershman Leeson also employed other actors to take on the identity of Roberta. Alvarez (2003) writes: "Roberta was a virtual clone of Leeson that took on a life of its own – in fact, three lives. In the second year of Roberta's life her adventures became so numerous that she grew into a multiple; Leeson ended up hiring three separate actresses to "perform" Roberta." Whilst these actresses tried to represent the same 'authentic' Roberta as Hershman Leeson, the artist herself spoke at the Autonomous Agents Symposium (Whitworth, Manchester, 2006) of "authenticity being only ephemeral."

Though the use of artefacts to support the construction and narrative of Roberta's identity adhere to characteristics of the Imaginary modality, and Hershman Leeson's terminology relating to performance supports this, Roberta's identity soon began to evolve in originally unforeseen directions. Three other actresses were employed to perform the identity of Roberta and while they tried to represent the same 'authentic' Roberta as Hershman Leeson's portrayal, the interactions of this multiple-Roberta construct facilitated her transformation into a much more post-modern creation. Roberta Mock (2012, pp.126-139) quotes Hershman Leeson (2010) as

providing a description of the actual world Roberta as an ongoing process created by social interaction, much more in accord with the typological Real; "Roberta isn't complete. She transforms and mutates through processes of improvisation and documentation. All of the people who engage with Roberta continue to embody her."

Hershman Leeson (2014) wrote: "I originally wanted to make an archive of my Stanford archive to re-enact digitally the work I had done up to that time, to be re performed by the avatar's avatar of Roberta." The statement may be taken to suggest not only that the avatar is 'second generation', i.e. twice removed from the artist, but that Hershman Leeson considers it to be Roberta Ware, the avatar's avatar, that is doing the performing, or in fact re-performing of that which was previously performed by Roberta Breitmore. The references to 'Life Squared' as an 'archive' and 're-performance' might be taken to suggest that Ware is simply a facsimile of Breitmore at the time of archiving and not part of a similar process of transformation and mutation. Reduced to her basic functions Roberta Ware may be considered to be a Symbolic avatar, created simply to perform a functional role, and as a proxy to represent a already Imaginary, constructed identity.

Lichty (2009) writes that the "project is a logical extension of Hershman Leeson's work in mediated identity, and brings it to the wholly virtual. That is, the artists in Second Life whose virtual work makes no pretension of a referent to the tangible." However this reimagining as Roberta in the landscape of Second Life gave the artist the opportunity to re-examine issues relating to the identity and embodiment of Roberta, describing Ware as "Roberta reconfigured, mutated and migrated into another form. She exists in the landscape of SL, with unknown users and adventures and encounters, so she follows the original conceptual thread of Roberta but in a different geography" (Hershman Leeson, 2014). Mock wrote that "Roberta Ware is and is not as

authentic, originary and/not autonomous as her namesake, the always already simulated Roberta

Breitmore" while Patrick Lichty (2009, p.8) writes of Ware that she is "perhaps the 'real' Roberta

Ware, as opposed to the 'dramatization' of Roberta Breitmore." Ware therefore, as Brietmore

before her, can be typified not merely an Imaginary performed construct, but a Real constantly

evolving entity with the potential for transformation. Mock quotes Amelia Jones that the artist is

"enacting a perpetual process of virtual becoming" who "stages the self as both simulacral and

embodied" (2012, p.135).

Figure 14: Roberta Ware - Life Squared in Dante Hotel. (Copyright 2006, Lynn Hershman. Used with permission).

5.1.3.5 Gracie Kendal Project

In Kristine Schomaker's 'Gracie Kendal Project', Schomaker recorded a blog of the life of her avatar, Gracie Kendal, and effected changes to her actual world appearance and activities to transform herself to become more like Gracie. Schomaker (2014) writes of how the Gracie Kendal avatar was initially created as a means to an end, to simply fulfil the function of allowing her to access Second Life. "Gracie...was just meant to be a character I played on Second Life. Everyone had an avatar. I couldn't go into SL without one." To document the 'Gracie Kendal Project', Schomaker took a photo of Gracie and herself every day and placed them side by side to create comics and conversations between them, describing these as her way of "talking to herself out loud."

Though Gracie was initially no more than a Symbolic proxy for Schomaker she quickly developed as an Imagined construction of the idealized representation of her originator. "The first week I was there, I bought a shape, skin, hair, clothes etc. I chose to give Gracie blond hair because I have blond hair, but otherwise she was my ideal self. She was tall and thin. She was often called classy because of the way she was dressed" (Schomaker, 2014).

On 1st Nov 2009 Schomaker embarked upon a project, based on a Stanford study of whether avatars can influence an individual's actual world behaviour, which would change the way she thought of Gracie. She began to make changes to her own appearance to model herself on that of Gracie, who she described as sassy, vibrant and outgoing, in an attempt to transform herself to be not only more physically like Gracie but also take on some of these qualities. In her blog (2010), she refers to Gracie as "my self-portrait, my alter ego, my inner conscience. She is a character in my life story that revolves around the loss of identity, self-awareness and self-

acceptance... Gracie is an ideal representation of me. Gracie is who I would like to be. ..Gracie is me. She is the skin that I am most comfortable being in." She described the process of transformation as "finding my inner Gracie... Her self-confidence, her charisma, her personality... is all me, but it's the best of me."

Through the project it might be said that, not only did Schomaker become an actual world Imaginary constructed and performed avatar of Gracie (who in turn was originally an Imaginary avatar of an idealized representation of Schomaker), but that the operator /avatar relationship was typical of the Real avatar classification. While Schomaker compared the experience of transforming herself into an actual world avatar of Gracie to wearing a mask or costume which felt good to take off, some of the physical changes, such as the nose ring, becoming a more permanent facet of the actual world Schomaker and the artist writes of how Gracie influenced her in other ways:

> I like to believe Gracie has positively influenced me in the physical world. I have found my voice in art, a bit more body image confidence and a path in life. Having the courage to be myself under the guise of Gracie really helped me in the real world... Through my project, I really looked into myself and have been able to be comfortable in my own skin. With all of the work Gracie has done in SL, she has taught me to be brave... With/through Gracie I am able to be myself, to be more real (Schomaker, 2014).

However Schomaker did not feel the initial project to be entirely successful. In an interview on her blog with 'Rowan Derryth' (15 April 2010) she is quoted as saying:

I would call it for lack of a better term a 'failure'… it was definitely not

how I expected it to turn out. I think I expected I'd feel like Gracie… I'd feel

more comfortable with who I am… but I wasn't... I was even more uncomfortable

because I became something I'm not… it was more because I put on this

'costume' and that doesn't change a person... I think the real purpose for both is to

find a balance.

Gracie Kendal is not the only avatar Schomaker created based on aspects of herself.

Schomaker writes how her eponymous avatar, Kris Schomaker, was created "as a representation

of my real life self because I just couldn't/wouldn't change Gracie to be like me in real life"

(Schomaker, 2014). It may be speculated that Gracie, having become 'Real', left a gap to be filled

by the Imaginary Kris Schomaker avatar.

Gracie and myself in RL started having existential conversations about life, reality

and identity. Gracie was trying to escape SL and I felt I had to get my RL self into SL.

Creating Kris was the best way to do that... I actually never developed a relationship with

the Kris avatar the way I did with Gracie. Maybe because she is too much like me in RL.

With/through Gracie I am able to be myself, to be more real. As the real me, like you

said, I am not comfortable in my own skin (and shape) and sometimes find it hard to be

myself because of judgment and criticism in our society (Schomaker, 2014).

Both of these avatars, along with 14 others were then used in a project, VB15, that

Schomaker worked on in collaboration with the Vaneeesa Blaylock Company which featured 16

avatars in total based on four different shapes and sizes, one based on Schomaker's actual world physicality, one based on Gracie Kendal, and two transitional shapes. The artist, along with several actors operated each of the avatars for the duration of the performance. Schomaker was asked how having multiple operators performing as the various versions of herself/Gracie impacted upon what seems to be quite a personal relationship with her avatars. "I was the operator for Gracie and the Avatar Kris Schomaker. While the other operators piloted the avatars with my shapes it didn't bother me because I created most of the avatars specifically for this project." She did however feel that she couldn't let anyone else operate the Gracie and Kris avatars.

Schomaker's more recent project 'Binge and Purge' (2013) shares the concept of an identity constructed and authenticated by ephemera with Hershman Leeson's Roberta and with the unseen occupants of her 'Dante Hotel'. Other projects working with this theme include the 'Life Sharing'(2000) project by Eva and Franco Mattes of which Quaranta (2007) quoted Volkart: "The project… exaggerates the assumption that our life and our identities are based on purely determined and determining accumulations of information." In 'Binge and Purge' Schomaker examined the relationship of Gracie with the ephemera she had collected during her time in Second Life. Over a period of five months she gradually put all her Second Life belongings on display before deleting them forever until Gracie owned no more than the clothes she was wearing. When asked how it felt when she had deleted everything Schomaker (2014) responded:

It was an interesting experience. It was pretty cathartic getting rid of your material possessions. I believe life is much more than what you own. Stuff, is a symbol of so much that is wrong with the world today. Binge and Purge has many layers, many meanings from working on my eating disorder to talking about commodity and value in

ourselves as well as our possessions. There were some moments that made me sad and even a bit teary. I had several items created by friends that have passed away. It was really great finding items that I had acquired when I first joined Second Life. I don't really miss anything, except I decided to start a new project and I need clothes. So now I have to go shopping, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is building up my inventory again. The Binge and Purge was more symbolic.

She went on to discuss how the project raised issues relating to the "commodity and value in ourselves as well as our possessions."

Unlike the culmination of DeLappe's 'gg hootenanny' in which MGandhi ascended from Second Life, never to return, Gracie has no plans to leave. "It was not meant to be an end all and be all. I believe Gracie exists independent of the property, but not totally. Her hair and clothes do help form her identity, but her name remains. Her personality, my personality is still mine. Gracie is still Gracie with or without possessions and even place" (Schomaker, 2014). She discusses how she still hasn't fully resolved the nature of the relationship between Kris and Gracie: "I have always seen Gracie as a part of me. A part of my personality. She is like the id and ego that sits on my shoulder. A cheerleader. So in that way she is both of us and neither of us."

Figure 15: Finding Grace- Two portraits in the pursuit of balance.
(Copyright 2014, Kristine Schomaker. Used with permission.).

5.1.3.6 Becoming Dragon

As with Schomaker/Kendal, the link between the artistic practice and the actual world identity of artist Micha Cardenas is explicit, if the transformation may be considered more extreme; 'Becoming Dragon' (2008) saw artist Cardenas spend 365 hours within Second Life exploring the 'Species Reassignment' transition of her avatar Azdel Slade from human to dragon to represent the 365 days transgender people have to fulfil living as their chosen gender before undertaking Gender Reassignment Surgery. Cardenas described the project as requiring "near-total immersion." The project, though Symbolic of gender reassignment was also a wider investigation of "the possibilities of transformation offered by contemporary technology… People are now undergoing all sorts of extreme body modifications. They're getting scales tattooed all over their bodies, horns implanted on their heads, tongues forked. It seems crazy right now, but I wonder how far we are from actually being able to change species. And if we could, what would that be like?" (2008).

There exist a wealth of historical precedents recording an anthropomorphic connection between humans and animals, and interviewees had spoken of a spiritual connection with particular animals; the theme has been developed by artists such as Tony Allard whose coyote headed persona 'Heckety', based on the trickster god of several Native American cultures, undertakes live, often political, performances in both Second Life and the actual streets of American cities. However during Cardenas' performance she discovered "a whole community of people who feel that they are truly, earnestly, painfully other than human. They're foxes, dragons, cats. One of them told me that they identify as transgender (but)… what they really want is to be a fox." It may be speculated that the reasons behind such a desire for species

reassignment lies in a deep rooted dissatisfaction with an individual's currently expressed Imaginary identity in all its facets of construction, performance and social identifications, and that the real desire is to deconstruct and reconstruct it to express the desirable characteristics Symbolic of the chosen totem animal; it may however be equally valid to speculate that the individual's most authentic and Real expression of self is as their animal-persona.

