VIRTUALLY THERE: SOCIAL STRUCTURE OVER TIME AND SPACE

by

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We have read and discussed the thesis submitted by Wayne Erik Rysavy, and we have also evaluated his presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. We find that the student has passed the final oral examination, and that the thesis is satisfactory for a master's degree and ready for any final modifications that we may explicitly require.

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I have read the thesis of Wayne Erik Rysavy in its final form and have found that (1) the modifications required by the defense committee are complete; (2) the format, citations, and bibliographic style are consistent and acceptable; (3) the illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (4) the final manuscript is ready for submission to the Graduate College.

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To my loving family:

For giving me the time and space to immerse myself in my passions

while also providing unwavering support when I got too deep.

Thank you for always believing in me every step of the way.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Communication is both process and art. It is the vehicle through which we share our thoughts and feelings as much as it is a creative activity resulting in the production of new meanings and ways of knowing. While we commonly understand communication as a continual process of reception and interpretation, new electronic media continue to extend our knowledge of what constitutes communication and how we characterize communication. Challenging the longstanding assumptions of fixed and positioned ways of knowing, studies with new electronic media accentuate the burgeoning contrast between the authority and stability of the written word and the mutability of the electronic word (Craig & Muller, 2007). These studies also increasingly highlight the need to problematize virtual communication in its own terms, examining it as a "technologizing" of message dissemination and reception and construction of the self over time and space (Gozzi & Haynes, 1992; Ong, 2002).

This thesis questions the constitutive role communication plays in virtual settings. By problematizing knowledge about virtual communication in Second Life (SL), an online virtual world created by Linden Labs and continually constructed by its residents, I attempt to expand our understanding of communication through technology as mediated communication becomes increasingly prominent in the world and in our daily lives. In particular, I develop a historical foundation for virtual communication that: (a) acknowledges that all communication is mediated and (b) focuses on SL, a new emergent communication technology, as a text through which we can communicate with one

another over time and space. I then extend this analysis by clarifying how individual interactions with technology lead to new interpretations how presence is 'ontologized' in virtual settings. Ultimately, the argument is made here that new media technologies increase the ubiquity of virtual communication in our lives, and, in turn, engender new ways of understanding identity, communication, and metatheory.

Communication: Historic Evolution and Revolution

Communication is foundational to the creation of our reality. At the most basic level, it is the process through which we make sense of our thoughts and feelings and share our interpretations with others. Yet, as we explore communication, it becomes clear that communication also allows us to make sense of the world through our interpretations. Understood this way, communication allows us to interpret the world around us through our personal experiences and interactions with others, as