Cardenas describes her transformation into Dragon as transreal, an oscillation between realities, and between the modalities we may use to describe them:

> I am becoming a shapeshifting creature of legend, a dragon. Standing here on the border, the sunlight through the clouds defeating the fence, I am transreal, between realities, moving through layers of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. Simultaneously quivering, swapping out, and swapping back in. I move too fast for anyone to discern the border between them. I am existing between my fantasies and desires, which are driving the changing form of my body, and which also drive the moment of perception in which you see me and call me ma'am, sir, dude, miss, or avoid choosing a category. (2010, pp.116-121)

Cardenas discusses "three major operations of the transreal: reality construction, transreal performativity and transreal technologies" and suggests "We are becoming transreal. Our identities span realities. Now that the possibility exists for bodily transformation… we want more. We want to be real and unreal at the same time, to span realities, to be multiple, a digital body and a physical body, and also multiple digital bodies, alts, bots, clones." (2012, p.76). Her later works, such as Technosexual which she performed with collaborator Elle Mehrmand as part of the Prospectives 09 exhibition in San Jose, continue to address themes of sexuality and the

transreal shifting between realities. Of Technosexual Cardenas wrote: "The mixing of realities in this project are a way of queering new media which parallels our own experiences of mixing genders and sexualities. Virtual/Synthetic worlds like Second Life facilitate the development of new identities which allow for (as yet) unimagined relations and relationships" (Technosexual//Montreal, 2010).

5.1.3.7 Reality Bytes

Australian artist Georgie Roxby Smith undertook a number of performance pieces using Second Life, originally as part of the research towards her Master's thesis. When questioned about her original creation of Diogenes, Smith (2014) described a third party relationship typical the Symbolic classification where the avatar fulfilled a simple role: "Whilst I mainly used SL as artistic tool as one may use a paintbrush, and my avatar was a figure I initially thought of being something completely objective."

Nevertheless, Smith constructed her avatar, Diogenes Wilder, as an Imaginary reconstruction of herself. Smith (2014) writes that her practice is "centered around digital identity and the desire for the idealized digital self" and describes the inspiration and process of creating Diogenes: "I was fascinated with the popular practice of creating fantasy or idealized selves through SL, where everything that required physical effort or was simply not available to people in RL, could be created in a click of a button. This inclination is an incredibly seductive one, whilst wanting to base Diogenes solely on me – I found myself tucking the tummy here, raising the cheekbones there."

The relationship quickly developed into something more personal than Smith had anticipated and she became protective towards her avatar:

> I was surprised to find myself strangely attached to her. In her were hours and hours of work & embedded experience – she was my embodiment in that world – I

experienced that world through her. Whilst we role play online in some form or another, we cannot completely hide our essential selves – they are "performing" a part of us... As an integral part of my work at the time 'she' also became a commodity as such, I was invested in her and found myself protecting her from friends who wanted to try SL, quietly freaking out if they moved her in an inappropriate way, pushed into people, or 'said' certain things – like I had to protect her reputation, now she was "someone"! (Smith, 2014).

Smith created multiple versions of this avatar for the purposes of a live performance 'Reality Bytes' crossing over virtual world/actual world platforms, and taking place both in Second Life and physically at the Watermill Center NY in 2010. She worked with new media and performance artists to create Reality Bytes which incorporated video projections along with performances by both humans and avatars, and likened the effect to "a hall of mirrors, in which viewers occupy multiple realities at once" (Smith, 2014). Multiple 'fractured' versions of Diogenes occupied the Second Life performance space, each physically based on herself but each different or flawed in some way and operated by different actual world performers interacting together.

Like Schomaker, she felt that these feelings did not extend in the same way to the multiple versions of Diogenes she used within her performances. Her attachment did not extend in the same way to these multiple versions of Diogenes nor did having multiple operators perform as distorted versions of Diogenes impact upon the operator/avatar relationship which had developed.

Having my split avatar controlled by other users did not bring about the same feelings as when people were using my actual avatar, which for the original Reality Bytes performance and subsequent re-performances, was always solely performed/operated by myself. That level of investment was not present, as the avatar was clearly not Diogenes Wylder, rather a version of her ... So, having multiple operators perform as distorted versions of Diogenes didn't impact my relationship with my avatar much, rather – as an experimental work in a focused residential environment – it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of others relationships with their avatars, how they/we interact across RL & SL and allowed me an incredibly detailed and privileged study into our digital selves (Smith, 2014).

Similar to DeLappe, Smith (2014) reported the unexpected physical effects of her relationship with Diogenes which seem not dissimilar to those experienced by DeLappe during his experience undertaking the Salt March on the treadmill: "I felt a physical sensation if she was pushed – there is a kind of neurological connection through the keyboard, shooting through your fingers into your RL body in a sense – I'm sure many SL users can attest to this."

In an interview with Jansson (2013), Smith expands upon this:

When using the PC with *Second Life* I was particularly interested in the way the physical body related to the on screen action. Initially, moving my virtual body through this digital environment had a strange and unexpected physical effect. Immersing myself in the screen by day, each night I dreamt in a "*Second Life*" world – trees, people and buildings streaming past me in a nauseous wave of giddy intoxication. When objects or

other avatars made digital contact with me, I noted an odd physical reaction in my own body...The brain seemed somewhat confused between these two physical planes.

As she worked more with Second Life it became apparent to Smith that the theme of identity was central to her work and after two years of reworking 'Reality Bytes' re-emerged as the multi-dimensional installation 'Your Clothing is Still Downloading' (2011) which explored identity and desire, asking if we can really create intimacy in manufactured spaces like Second Life. The installation includes a Second Life sex scene, for which, the artist (2014) described how she "created two avatars – one my own and one an idealised male – and operated them both simultaneously using two computers to create the desired film output for projection" using the analogy of 'playing dolls' to describe the experience of operating both avatars to create the scene. "It was quite fitting as in the end, playing dolls, are we not just virtually fucking ourselves anyway?"

In the final work discussed in her thesis 'iObject' (2011) Smith explores not the expression of virtual self but rather "the negation of self in a virtual world" (Smith, 2011) by taking her Imaginary 'self-portrait avatar' Diogenes and stripping her not only of possessions and symbols of desire and ego, an act which has resonance with Schomaker's 'Binge and Purge' but also of all identifiable features until she is no more than a 'three dimensional shadow.' Smith relates how she used this "deconstructed avatar (to stage) a number of sit ins as a three dimensional shadow in the consumer, social and sexual constructions of Second Life – provoking reactions of scorn, threat and complete disregard by observing avatars. Silent in her commodified surroundings, the death of her virtual ego and loss of virtual currency is

underscored by the evocative sounds of a Buddhist chant – creating a blur between an act of holiness or menace. It is the artist role playing herself into a ghost in the machine" (2011).

5.1.3.8 You are me

While 'iObject' stripped away the identity of Smith's avatar, the avatar in Leonardo Selvaggio's 'Youareme' project started off as a tabula rasa with nothing but a name, a blank slate on which anyone could impose an identity. Selvaggio allowed viewers to participate in the ongoing project by logging on to Second Life to take full control of his avatar LeoSelvaggio, and therefore his Second Life identity. This 'open source' approach to artwork is particularly interesting in so far as the creation of the art becomes decentred from the artist, with the artist/s becoming a facilitator or curator for art created by the discourse created by the interface of the artistic process with its audience.

Unlike many of the artist's previously discussed, Selvaggio developed no personal relationship with the avatar either prior to or during the project and, despite the avatar's name, did not express any concerns in respect of the avatar's reputation. Selvaggio (2013) wrote of how he was interested in the possibilities of a crowdsourced socially mediated identity. "I was really interested in the type of life that could be built for me, if I were not the one responsible for its construction. Who could I be, if I allowed others to design me outright?"

Comparison may be made to Shoemaker's 'Brownson' thought experiment wherein the brain of Mr. Brown is put into the body of Mr. Robinson, i.e. the operator/brain placed into the body of the other/avatar. In the experiment the resultant 'Brownson' behaves in accord with Brown's identity; however, in 'Youareme' this is not necessarily the case. If an operator wishes to enter Second Life to behave in accord with their own identity, or indulge in any form of identity

experimentation as an Imaginary persona, they can do so freely as their own avatar. However the more an Imaginary avatar is constructed to reflect the operator persona, and the more Real the immersion/embodiment experience of the operator-avatar becomes, the more an operator is inclined to identify with their primary avatar as being Symbolic of themselves, i.e. perceiving it to be a direct proxy of an identifiable actual world self within Second Life. Conversely, while the LeoSelvaggio avatar became a proxy not for Selvaggio himself but for anyone who chose to operate it, it remained Symbolic of the originator.

The attraction of 'Youareme' seems therefore to be derived more from the ability to play at being someone else completely, free any possibility of personal recognition; this may of course lead the operator to perform transgressive acts, freed from any potential impact upon the operator's reputation (or the reputation of their avatar within Second Life).

However this researcher's own ethnographic experience of 'Youareme' using the LeoSelvaggio avatar regularly over the course of a several days proved different to the expectations of transgressive freedom as revealed via the log entries;

> The first experience of logging on as LeoSelvaggio was a bit like waking up somewhere unexpected. I seemed to be standing alone staring down the centre of an empty highway; I looked around to see a building and greenery; this first experience was of the strange environment and wanting to explore it, with little thought as to the strange body which served as a conduit to my direct experience of this environment. No one else was around and my first thoughts were 'where am I, who brought me here, why? (Wardle, private log, 4th Nov, 2012)

Today I tried modifying the appearance of LeoSelvaggio but it was ultimately unsatisfying; I didn't want him to look like me because he isn't me, isn't representative of me, but if I'm going to be operating him, then I keep feeling he should look like me... which makes no sense. Maybe he should look like my car. Or just a blank featureless avatar tabula rasa who anyone can write on, but ultimately the words will get wiped off so there is little point to writing them in the first place. (Wardle, private log, 6th Nov, 2012)

I logged on to LeoSelvaggio to find him where I left him, unmoved and waiting for me to return, or for someone else to take control of him. I consider taking him out for a spin, visiting places Guido couldn't go... except there aren't really places Guido can't go. If I want to make the effort of talking to people, even making small talk, it's easier and more comfortable to do it in my own avatar, it's effort to pretend you are someone you are not. Maybe I could go griefing unsuspecting avatars without fear of reprisal, but why? It would seem no more than the juvenile pranks of masked trick or treaters. (Wardle, private log, 7th Nov, 2012)

The operation of the LeoSelvaggio was particularly interesting because the direct experience of the initial 'landing' in an alien environment was described in such a way as to suggest it was more Real for the operator than the remainder of the experiences using the avatar. In fact, in so far as the modalities can be viewed as hierarchical, the log entries above suggest a devolution through the modalities with the initial Real experience giving was to unfulfilling Imaginary construction and the consideration of the avatar simply as a tool to be used to

undertake activities within Second Life perhaps not even Symbolic of anything other than the avatar's own functional status and, due to the name, the artist's original intent.

Following the experience of operating LeoSelvaggio, the researcher, in an attempt to develop this concept and examine first-hand the experience of an operator finding an avatar personal to them unexpectedly change between the periods they operate it. Wardle gave the log in details of his primary avatar to a friend who he asked to intermittently log on to Guido and operate him for a short period. After a few days of operating normally within Second Life Guido, who had been in his Second Life workshop the night before suddenly logged on to find himself in the unexpected environment of a Second Life reception area:

> Even though I half expected it, it felt disturbing, a discomforting memory lapse like waking up with a hangover and an uncertainty about what happened the night before (Wardle, private log, 12th Jan, 2013) .

A few days later Guido logged on one evening to find himself naked, complete with realistic skin and attachable penis, in a busy shopping area:

> It felt a violation. In some ways it was a reputation thing, like 'I hope I don't meet anyone who knows me' but really it was stronger than that, more of an in built embarrassment about being naked in public. Accidental nudity is probably more common in Second Life but even though nobody seemed to care I struggled with the inventory to quickly put some clothes on. (Wardle, private log, 17th Jan, 2013).

The researcher's embarrassment at his avatar's unexpected public nakedness is worthy of consideration. There is no real privacy within Second Life, if Guido were naked within his workshop any avatar might spy upon him but there would be no constant feeling of embarrassment. Further if avatars are considered to be Imaginary constructions made of pixels then there is no qualitative difference between a naked avatar and clothed avatar and the consequences of public nakedness in Second Life are likely to be less than those within the actual world. It is assumed too that the embarrassment felt would have been significantly lessened were the operator to have found himself logging on to an unexpectedly naked LeoSelvaggio avatar. However it is the Symbolic link established between the avatar and operator that can be attributed to be the primary cause of the Real experience of embarrassment.

On a subsequent occasion Wardle found Guido in a virtual London street where some kind of celebration was taking place, dressed in a pink sari with matching handbag. By this point the expectancy that such changes would take place were making them feel commonplace and a performative element was coming to the fore with Guido remaining dressed in female attire and interacting casually with the partygoers.

5.1.3.9 Meta_Body

Mother and daughter artist team Sameiro Oliveira Martins (avatar Meilo Minotaur) and Catarina Carneiro de Sousa (CapCat Ragu) initiated the Meta_Body project in 2011 by distributing a variety of elaborate appearances and costumes and inviting participants to "rethink bodies through avatars" by submitting images and machinima videos of their avatars interactions with these avatar bodies in response. "Machinimas were exhibited and videos were captured in

SL, where their creators used Meta_Body avatars (modified or not) as characters for their narratives." (2013, pp. 147-163). In phase 2 they "invited SL residents to share their derivative avatars that had the Meta_Body project avatars as a starting point." (2015, pp.187-214)

Doyle wrote of Meta_Body: "Through avatar creation, distribution, embodiment and transformation, the artists aimed to understand the processes of virtual corporeality constitution: to question the role of the body in virtual environment" (2015, p. xii). As in the Selvaggio's YouAreMe project participants were invited to embody the creations of the artist, but unlike the LeoSelvaggio avatar the creations of Martins and Sousa are already imbued with a narrative suggested by their appearance, a back story on which participants may build.

Sousa discusses the development of their artistic practice and recalls her experience as a child of making butterfly wings with her mother to dress up for a carnival as 'the first avatars we ever made together.' She goes on to compare her experience of Second Life as:

> …very much like playing with dolls at first – the dolls in question being our avatars…Our dolls (our avatars) were for dress-up games, but they were also our way of communicating with other avatars. It did not take our 'dolls' long to create their own personalities, perhaps as some extended projection of our own, but not exactly the same… mine always more stable, Meilo Minotaur's always more of a shape shifter… most of her alt avatars have their own stories and personalities; they are in fact characters she has embodied through internal focalization. Playing with dolls was getting more and more complex." (2012, pp.137-160)

The process shows a typical development through the third party relationship of playing with dolls as typical of the Symbolic modality, from dress up games to the Imaginary

construction of avatar personalities to Meilo Minotaur's shape shifting embodiment of the avatar personalities. The reference to internal focalization, in which the narrator, or in this case operator, only says what the avatar knows, refers to Niederhoff's discussions of narratology (Niederhoff, 2011), and narrative is clearly important to the artistic practice of the duo.

In an early Second Life project they created and distributed three beautiful and carefully crafted female avatars that invoked different mythic aspects of womanhood and whose "physical attributes were very different from those commonly used in the Metaverse to denote feminine beauty." Sousa writes: "Whoever embodied these female bodies had in their hands the power of transformation, the freedom to reinvent their 'self'" within what she describes as "open narrative conceptualization" (2015, pp.187-214.)

When discussing the Meta_Body project Sousa writes:

"The virtual experience of the body is not exactly an experience of the flesh. These sensations, albeit having a physical sensorial aspect, continue to be experienced in our bodies behind the screen, not in our avatar body. The virtual body is a metaphorical body, all language, therefore open to experimentation and possibility."

She emphasises the semiotic Symbolic nature of avatar bodies, and discusses new ways in which this can be interpreted:

"The body has a semiotic aspect that impacts our everyday lives … for when the body is stripped from its physical form, its symbolic dimension becomes prevalent in virtual worlds. The avatar thus becomes a body of language and expression, open to further symbolic investments. One can choose the stereotype metaphor of gender, ethnicity, age, etc., or move beyond it and rethink, rebuild this metaphorical body… The

metaphorical nature of this digital body makes it an open space to invest with new meanings." (2015, pp.187-214.)

The Meta_Body avatars were imbued with unlimited potential and richly evocative narrative implicit in their names and appearance, and drawn from a wide range of sources; some were anthropomorphic, others inspired by narrative or historical figures such as the ice-queen or Godiva, by environments such as rivers or jungles, or by dolls such as harlequin and rag doll. Sousa writes how they "ranged from the realism of old Godiva to the transparent improbability of Chart Man, yet they never became entirely abstract, and they never lost their metaphorical dimension. By sharing them as transformable artefacts we intended to open this avatar language to different forms of expression. The embodiment of the avatar itself could become, simultaneously, an aesthetical experience and a creative process." (2013, pp. 147-163)

Sousa concluded that "Playing in Second Life… for us is still very much like playing with dolls – a tension between fictional and factual, in a world where space itself is conceptualized, not referring to an actual space, but evoking a potential space that resides within our imagination… the avatar, a performed and semioticized body, becomes open for metamorphosing, with a potency of transformation, and the freedom to reinvent itself." (2015, pp.187-214.)

Although the researcher's own ethnographic experience of the Meta_Body project is limited to several hours during the first phase of the project in 2011, visiting the Meta_Body area to download and try on some of the avatar bodies, the experience was a memorable and meaningful one. In visiting the area that the artists had created and donning the costumes (for that is how he felt of them) he felt strangely both self-conscious, and as though he had entered a

dream in which the artists, or some stranger, would suddenly appear and expect him to behave in accordance with his new appearance. There was an emotional charge to wearing the Meta_Bodies, the costumes becoming dominant personas; The Fog avatar seemed to possess him and make him want to dance away vestiges of his former self; he wept as he understood Godiva's ancient wisdom and saw the inevitable endings in her milky eyes. On returning to his workshop this emotional charge had dissipated; it seemed to the researcher that it was a product generated by the combination of the Meta_Bodies with the psychogeography of the Second Life space the artists had created. In the safety of his own Second Life his workshop, the Meta_Bodies no longer held any power over him. Working with them no longer held the thrall and immediacy of the direct marriage of the Symbolic and Real he had encountered previously, the activity became one of Imaginary construction, trying on and combining costumes (to which the Meta_Bodies had now reverted). This is not to say that there was no pleasure or value to this construction, and the researcher took both an academic and creative interest in the process, particularly in the experience of the liminal states between avatars created by system lag, Godiva transforming into a Meta_Bird, or the net body of Chartman wearing the glass domed eyes of the Dragonfly (Figure 16), or the technical use of effects such as alpha channels, but the emotional investment in the experience was no longer present. This consideration of emotional investment, and its link to the Real avatar modality raises questions to where and how this Real resides, whether in the artist/contributor's experience of crafting/modifying the avatar bodies, the third party operator's experience of donning the costumes/personas or the viewer's experience of the tapestry created by them and the worlds they inhabit.

5.1.3.10 We Have Always Been Avatars, and Avatars Must Die

Artist Alan Sondheim argues that Reality is always interpreted through the Symbolic: "The body is always virtual, the worlds we live in are virtual, as soon as you start speaking about the world you start implying Symbolic systems… We're always avatars and avatars must die, we have to learn how to accept our own death, pain and suffering" (2014, pp.41-46).
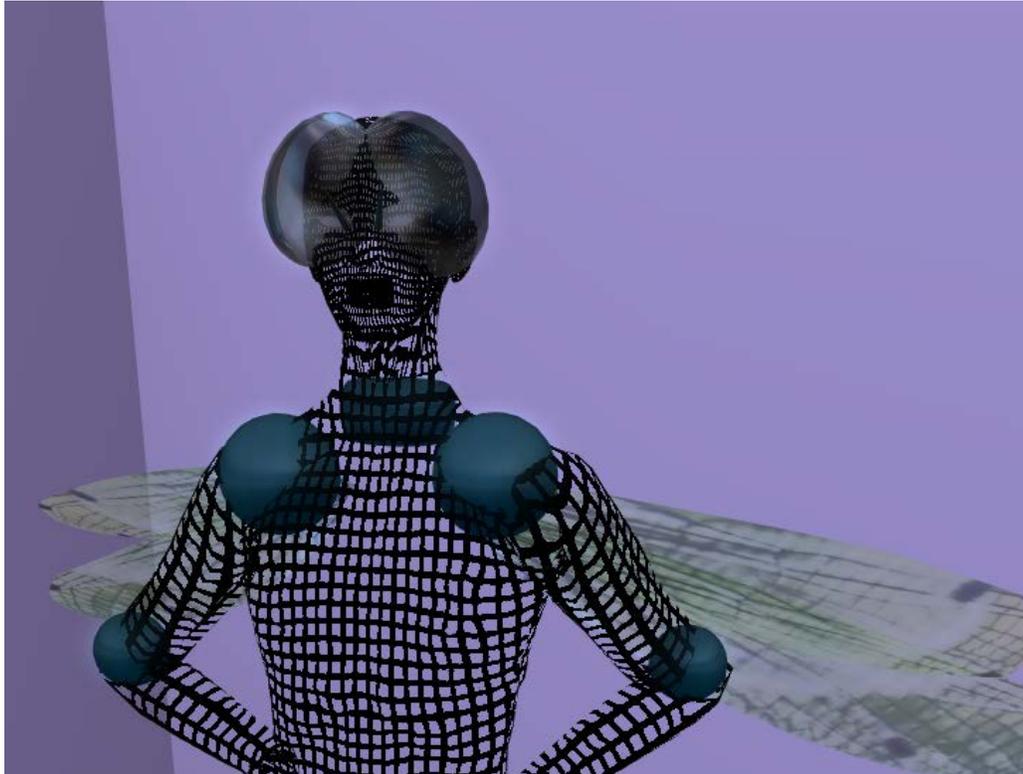
Figure 16: Meta_Bodies unexpected transformations

Rather than view virtual worlds as a safe haven on escapism Sondheim's work in Second Life, 'We Have Always Been Avatars, and Avatars Must Die', seeks to create an emotional response by attempting to embody and represent pain and suffering within virtual worlds. The avatar, whose form was created by a motion capture input from the movements of multiple performers, appeared as highly distorted and "doing things that no real avatar could do". Sondheim writes "The body has always been virtual, I think this is indicated by things like tattoos, scars, birthmarks, all of these things which carry a history… they're on the body in a readable way." He describes the work as "related to issues of wounding, issues of pain, issues of death…the interior of the avatar has scars on it, it has tattoos on it" (2014, pp.41-46). Sondhein writes of creating visceral reactions in the viewer: "I think the reactions to abject pain can be used even though it's just texture mapping, even though it's just pixels... I try to use characters that are carrying signs of the real world, pain or sexuality or something in the real world that will elicit a response that's less under control (2014, pp.41-46) In an interview with Katherine DiPierro, Sondheim was asked about the challenges of creating chronic illness or death in a virtual environment:

> The difficulty is creating an uncomfortable rupture with the virtual, where the viewer is brought up short…; it's more difficult to get caught or snared in sorrow or wounding - to realize there are humans behind even the bots. As usual, people working sexually in SL know all of this already, know what's at stake, because they're potentially directly aroused and/or emotionally involved in what they do; that's an odd kind of honesty that slithers away elsewhere, I think. My own thinking wants to constantly bring the virtual up short - and bring the 'real' up short as well, since these are deeply entangled,

inseparable; the body is always already an inscriptive and abject body, the body always hurtles towards death (2011).

Sondheim uses his avatars to create a new Symbolic language by which to not only interpret difficult and uncomfortable emotional states, but in doing so to face emotionally investment within the Reality of such experience themselves. At first glance it appears that there is no Imaginary construction taking place, just a powerful collision of Symbolic and Real; on further consideration however one realises that the pain and suffering is illusory; although that which is viewed in Second Life is not constructed or performed in the sense we might normally apply the Imaginary modality, what is being viewed is a result not of pain and suffering, but of an actual-world performance of pain and suffering. This knowledge however does not lessen the emotional impact created by Sondheim's 'uncomfortable rupture with the virtual.'

5.1.3.11 Paul Sermon

Before going on to examine the artistic practice of the researcher, this chapter will consider the Second Life work of Paul Sermon who supervised the researcher's academic study and whom the researcher assisted with a project in Manchester in 2007. Sermon's Second Life works such as Liberate your avatar sought to bridge actual and virtual spaces by bringing avatars telematically face to face with their operators. Liberate your avatar took place in All Saints Gardens, Manchester on October 12th 2007 for the Urban Screens Festival and used chroma screen technology within Second Life so that actual world visitors and Second Life avatars could coexist and share the same park bench in a live interactive public video installation. Sermon writes that his practice "looks specifically at the concepts of presence and performance in Second

Life and first life and will attempt to bridge these two spaces through mixed reality techniques and interfaces" (2011).

'They live (in Second Life)' (2008) further explored issues of avatar identity using a variety of avatars through which Sermon explored how the Symbolic is used to construct the Imaginary:

> It will explore the avatar in relation to its activating first life agent, focusing on the avatar's multiple identifications, such as gender roles, human/animal hybrids, and other archetypes, identifiable through visible codes and body forms in second life. The project aims to evaluate the diversity of personas and social life styles of the avatar (2008).

Through this work Sermon also sought to investigate the factors which make an experience immersive within Second Life and which create the complex mutually interactive symbiotic relationship between operator and avatar that typify the Real modality: "The project will further examine the notion of telepresence in Second Life and first life spaces, the blurring between 'online' and 'offline' identities, and the signifiers and conditions that make us feel present in this world" (2008).

In the description of 'Mirror on the screen' (2012), in which avatars are brought face to face with (a live video stream of) their operators via an in-world 'mirror', Sermon explains the influence of Lacan on the work:

> By consciously deciding to refer to this image that is mirrored as 'first' life rather than 'real' life, the authors' central question poses a paradox in Second Life when we consider Jacques Lacan's proposition that the 'self' (or ego) is a formulation of our own

body image reflected in the 'mirror stage'. However, there is no 'mirror stage' in Second Life, which would suggest that the computer screen itself is the very mirror we are looking for, one that allows the user to formulate her/his 'second self' (Sermon, 2012).

The work might be viewed as bringing together two Imaginary (constructed) selves, those of the avatar and the operator within a liminal space which is both actual and virtual, and questioning where the expression and experience of self is located, whether in the avatar, the operator, or the operator's image streamed in-world but generated and perceived by the actual world operator. The realisation of this bilocation of self is perhaps catalytic to a change in the operator's understanding of their relationship with the avatar.

5.1.3.12 Pete Wardle: Artistic Practice in Second Life

This chapter will now examine the artistic practice of the researcher, Pete Wardle, which took place within Second Life between 2008 and 2013, and analyse this with reference to its inspirations and the modalities discussed.

- *5.1.3.12a Experiments in Embodiment*

Wardle's earliest project in Second Life, Experiments in Embodiment, in collaboration with Alan Hook, took place on 6th January 2008 at the Second Life Virtual Tech Museum in which a series of performance games explored and challenged the expectations of how operators in Second Life are embodied via their avatars.

In the first of the Experiments 'I've lost my voice' the artists swapped voice channels so they were speaking out of each other's avatars at two ends of a large populated area. In a game of

Second Life Cat and Mouse the objective was for one performer to locate the other by convincing members of the avatar public to help him by describing the avatar's surroundings whilst all the time the second avatar seeks to evade his pursuer.

The second performance game 'Losing Control' explored the idea of multiple personalities where both artists fought to seize control of the avatar and both communicated with the avatar public by text chat, both trying to give conflicting information to the other participating avatars so that observers were unsure of which artist was in control. The aim for one artist was to have the avatar collect ten L$1 donations from onlookers, whilst the other artist tried to prevent this from happening.

Influenced by Kit Galloway & Sherrie Rabinowitz's Hole in Space, the third performance, Crossing Lines, had the two avatars situated in different Second Life locations, the Virtual Tech Museum and Avatar Island, and both operators in differed actual world rooms. By swapping the voice channels around on the two actual world computers the voice of Wardle came out of the mouth of Hook's avatar, whilst Hook's voice came out of Guido, allowing the artists to act as a conduit for a long distance conversation between two avatars.

At this stage of development Wardle's avatar Guido was still fashioned using the off the shelf 'noob' avatar appearance, whilst Hook's avatar Alan Regent was constructed to resemble the artist. Both avatars wore t-shirts specially designed for the performance bearing the slogan 'First Life, Second Life, it's all just a game' emphasising the ludic nature of the aims of the first two 'Experiments'. In these three 'Experiments', from the artists' perspective, the avatars were being used as third party puppets to be controlled, or as conduits for technical experimentation, within Second Life and were very much seen viewed as tools or game pieces to be manipulated

externally to facilitate the in world performance to take place, typical of the Symbolic modality. The interaction between the performers was taking place in the actual world and comparable to if they were playing a computer game against each other, or working together to implement a creative project on computer. Simultaneously however from the perspective of the other participants and observers present, an interactive performative event was taking place situated within Second Life, and this had been constructed and scripted by the artists, the avatar performers therefore clearly typifying the Imaginary modality. The assembled group of avatars were interacting with the avatar performers even though, in Wardle's view, the artists were so involved with following a script and interacting with each other in the actual world that they did not really experience any interaction within Second Life with the other participants. Real and spontaneous interaction may have been occurring, but for the artists this interaction was situated within the actual world despite the avatar performance being situated in Second Life. Furthermore, although feedback was not obtained from participants following the event, it may be speculated that, due to the interactivity inherent in the performances encouraging active group participation of the other avatars present, at least some those present encountered a Real immersion in the avatar's experience of the (virtual) environment.

- *5.1.3.12b Connecting Point: Human/Avatar*

Wardle's next collaboration with Hook, 'Connecting Point: Human/Avatar' (2008, Figure 17) was an interactive actual world/Second Life installation exhibited in the actual world San Jose Tech Museum of Innovation. The work was influenced both by Kit Galloway & Sherrie Rabinowitz's Hole in Space and by the practice of Paul Sermon, and once again the artists sought to bring a ludic element to the installation in which museum visitors on one side of a screen were able to control two avatars located in the corresponding area of the Tech Virtual Museum in Second Life

to complete goals and play games across the areas using a specially created on screen menu of pre-set animations. The avatars not only performed the actions, games and dances as directed by their operators but, via life size projections, they also relayed instructions to copy them to actual world visitors on the other side of the screen.

The avatars used for this installation were designed to be purely Symbolic functional 'puppets' to undertake the role of virtual intermediary between operators and visitors on either side of the screen, with no relationship to the artists themselves; as with the LeoSelvaggio avatar, they could be operated by anyone. The avatars were always intended to be viewed as a third person tool and as such, without any constructed identity to inhabit, the immersion of their operators was short lived and experienced as game play. The experience however was one not only of the operator controlling an avatar, and a third party visitor mimicking that avatar, but of the operator exerting control over the visitor via the projected avatar. If the projected avatar can be likened to a puppet controlled by the operator, then the visitors might be said to have become willing puppets, or avatars, of the projected operator/avatar symbiote. Interestingly the visitors who assumed the role of such willing puppets generally reported their experience being more immersive than did the operators, perhaps due to their increased physical involvement; the operator's generally reported greater levels of immersion when there was a pre-existent relationship between themselves and the visitor they controlled.

- *5.1.3.12c Second Life Storyteller*

Slightly predating Jacqueline Ford Morie's creation of a Second Life storytelling space in "Coming Home' Wardle's 'Second Life Storyteller' (2008, Figure 18) was exhibited in Manchester as part of a 'mixed reality' installation. Video recordings of actual world storytellers

were imposed upon a 'media-mask' worn by an avatar to tell their tales to visitors in-world; via a 'menu-wall' visitors in Second Life were given the ability to change the storyteller and story being presented by the avatar at the touch of an in world button. Though this installation did not allow visitors to take direct control of the avatar's actions, they were still able to exert control upon it by choosing which storyteller it would display. An actual world version of the installation featured a screen positioned in place of the head of a stationary seated mannequin on which the storyteller clips were shown, sequenced and changed by viewers by means of a Wii remote.

Wardle's Funkin Sohl avatar wore the media mask for the Second Life performance and whilst she needed be no more than a Lockean tabula rasa upon which the identities of the storytellers could be imposed, the avatar's physical appearance (the gender appearance of which could be modified dependent upon the storyteller selected) allowed a storyteller's identity to be expressed or performed by the operator without which the storytellers faces might just as well have been projected onto an in-world TV set or screen; it was the expressive nature and humanoid characteristics of the avatar that transported the storytellers into Second Life and allowed visitors to interact with them.

During the premiere of the installation the storytellers who had taken part visited both the actual world installation and Second Life to encounter and interact with themselves as performed by the Funkin Sohl/ Storyteller avatar. It is notable that actual world visitors who experienced both the actual world and Second Life installations reported a greater sense of immersion within the virtual installation than the actual world installation; the screen and Wii controller helped assign the activity of interacting with the actual world installation into a parallel of a TV show or game in which the pre-recorded clips remained simply Symbolic avatars of the storytellers. Conversely, within Second Life, the unfamiliar experience of a seemingly physical, expressive

face upon the Storyteller avatar, along with the ability to interact with the avatar in-world added to viewer's engagement with and immersion in the installation. The physical appearance and movement of the avatar helped reify the storytellers within in Second Life.

The aspects of narrative and performance were clearly important to the installation. Five narrative stories were performed and recorded to form the content of the video clips. These narratives were then deconstructed, though not irreconcilably, by being cut into clips and mixed up for participants to select from and sequence. If the original performances of the actual world storytellers can be considered Imaginary insofar as they were constructed and performed narratives, then the deconstructed videos of these can be viewed as Symbolic of these originals, functional components of the installation, just as the tabula rasa avatar can be viewed as Symbolic of the generic storyteller. The Real avatar in this case is not created simply by the bringing together of all of these components, or by the artist's relationship with the avatar, rather its existence is generated spontaneously within the installation by the viewers interaction with it to reconstruct the components into an original and constantly assembled and reassembled narrative. Although since the installation took place one of the storytellers, Dorothy, died in 2014 her story can continue to be told and reconfigured in new ways within Second Life.

Figure 17: Photo documentation of Connecting Point: Human Avatar in San Jose Tech Museum.

(Copyright 2008, Pete Wardle.).

Figure 18: The Second Life Storyteller installation. (Copyright 2008, Pete Wardle.).

- *5.1.3.12d Short Performances 2011-2012*

In the project 'Becoming Human' (2011, Figure 19) (named to pay homage to Cardenas' Becoming Dragon) Wardle explores the liminal space between the actual and the virtual during the point of the transition of consciousness between these two spaces, and the contrasts between the two. While the actual world, and the avatar's physical counterpart, appear to intrude upon the virtual one must appreciate the irony that within the constructed and Imaginary performance the video representation of the artist is no less a Symbolic reconstruction of the operator than his avatar is, and may even be considered to be more so as this remediation of a video of the actual world artist was pre-recorded and edited in postproduction prior to being streamed onto a transparent media mask worn by the avatar to create a palimpsest of the pre-recorded actual over the virtual; in contrast during the performance the avatar was captured 'live' under the control of the actual world artist. At the same time that the artist's consciousness was partially immersed within the virtual world, residing within the avatar, he simultaneous watched his own pre-recorded performance on video through the screen as a detached observer. Although there was no unplanned Real interaction during the scripted performance, the work questions the notion of the liminal boundary between actual and virtual, and the nature of the symbiotic avatar/operator relationship which typifies the Real modality.

In the performance 'Talking to Myself' (2011, Figure 20) Guido sat down for a romantic meal with a female avatar played by Funkin who, over the course of the conversation, became transformed and gradually adopted Guido's physical appearance. The piece references the concept of introjection which theorises that human beings are incorporative by nature integrating external qualities and objects to form a part of themselves (Sarup, 1996, p.33) and examines how

individuals can assume or be subsumed by another person's identity traits or can allow themselves to be moulded by another's Imaginary ideal of how they should present themselves. The project also references the fact that within Second Life avatars are designated a nominal sex which changes the parameters of how their physicality can be modified, but are essentially created in an ungendered state for us to impose identity upon, drawing parallels with actual world gender identity in which physical sex, though not completely fixed is relatively unchangeable, whilst gender is a mutable concept.

The artist considered the idea of attempting to form a relationship with an unsuspecting third party avatar in Second Life then gradually changing the gender appearance of his own avatar to examine the reaction of the third part to this. However, although all operators understand that Second Life identity is mutable and all aspects of the actual world identity generally remain unknown, the idea was never put into practice as it may breach ethical guidelines to form a relationship with the sole intent of a ethnomethodological intervention in which an avatar's gender appearance was changed.

In another short Machinima performance Evolving Doors (2012, Figure 21) using an avatar constructed to have the Symbolic appearance that viewers would associate with a prehistoric man, this curious ancestor activates a revolving door only to find his appearance transformed into that of his modern day descendent via the magic of RLV scripting. However the true evolution represented by this transformation is the evolution of the operator from the actual to the virtual and the inherent realization that we are become mutable beings, able to transform our projected and Imaginary identity at the click of a mouse.

Figure 19: Becoming Human (2011)

Figure 20: Talking to myself (2011)

Figure 21: Evolving Doors (2012)

In response to the Second Life work of Sondheim, Wardle (2012) created a number of avatar performances to attempt to represent various emotions. In Two Minds (Figure 22) gave the appearance of an avatar divided vertically into two halves, one side laughing and waving its arm in glee whilst the other half fell to its knee sobbing. Using pre-scripted animations and recordings of the artist's voice, the effect was actually achieved using two avatars, Funkin and Guido, each of which had been made half invisible by means of the application of alpha channels. As Guido had been originally constructed in the image of Wardle, for this performance Funkin assumed the Imaginary appearance and persona not of Wardle, but rather of Guido, a copy of whose physical appearance she had assumed by application of a copy of Guido's shape, skin and clothes within Second Life. However, rather than becoming Guido she remained his Other, a reflection rather than a copy, filling the space where he was not and laughing as he cried (or vice versa.) Having logged into Second Life twice to have both avatars present simultaneously, applied the appearance and activated the pre-scripted performance, the operator's presence was no longer needed; the avatars had become performers and performance in their own right, Symbolic of the emotions being performed with no operator present to facilitate any experience of the Real emotion they represented.

Perhaps one of the most successful of the artist's attempts to recreate emotion was the avatar representation of 'Anxiety' (Figure 23) with its appearance constructed using projected videos of himself onto Second Life media masks along with expressive drawn and scanned textures, animated attachments, recorded sounds and scripted behaviours to attempt to create avatars able to perform the expression of emotion.
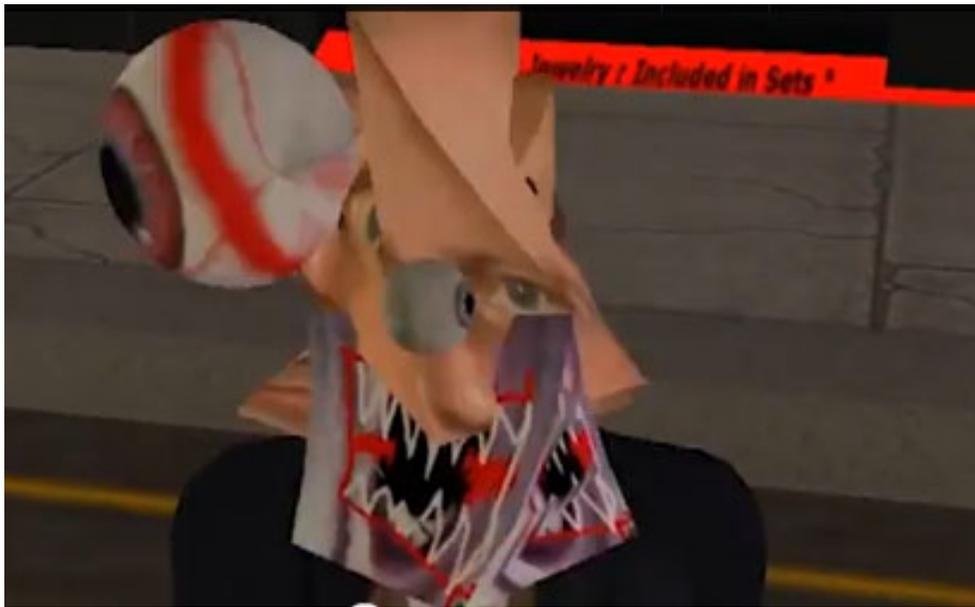
Figure 22: In Two Minds (2012)

Figure 23: Anxiety (2012)

Figure 24: Before and after images of the avatars in They Fade Away (2012)

Figure 25: Changing Rooms (2012)

In the artist's blog Wardle writes:

> …environments have an effect on our expression of identity, by the restrictions they exercise upon us and by our interactions with and reactions to them… (through the avatars I) seek to replicate our emotional response to environments within a digital context. Cities have a variety of effects on me; often I find them to be energising, but sometimes unfamiliar cities have been known to bring on anxiety, even paranoia… I have tried to replicate this anxiety within Second Life London. (June 2012)

The artist used Guido, the avatar with which he had the closest personal bond, enacted scripted jerky and spasmodic movements, pacing backwards and forwards on the roadside of a virtual London street accompanied by sounds on heavy traffic, blaring car horns. The videos of the artist's own anxious facial expressions combined with animated floating bloodshot eyes spinning frenetically around the avatar's head. Though to some extent the pre-scripted nature of the work meant that the emotion could only ever be realised as performative and therefore characterised as Imaginary in nature, the impact of operating the avatar, even for the short duration of the performance, trying and failing to control its movements and to communicate coherently with others did create a sympathetic and secondary but nonetheless Real experience of anxiety by the operator.

The performance 'They Fade Away' (Figure 24) was inspired by a comment on the Official Second Life Wiki relating to Second Life etiquette: "Just like in first life, no one with self-respect likes a badgering beggar" (2011). Although in Second Life avatars do not suffer from homelessness, avatars with free accounts do not own land or necessarily have a Second Life place they can call home, i.e. a place they can settle down and build or 'rez' their possessions

which are carried around with them. The performance raised the question, if identity is mediated by those with whom we interact, where such interaction is not present does identity too begin to fade away? Another issue raised is that, in these days of 'virtual living', lack or loss of computer access and the pursuant lack of ability to interact with the community it creates can lead to individuals becoming disenfranchised.

It may be considered as an ethnomethodological performance as the third parties present were unaware that the performance was taking place (except insofar as everything taking place in Second Life may be considered performative, especially that which is outside of typical normative Second Life behavioural patterns.)

For the performance two avatars, Guido and Funkin, dressed in ragged clothing in a busy area of Second Life and, in an act reminiscent of Wardle & Hook's earlier 'Losing Control' performance, begged passers-by, by text chat, for contributions of Linden dollars. If no contributions were received over consecutive ten minute periods then RLV scripting and the application of alpha channels caused the avatars to gradually fade away until, after an hour, the avatars became invisible and only their voices and limited possessions remained. For each contribution that was made, the avatars would become one stage more tangible, though this did not occur. Although there was no shortage of avatars within the area, and during the hour nine walked directly past the avatars, no donations were made. Of the nine seven ignored the text based pleas of the avatars to 'Spare some change' only two made any response. The first simply texted "no, sorry" as she walked past which perhaps typified the expected actual world response; the second tried to engage the avatar, or more correctly the artist via the avatar, to investigate why avatars were sitting on a Second Life street begging. However he soon tired of the avatars' responses which remained 'in-character' and were limited to "because I'm homeless" and "I

have nowhere else to go, please can you spare a few L$", and walked away, perhaps confused that a question which was directed towards the operator was being answered from the perspective of the avatars.

The artist operated both avatars simultaneously for the period of an hour and refrained from multi-tasking in the actual world during that period, giving his full attention to trying to attract the attention of by-passers and ask them to donate Lindens via text. Whilst the experience of being ignored for an hour may have seemed frustratingly Real for the operator at the time it must be remembered that it is no more than Symbolic of the plight of the ignored homeless but lacking in the Real consequences of its parallel within the actual world, an Imaginary performance almost condescending in its nature as of someone claiming to have undergone a Real experience of homelessness after spending an hour on the streets before returning to the safety and shelter of their home.

Through the installation Changing Rooms (Figure 25) Wardle explored how, in the actual world, rather than having the convenience of alt avatars to express different aspects of identity individuals shift between pre-scripted 'off the shelf' identities, packing away a 'business' persona into a briefcase and donning the persona of 'parent' or 'socialiser'. The installation allows the operator/avatar to pick an 'off the rail' appearance using Symbolic costumes suggestive of a specific stereotype or narrative backstory, e.g. the union flag t-shirt and skinhead avatar appearance evocative perhaps of negative connotations of British Nationalism, or the bubble jacket, cap and gold bling stereotyping a Afro-American rapper, through which to transform the operator's Imaginary performance of identity.

The Changing Rooms in-world installation was the prototype for what would become the larger Second Selves installation. It was designed to build on the researcher's autoethnographic experience as the LeoSelvaggio's You are Me avatar, or wearing the Meta_Body costumes, by further investigating the experience of an operator controlling an unfamiliar avatar in the way Schoemaker's Brownson thought experiment envisaged a mind transplanted into an unfamiliar body. Using a neutral avatar, i.e. one unpossessed of any predefined identity, Cypher SecondSelf which had been designed specifically to undertake such projects, six volunteers, all male college students, each agreed to select an appearance from off the Changing Rooms rail and use it to explore within Second Life for a period of two hours. As with 'They Fade Away' this insertion of performing avatars into the general population of Second Life may be considered ethnomethodological as the residents with whom these participants interacted were unaware of the installation/performance taking place.

Four of the operators returned two to three times within the two hour period to try a different identity and at the end of the period related that they had found the experience 'uneventful' with 'not much interaction with other avatars.' They related how they tied to find similar avatars to interact with or areas where they felt they could 'fit in' or how they simply used the time to explore unfamiliar areas.

Conversely two of the participants, having chosen an appearance, remained in that appearance for the whole two hour period. Both these participants seemed to have experienced a greater level of interaction and immersion during this period. Whilst this may be attributable to the greater period of time operating a single avatar appearance, it is notable that, whilst the other participants tried to find areas where they could fit in, the two participants in question treated the

experience more performatively and sought out areas where they would actively be noticed for their differences.

The first of these participants chose the appearance of an extremely obese sumo wrestler in a loin cloth to sit at a cocktail bar in a beach resort to chat with the clientele there.

"Everyone there had uber-pretty avatars and I felt like I was wearing an inflatable suit, but it was funny; people were actively coming over to talk to me, and introduce me to their friends… in a real bar I'd attract less attention even though I'm hopefully a little bit more attractive than the avatar I used. My appearance didn't seem to matter, maybe it was the reason people were coming over out of curiosity or something, because I looked different, but I don't think anyone actually mentioned it. At first I thought people might be pretending to be friendly but making actually making fun of me but I don't think that was the case. After a while I forgot about how I looked, I was just chatting and enjoying the company of new people."

This operator's experience certainly challenges the typically accepted convention that avatars should adhere to the actual world conventions of beauty and perhaps suggests an unconscious recognition by those with whom we interact that, whatever the appearance of an avatar, it is never more than an Imaginary construction which may, by its appearance, reveal something about the person who chose to construct or operate it, but the information revealed by the Symbolic codes used within the avatar construction may be interpreted in an entirely different way from that intended. Typical conventions of beauty within Second Life may be associated with a lack of originality or a need to fit in, and conversely less typically attractive avatars may be associated with an operator who is more fun, original and willing to take chances.

The second participant adopted the appearance of the elderly lady avatar and immediately headed for a dance club area he had frequented on a semi-regular basis using his own avatar. He related his experience:

> "At first it felt a bit uncomfortable, like I was Norman Bates dressed up as his mother and everyone was looking at me. Then I thought, what the hell, it's a club, I want everyone to look at me, and hit the dance floor."

As with the previous participant he found that a typical response to anyone appearing different to the norm in a social area within Second Life was to interact enthusiastically with them:

> "I've never had so many people cheering me on and flirting with me on the dance floor, I'm guessing they didn't really see it as flirting with a granny, just having fun with whoever I happened to be, like I was in a cool fancy dress. Everybody else was typical bare-chested muscle guys or supermodels so I stood out a bit. I danced with a couple of guys I'd seen in there before and whose avatars I'm friendly with on a casual basis, it was funny that they had no idea who I was and that they were dancing with another guy. Maybe I'll tell them next time I see them."

The participant's discussion didn't make reference to the fact that previous meetings had taken place avatar to avatar and neither knew the other's actual world identity and gender; in saying "they'd met me before" the participant was unconsciously forming a direct correlation between his usual avatar identity and his actual world self, the implication being that by meeting his usual avatar the other avatars had met the same continuous and perhaps 'authentic' expression of self which then went on to perform the elderly lady. This performed identity had

become continuous with that of his prior and subsequent Second Life avatar narrative to the extent that he considered talking about it to others with whom he had shared both experiences in-world in a way that he would be unlikely to discuss an actual world experience. This raises questions as to whether, when operators employ alt avatars within Second Life, they are typically viewed by the operator as separate entities with separate narratives (in the way that the researcher views Guido and Funkin independently of each other) or as projections of different aspects of the same holistic entity, in the way we view the different aspects of personality we present to others within the actual world.

5.2 Research Study 5: Second Selves Installation – Artistic Practice as Research

Context:

To investigate how behaviour and expression of identity is manifest by operators controlling avatars which change in response to external stimuli.

Approach:

Qualitative: by means of videoed in-world and actual world observation of participant interaction with the 'Second Selves' (2013) installation in Second Life, in which participants operated avatars which changed appearance by interacting with elements within the virtual environment, and by subsequent interviews with participants.

Date:

Conducted between October 2013 and March 2015.

5.2.1 Rationale

While social virtual worlds offer individuals a high level of fluidity in identity representation it is widely documented by researchers such as Yee and Boellstorff that much interaction within virtual worlds adheres to modern or pre-modern identity paradigms by having avatars express a single, fixed identity not only by means of a consistent appearance, but also by adopting consistent behaviour patterns to cultivate the coherence of identity which facilitates acceptance in the social space. The alternative to such fixed representation is to deliberately seek

out ways to radically change an avatar's appearance within Second Life, and by doing so to seek to investigate the impact this has upon the relationship of the operator to their avatar.

Whilst the previous stage of research used case studies of artists working in Second Life to investigate different ways of expressing identity, in this stage participants took part in the 'Second Selves' installation within Second Life to obtain qualitative accounts of their phenomenological experience of operating avatars which change appearance by means of interaction with elements within their environment, and to ascertain how such changes to the avatar appearance modify the discourse between avatar and operator.

5.2.2 Sample size and demographics

A minimum sample size of 30 participant interviews was set in accordance with the guidance in Denscombe (2005) and although a larger sample size of 50+ would have been desirable only 34 participants were recruited to participate of whom four were subsequently unavailable for interview. Most of the participants were recruited from students from the university or local college and predominantly males age 17-23, with only two female participants in this same age group and three older male participants in an age range from 28-48. Most participants identified as White British although 20% (6 participants) identified as Asian/Asian British or of Mixed Ethnicity.

5.2.3 Sampling Methods

An installation, 'Second Selves', was designed in a specified location within Second Life, in which two participants were each asked to take control of one of two avatars and to interact

with the other avatar and with elements within their environment. Scripts within the environment allowed avatars to interact by clicking on elements such as footballs, handbags, toys, posters, etc., causing changes to be made to the appearance of one or other of the avatars.

A number of prototypes were constructed using RLV (Restrained Love Viewer) scripting language to allow interaction with objects to make changes to an avatars appearance. One such prototype changed the avatars appearance of gender when they opened a door, another was a wearable item which allowed the operator to change the appearance of the avatar when they activated it. However whilst the RLV scripting language, which was designed to allow avatars to exert control over other avatars, allows greater functionality than standard LSL (Linden Scripting Language) scripts in Second Life, it can only be used when the avatar is viewed within a compatible viewer such as Firestorm or Phoenix viewer. Furthermore any avatars whose appearance is to be modified would need to download a scripted item plus any alternate appearances into their avatar's inventory meaning participants could not easily access the installation remotely within Second Life. For this reason it was decided that the installation would need participants to be present within an actual world environment within a controlled space where PCs are already loaded with the compatible viewer where participants could then assume operation of the pre-scripted avatars. Additional factors for consideration were as follows;

- Within Second Life a limited amount of avatars can occupy one area at any given time or the system can suffer from lag;

- the transient nature of the Second Life environment meant that changes to the scripting language, or to factors such as the ownership or permissions of land,

could impact on the research to be undertaken meaning it was desirable that, once set up, the study take place over a relatively short period of time.

Due to the limitations discussed above it was decided to run the study as an installation based at the Egg, in the Media City campus at the University of Salford, Manchester, over a two day period on 28th and 29th October 2013. The installation was subsequently exhibited again for a short period during participation in the V&A Digital Futures - Self-Versioning event at The White Building in London on 31 March 2015.

The installation at the Egg was promoted via the news pages of the University of Salford website, via emails to staff and posting on relevant newsgroups and forums as well as on posters and screens situated around the campus and by word of mouth. Due to the installation taking place within the University campus expectations were that the demographic profile of participants was likely to be drawn primarily from staff and students but an effort was made to attract participants from different academic specialisms and of different sexes, age groups and ethnicities. A group of 18 year old students from nearby Trafford College with an interest in studying within the field of interactive media, games and animation were also invited to participate. Participants were generally regular or semi-regular computer game players but with little or no previous experience of Second Life.

Initially it had been intended that the two participating operators would be in different rooms and unable to interact within the actual world so that any interaction between avatars would not be impacted upon by potential actual-world interaction between operators, or even by the operator's awareness of the actual world attributes of the other participant such as age, gender, etc. Although this proved logistically impractical to achieve within the installation, the

room layout was such so that participants were separated to discourage physical interaction and each operator's attention was focused away from the other participant and onto the virtual environment. Each participant had a computer and screen in front of them on which they were able to view their avatar from the typical gaming/Second Life third person perspective behind and slightly above, allowing them to see when changes to place to either avatar. An invisible in-world camera was positioned so as to be able to see all activity within the virtual space, which was projected onto a large screen at the front of the actual world installation space allowing both operators to also see the installation from this neutral perspective.

Participants were shown the controls within the virtual environment, including how to use text to speak to the other avatar, and invited to spend as much or little time as they wanted within the installation and to have their avatars interact with each other and with whatever elements of the environment they wanted to. The only limitations put upon the participants were that they were requested to stay within the virtual area designated for the installation and not to fly, teleport or access the avatar's inventory to make manual changes to the avatar appearance.

When subsequently interviewing participants, whilst a semi-structured approach was still utilised to allow the researcher to further explore answers given by participants, interviews were kept short generally between 10 and 15 minutes to try to elicit spontaneous responses which reflected the participants experience rather that the considered responses solicited by the previous research studies which sought to investigate the reasons behind participants choices. Responses were recorded both on video so that they could be subsequently reviewed and by notes taken by the researcher to quickly highlight any areas of specific interest. To facilitate shorter interviews the researcher generally adhered more closely to a structured list of questions,

although the questions were kept open and follow up questions could be used to solicit additional information as appropriate. The list of questions used by the researcher was as follows;

- When using different avatars were there any ways in which your behaviour or the way you communicated with other avatars changed?

- Did you feel different when controlling avatars with different appearances?

- Were there any ways in which controlling different avatars had a particular impact on you?

- Did the appearance of the other avatar in the installation affect the way you communicated with it or behaved towards it?

- Did you feel uncomfortable when performing as or interacting with any specific avatars?

- Did any elements of the environment or avatars affect your immersion in the installation?

Where prompting was required to solicit further information participants were asked if sharing traits with the avatar increased immersion or conversely if avatars with whom the participants did not share traits decreased immersion. Where appropriate discussions also related to specific observed or recorded behaviours by the participant/avatar, and their interactions with other avatars as mediated manifestations of the ways in which the operator interacts with other operators.

Participants were then given a sheet showing images of the nineteen different avatar appearances that were available within the installation (shown in Figure 26) and asked which ones they were most likely and least likely to choose to use over a prolonged period, and the reasons for their choices. The appearances of these avatars were specifically fashioned to cover appearances relating to a wide range of demographic factors including gender, age, ethnicity, social class and psychographic preferences, with some avatars designed specifically to reflect or appeal to the demographic profile of expected participants, as follows;

- Gender - six of the avatars were based on the Second Life 'female' body shape, and thirteen on the Second Life 'male' body shape, although of these thirteen, four were designed with varying degrees of ambiguity in the appearance of their gender. The decision to have more male avatars than female was a deliberate one and based on the expected demographics of the participants being primarily male.

- Age - the appearance of avatar age ranged from one child avatar to three elderly avatars, seven appearing in their late teens or twenties, five in the age range 30-50, and 3 age ambiguous. Whilst this was not designed to directly parallel the expected demographic of the participants, the choice to have the largest set of avatars appear to be in the 18-29 age range, and almost two-thirds in the 18-50 age range was a deliberate choice to reflect the participant demographics.

- Skin tone/Ethnicity - of the nineteen avatars six were designed the appearance of being light-skinned (including one with the appearance of white makeup) with most of the others fashioned with varying degrees of skin tone and three where

the skin tone was not visible. Of these three, one of these wore a hijab so that the avatar appearance might suggest that of a Muslim female.

- Social groups and psychographics - most of the avatars were dressed to reflect a working class/middle class demographic to reflect that of the expected participants; however one avatar was deliberately designed to appear dishevelled to reflect the lowest level of subsistence. A number of the avatars were fashioned in such a way as to reflect stereotypes of belonging to specific social groups (e.g. punk scene, rap music, goths, bikers), whilst others were fashioned to link with potential actual-world interests of the participant, for example the inclusion of an avatar dressed as a Manchester United football player reflected the proximity of the installation to Manchester United's ground at Old Trafford, and another 'smiley-faced' avatar to be deliberately reminiscent of the 1980's Manchester rave music scene. Others were designed to evoke fictional genres such as fantasy and Victorian Steampunk or link to fictional characters (such as the Transformer fashioned avatar) and avatars were categorised by their levels of 'realistic' or 'fantasy' representation.

These demographic categories were then considered when analysing the avatar preferences of the participants both in respect as the avatars which were generally viewed as either preferable or undesirable by the participants, and those which elicited the strongest overall level of reaction (i.e. those mentioned most times in total by participants when questioned about either most or least favourite avatars).

Second Selves Avatars

Which avatar/s would you play?

Figure 26: The nineteen avatars used in the Second Selves installation

5.2.4 Findings

The 'Second Selves' installation (Figure 27) took place in October of 2013 in the Egg, University of Salford Media City Campus, to examine how individuals reacted to the experience of operating unfamiliar avatars. Participants were given control of one of two tabula rasa avatars, Funkin Sohl and Cypher SecondSelf, within a specially designed environment within Second Life. The environment contained multiple scripted objects with which the avatars could interact resulting in one or the other of the avatars undergoing changes to their physical appearance and attire. The installation used both Guido and Funkin's usual appearances, three other appearances that had been randomly generated when deciding upon Funkin's final appearance, along with other avatar appearances previously used in the Changing Rooms installation. All were humanoid and most were deliberately designed to imply a narrative backstory with a total of twenty different avatar appearances including virtual representations of an elderly grandmother, a child, a Hell's Angel, a Smiley face avatar and a Transformer.

The new visual aspects of identity were, sometimes unexpectedly, imposed upon the avatars by the operators by their interactions with the environment and these avatars could be controlled, interpreted and performed by visitors to the installation. Participants were observed and recorded interacting with the avatars and subsequently questioned about their preferences and the reasons for these.

The first stage of analysis of the participant's responses considers the characteristics of the participants preferred and least favoured avatars (i.e. the net result positive minus negative responses relating to a particular avatar) and of the avatars which elicited the strongest reaction

from participants (i.e. those mentioned most times by participants when questioned about either most or least favourite avatars).

In response to the question asking participants which avatar they would be most likely to play over a prolonged period of time, the most popular positive response from participants was the avatar designated Avatar G (Figure 28), which was constructed to resemble the appearance of a Muslim female wearing a hijab, which was cited in the top two preferences by a full third of the 30 participants interviewed.

Figure 27: The Second Selves installation. (Copyright 2013, Pete Wardle).

Figure 28: Avatar G

It had been anticipated that the preferences would either favour avatars relating to recognisable characters from popular culture (e.g. the Transformer), avatars which participants may view as playable games characters, or avatars with whom the operator shared characteristics and therefore the positive predilection for the avatar representing a Muslim female was unexpected as a similar demographic was not represented within the participants. However on interviewing the participants as to the reasons for their preferences it became clear that the Symbolic codes used in the construction of this avatar had been almost universally misinterpreted; the hijab covering the avatar's face and obscuring her features had led most of the participants to believe the character represented an ninja/assassin type game character or similar and were attracted to use it because they felt it was 'sinister' and represented qualities associated with anonymity, mystery and intrigue. The popularity of Avatar G did therefore meet the expectation that participants may favour avatars relating to popular culture which they viewed as playable games characters. None of the participants questioned recognised the avatar as a Muslim female; whilst this could have been a flaw in the character's design and construction and the Symbolic codes used to communicate its intent, were someone in a similar garb encountered walking down the street one's first reaction would not be to conclude they were a ninja assassin. However in virtual worlds, where operators are familiar with playing characters such as those represented in Assassin's Creed, the presence of a ninja assassin seems not only likely, but is brought to mind more easily than the representation of a Muslim female. This has further consequences in so far as it suggests that when confronted with a representation with which an individual has no obvious shared characteristics, associations are made to an external point of reference via representations from popular media culture. This phenomenon may also be

observed within the actual world where the reactions of individuals to those viewed as Other to themselves are often dictated by the representations of such Others within the media.

The next most popular avatars overall were Avatar D (Guido) and Avatar J (Victorian Steampunk Gentleman), both of whom shared the white male demographic with the majority of participants, although did not share a similar age demographic, and avatar T (the Transformer). Participants favouring avatar D felt he was 'smart', 'suave' and 'refined' qualities they would like to project themselves in the actual world, although none felt that they actually did project these qualities. It was of interest that participants seemed to favour these qualities over qualities which may have been more readily expected such as strong or handsome. Only one, older, participant felt Avatar D was similar to the way they actually represented themselves. Two participants felt they would not use Avatar D as, from his appearance, they thought he was 'boring' and 'from the upper classes.' Although Avatar J was designed as a fantasy Steampunk based avatar, no participant who expressed a preference for using him referenced this genre as a reason; instead the reasons for the preference all related to the avatar's attire which once again was both smart and unconventional being described as 'quirky', 'cool' and the 'best costume.' Nine participants favoured using the Transformer stating reasons that that they did so because of an 'affinity with science fiction' and many specifically referred to being fans of the Transformers series, one stating that playing the avatar 'brings back memories', all of which support the view that there is a preference for avatars which operators relate the characters from popular culture, bringing with them, as they do, a pre-defined narrative. One participant stated that 'robots are always fun to play', supporting the assertion that there would be a preference for avatars which participants may view as playable games characters.

Only one participant stated they would avoid the Transformer because they would be unable to use them to 'project a sense of themselves to others', and felt similarly about Avatar U (Smiley Face). Avatar U (Smiley Face) was of particular interest in so far as it elicited the strongest response from participants questioned with 17 participants including either as one of the avatars they would be most likely play or to avoid, but with similar numbers in each category with 9 preferences, generally describing the avatar as 'happy' 'funny' and 'comedic' and 8 avoiders many of whom felt the avatar was 'too unrealistic'. One participant stated that they liked Avatar U because they felt it was representative of the 'rave' scene which they had been a part of, whilst another felt they would avoid the avatar because it represented 'Acid culture' which they did not want to be associated with. The participants can be seen to view the avatars as representative of the Symbolic modality insofar as the avatar became a symbol of an external influence or remembered event which they associated with positive or negative connotations. Avatar K, the Hobo, was another avatar which elicited a high response rate but on which opinions were split with 8 preferences and 6 avoiders. Whilst the avoiders typical cited reasons relating to the characters perceived narrative such as 'he's a tramp', one prefererer turned this narrative into a positive by describing how the character 'looked like he has had an interesting life' and described him as a 'survivor'; others expressed a preference for the avatar because they felt he was 'interesting', 'quirky' or 'had character'.

The avatars least favoured in the interviews seemed to be those which most closely represented actual world demographics with which the participants did not associate themselves, i.e. the Hell's Angel, the Punk Rocker, the Gangster Rapper and all of the female avatars. Several participants said they would avoid avatars that were too different to themselves whilst one male interviewed automatically rejected the possibility of playing any of the female avatars

for any length of time because they were female. No participants stated that they would choose to play Avatar C for a longer period with two saying they would avoid the avatar because they felt it was boring; this is significant in so far as Avatar C is perhaps most typically representative of conventions of female attractiveness and thus typical of female avatars frequently found with Second Life, supporting a conclusion that the participants valued avatars representing quirky, interesting characters rather than those conforming to popularly accepted Symbolic conventions of attractiveness. If participants perceived Avatar C has any Imagined narrative back story, then it seemed to be one that they did not find interesting.

Comments from many participants relating to why they expressed a preference for particular avatars included references to similarities to their real life appearance, or to attributes they felt to be desirable whilst similarly many participants discussed that they were least attracted to those avatars which they could not relate to or which they perceived to be too different from themselves. In general it may be concluded that participants favoured using avatars with which they felt some affinity whether this was attributed to be due to the sharing of physical characteristics with the avatar, a perceived prior narrative, or the perception that the avatar expressed qualities they felt to be desirable. Although they had not constructed the avatars themselves, participants often felt that the construction expressed some actual or desirable aspect of themselves and as such they were able to create for themselves and assume the Imaginary persona of the avatar. Similarly most participants were least attracted to those avatars which they could not relate to.

The installation was also able to investigate the behaviour and expectations of operators using unfamiliar avatar types. One phenomenon which was clearly observed when reviewing the footage of the avatar's in-world behaviour was that in many cases the two avatars simultaneously

involved in the installation rarely interacted with each other, and in no instances attempted to communicate by means of text chat. Instead they could often be seen to be interacting much more readily with the environment and objects therein, treating the installation as game or opportunity to explore the environment in an attempt to try on or 'collect' all the different appearances and either remained seemingly oblivious to the presence of the other, or else treated the other as an incidental character within a game world, unimportant to the narrative being played out. Had two individuals within the actual world been put into a room it is likely that the reaction would have been to communicate with each other or stand in awkward silence unless they had been given a ludic objective, e.g. to search the room and find as many of item X as possible within a given timeframe; in this case the installation seemed to become inherently viewed as a ludic objective in itself, a perspective perhaps reinforced by the fact that participants were operating within a virtual world which conferred associations with gaming.

Another observation which was reinforced by the subsequent interviews was that the participant's expectations of the avatars capabilities were often aligned to their physical appearance which in turn informed their performed behaviour. Of the Transformer avatar two participants described their expectations that the avatar would be equipped with functional weapons and how they had attempted to find a way to make it shoot at the other avatar. Another compared the presence of two avatars, and ability to change between avatar appearances, to the Mortal Combat game and expressed disappointment that the avatars didn't have special abilities to fight each other with, expressing that the elderly grandmother avatar "would be really cool if she busted some karate moves." Although the research participants were predominantly males aged 17-23, which may have influenced the findings that participants viewed the installation as a game there was no noticeable deviation from this tendency by other participants.

As the participants controlled the avatars for only a short period of time the finding related most closely to the Symbolic avatar modality resulting in the participants relating to the avatars as they would to gaming characters, or the Imaginary modality with participants attempting to perform behavioural characteristics in accordance with the expectations associated with the avatar's construction. Even so the beginnings of a mutually influential synergic relationship between operators and avatars, typical of the Real modality, were occasionally evident and some participants reported that certain avatars made them more likely to behave more or less aggressively in-world towards the other participant avatar.

<u>Chapter 6: Conclusions & Recommendations for future study</u>

This chapter will present key conclusions relating to research studies undertaken. It will detail the framework constructed to form the Table of Avatar Modalities and provide discussion of the research findings in relation to the positioning of these findings within the framework. The application of this framework will serve to establish a common critical language for the discussion of selfhood as it relates to the relationship between avatars and their operators in virtual worlds and support the unique contribution of this thesis.

6.1 Conclusions

Although the findings of Research Study 5 suggest that when selecting avatars a preference is shown for characteristics such as quirkiness or interesting features, when constructing characters such traits are often overlooked by operators in favour of conforming to the norms, e.g. having avatars adopt popularly accepted stereotypical conventions of attractiveness. The prevalence of virtual worlds designed for the purpose of allowing gamers to enact very restricted character roles within games makes it unsurprising that virtual worlds and those who populate them often cling to historic and outdated Symbolic paradigms derived from the actual world when considering the development any expression of identity. Though contemporary virtual social worlds offer great potential for identity experimentation and of more developed and sophisticated construction of avatar identities, once such identities are developed the tendency persists for operators to continue to perceive avatars as they perceive actual world objects, or as they, perhaps mistakenly, perceive their own identities, as being relatively fixed and stable. This seems a key factor in limiting the potential for expression of identity within

these worlds, leading operators to construct Symbolic avatars limited by their physical appearance to be representative of the actual or desired physical appearance of the operator, or of the avatar's social role. Even where the original construction of an in-world Imaginary identity is evident, once an avatar's appearance has been developed operators rarely experiment significantly with it rather than moving towards a more interactive and fluid expression of identity which typifies the modality of the Real avatar.

The research undertaken has explored the characteristics typical of identity expression via avatars and assigned these characteristics to the proposed modalities to generate the Table of Avatar Modalities (Table 6). When developing this Table it was never the intention that it be seen as a rigid taxonomy but as a tool to facilitate the more precise deconstruction of the complexity of experiences and manifestations of identity to be found within virtual worlds. The Table of Avatar Modalities shown as Table 6 is itself a development of an earlier version (Wardle, 2015) modified and added to in light of further research. A small but important shift from the original table (2015) relates to the definitions avatar appearance. Two common manifestations of expression of identity within Second Life are for operators to closely model the appearance of the avatar on their own actual world appearance, or else to closely model the appearance of the avatar on another source such as a character from popular culture or an actual world icon. The research which involved a group of new operators constructing avatars made it clear that, in such instances, although the identity being manifest adheres to the characteristics typifying the Imaginary modality, the construction of this Imaginary identity has taken place not within the virtual world, but the actual one, i.e. it is the actual world manifestation of identity which has been constructed as imaginary rather than that identity expressed by the virtual world avatar. The avatar identity is not therefore constructed, but rather transcribed directly from the

actual world construction, a second level role identity Symbolic of the actual world operator (or of an actual world Other or media construct) onto which any in-world Imaginary identity can subsequently be constructed.

It has been demonstrated within the research that the modalities do not apply exclusive of each other and that in many cases adopting differing perspectives can reveal that two or all three of the modalities may be applied concurrently to a given avatar's expression of self. Rather, the modalities may be treated as lenses through which a subject avatar may be examined, or qualities which each avatar has to a lesser or greater extent. The presence of Imaginary characteristics does not preclude the avatar adopting a Symbolic function or vice versa, nor does the development of a symbiotic Real relationship between operator and avatar mean that the expression of identity via the avatar's appearance has developed beyond the Imaginary or even Symbolic.

Table 6: Table of Avatar Modalities

	Symbolic Avatar	*Imaginary Avatar*	*Real Avatar*
Modality	Visual signifiers, created from pixels to determine the order of the subject within the semiotic scheme of the virtual environment	Coherent constructed image of ideal whole self performed within the confines of the virtual environment	Spontaneous independent interaction within the confines of the virtual environment
Related identity paradigms	Pre-modern imposed role identity	Modern self-curated/ constructed/ performed identity	Postmodern multiplicity of identity
Avatar appearance	Limited to pre-defined choices, transcribed from the characteristics of which it may be considered a portrait or transcribed from other sources, e.g. from popular culture	Selection based on the caricatured or idealized appearance of the operator (or developed/combined from other sources, e.g. from popular culture) and transformed in-world by the process of construction	Unlimited possibility, platform for fluidity, experimentation and interaction transformed in-world by the process social interaction.
Role of the avatar	Traditional pre-defined gaming avatar or class, or avatar designed to perform a specific task; minimal operator personalization	Typical stable self-customized avatar currently residing in social virtual worlds such as Second life; generally an idealised representation of the operator's actual world self, or aspect thereof	Potential for self- expression via avatar within social virtual worlds; based neither on function nor on an aspect of operators identity, rather a becoming of the avatar form and function realised within and by interaction with its environment
Social interaction/ behaviour	Limited social interaction; avatar behaves in accordance with role	Operator interacts with others via interaction between avatars which serve as persona masks and act in accordance with actual world social conventions	Operator/avatar symbiote interacts spontaneously with other operator/avatar symbiotes
Operator's relationship to narrative	Part of a fixed imposed narrative; limited choices;	Consciously performed or constructed narrative with choices influencing the performance/outcome	Making sense of non-sequential multi strand interactive narratives

Table 6 (continued)	Symbolic Avatar	Imaginary Avatar	Real Avatar
Avatar relationship to operator	Actual world operation; identification of avatar as proxy or extension of the operator to allow access to the virtual environment;	Virtual world immersion: Avatar expressing/ performing chosen facets of operator persona;	Phenomenal existence: Complex mutually interactive relationship between operator and avatar with the two becoming an autonomous emergent symbiote which inhabits-informs-compensates-transcends both
Experience of embodiment	Avatar viewed as a tool, doll or other object separate to operator - third party relationship; attention is from the body to the interface and avatar	Sense of operator embodiment in avatar only during 'play'; attention is generally from the body and interface to the avatar	Attention is from the body and interface and the avatar to the immersive experience of the (virtual) environment
Active mode	Having (the describable fixed qualities of)	Doing (performing the narrative of)	Being (neither fixed nor describable) and becoming (through interaction)
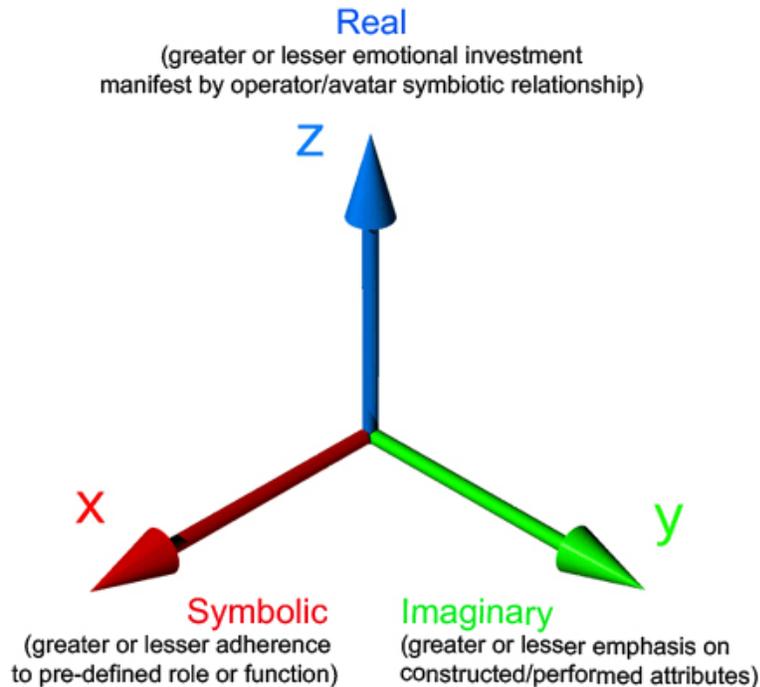
Figure 29: The Modalities considered as coexisting axes

It has been demonstrated within the examples analysed of both typical operators and artistic practitioners that during the process of avatar development evidence of 'avatar evolution' can often be observed by avatar progression through stages exhibiting characteristics typifying each modality sequentially, i.e. the avatar's relation to the operator develops from third party functionary to performed construction to symbiote; the Symbolic avatar which does no more than serve a function as a tool or proxy for the operator evolves to become the Imaginary avatar, consciously constructed and performed by the operator, which in turn becomes Realised not by any single defining act, but spontaneously by the ongoing relationship between operator, avatar, and those with whom the avatar interacts. It can also be seen that the Imaginary avatar is often constructed and performed using components of the Symbolic; similarly, no matter how symbiotic the operator/avatar relationship becomes, and how embodied the operator becomes within the virtual, the Real Avatar will always contain within it the Imaginary, constructed and controlled by the actual world actions of the operator. However it is important to avoid an erroneous conclusion that one modality is a necessary precursor to the other; rather it is observable that all exist simultaneously to greater or lesser extents in relation to each other. Though such progression from Symbolic to Imaginary to Real often takes place, it can be easily envisaged that an Imaginary mode of avatar might not have evolved from a typical Symbolic avatar but rather be constructed from a wider range of more abstract sources, and its Symbolic element be more conceptual. Similarly Real avatar interaction must necessarily, by its nature, arise spontaneously whether preceded by Symbolic roles or Imaginary performances or not, as must Real un-mediated interaction between individuals in the actual world; all that virtual worlds such as Second Life can hope to achieve is to provide virtual platforms where such interaction is possible. Parallels may be drawn to actual world expressions of identity in which individuals

often classify themselves first by association with a (Symbolic) job role, carefully construct and perform different aspects of (Imaginary) self-expression to different social groups whilst trying to fulfil a longing for (or escape from) the intangible and elusive experience of Real interaction with their environment, with others and with that which they perceive to be their 'true' self, whilst the three modalities co-exist as palimpsests to each other as simultaneous and concurrent facets of self. As demonstrated by artistic endeavours such as DeLappe's Salt March and Cardenas' Becoming Dragon as well as others examined by this research, avatars can simultaneously exhibit a high level of the typifying characteristics of each modality.

This suggests a further way to employ the Table of Modalities as an analytical tool by using each modality to analyse the specific facet of the avatar's expression of identity that is most related to the characteristics typifying that modality, i.e. using the Symbolic modality to examine the function of the avatar, the Imaginary modality to examine construction, performance and social perception of the avatar and the Real modality to examine the avatar relationships both with others in-world and with the operator, considering aspects such as emotional investment of the operator/avatar symbiote within the virtual environment. In this way the modalities may be viewed as separate axes on which the avatar might be positioned at any given time dependent upon their level of conformity with the characteristics typifying the modality relating to these axes as shown in Figure 29.

The recognition of this ability to simultaneous manifest all three modalities rather than view identity, whether that of the avatar or operator, as tethered to one of them could prove important to our relationships with ourselves, others and our environments whether situated in the virtual or the actual. As it has been observed that an operator's identity may be projected as Imaginary in the actual world and interpreted as Symbolic (of that Imaginary actual) in the

virtual world, it must also be acknowledged that the Real may be experienced by the physical operator in the actual world, via avatar's interactions in the virtual world, or in the liminal phenomenological world inhabited by the operator-avatar symbiote. For example, should it be observed that the avatar is not, at a particular point in time, experiencing Real immersed interaction within the virtual world, it may be that the operator's attention is fully immersed within the actual. It may be assumed that the more Symbolic the avatar, and the less the operator has to do within the virtual to maintain the avatar's functional role, the more time the operator's experience may be grounded in the actual; taken to a logical conclusion a pre-scripted robot avatar may exist within Second Life fulfilling a Symbolic role without the operator present within the virtual at all. Similarly, should the interaction taking place within the virtual involve an Imaginary performance by the avatar in which it performs for, but does not interact with, other avatars, the experience of the Real experience may be located not in the actual world of performer-operator or in the virtual world of the performed-avatar, but in the liminal phenomenological world of the operator-avatar performer-performed symbiote. Consequently whilst the potential for the experience of the Real must always be present, the location of its manifestation may change.

This understanding of the simultaneous manifestation of the modalities applied to the self as experienced across different actual/virtual locations provides contributions not only to the understanding of identity within virtual worlds, and to the development of artistic practice within virtual worlds, but also to discussions relating to games theory and other fields relating to virtual-human interaction, social sciences and identity theory in a wider context.

When Baudrillard mourned 'the death of the real' and the immersion of society into virtual hyperrealities he wrote too that "we deplore the disappearance of the real, arguing that everything is now mediated by the image. But we forget that the image, too, disappears, overcome by reality" (2001, p.145). For our experience of self to remain spontaneous rather than routine we must open ourselves to the possible, potentially abstract or unfamiliar experiences and interactions made possible by a new and virtual Real.

6.2 Recommendations and Future Research Directions

A number of topics have arisen that it has not been possible to investigate fully within the scope of this research study. Additional topics for further potential research, or which might provide inspiration to artistic practitioners, are discussed below;

6.2.1 Impact of different virtual environments on expression of self

Whilst this study has limited itself to the application of the modalities of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real to the manifestation of self and identity via avatars, it should be remembered that identity is apprehended in relation to a given place and time (Erikson, 1996, pp.14-27). As Doyle (2007) went in search of India as Wanderingfictions and discovered that visiting the symbol of a place within the virtual does not presume an authentic experience of that place, it would be valuable to extend this research to examine the psychogeography of different virtual environments using these modalities, and the impact on the expression of identity of occupying such different virtual social spaces, particularly as it relates to the operator's emotional engagement, and the impact of their interaction upon environments.

6.2.1 Use of Multiple/Alt avatars for expression of self

Whilst this study focussed primarily on the manifestation of self via single avatars developed or operated within Second Life, it did not significantly engage with topics relating to the use of multiple or alt avatars and raised questions as to whether, when these are employed within Second Life, they are typically viewed by operators as separate entities with separate narratives (in the way that the researcher views Guido and Funkin as independent of each other) or as projections of different facets of the same holistic self, in the same way that individuals typically view the different aspects of personality presented to others within the actual world, and this presents a fascinating topic for further study.

Of particular interest is the relationship of layers of expression of identity existing as palimpsests to each other as might be expressed by an avatar assuming a second performed Imaginary identity not its own (e.g. for the performance of machinima), or the existence of an avatar's avatar within a virtual world.

6.2.3 Experimental avatar appearances

Further research would be warranted to examine the differences that have been highlighted herein between the characteristics that operators may find appealing when choosing avatars to use (e.g. characteristics which may make avatars quirky, interesting or individualistic) and those which they choose to accentuate when developing avatars (e.g. commonly accepted conventions of attractiveness) and the reasons for these differences. As an extension to this, further research is recommended on the tendencies documented within this research for female operators to be more likely to create experimental avatars, and for individuals creating more experimental avatars to have a greater investment in those avatars.

Of particular interest from the viewpoint of the researcher as an artistic practitioner is the use of avatars (or virtual environments) to express 'the hidden face where the object crumbles" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.109).

6.2.4 Expression of Emotion

The expression of emotion within virtual worlds would benefit both not only from further academic study to investigate the links between emotion and operator embodiment/immersion in the avatar but also as a topic of further exploration by artistic practitioners within virtual worlds.

6.2.5 Adopting and Extending the Table of Avatar Modalities

It is recommended that the table of modalities developed by this research is more widely adopted by other writers on the subjects of identity and selfhood to allow a common framework of language to emerge when discussing these topics, whether as they relate to virtual worlds, games, social networks such as Facebook or to wider expressions of identity. It is hoped that future researchers might further analyse artistic practice and avatar behaviour using these modalities and that artists may consider how these modalities are applicable to their own practice. However it is not only the role of artists working in virtual worlds to continue to explore themes of identity and push the boundaries of their own, and their audiences, relationships with their avatars, but the duty of game makers and academics to also explore this potential. In doing so, they must challenge the ways that identity is expressed and perceived not only within virtual environments but also within in the actual world, encouraging us to consider that we are not merely synonymous with our primary role in life, or the sum of our physical appearance and properties, but rather to realize ourselves as unique and multifaceted personalities constantly made Real by our interactions whether in actual or virtual worlds.

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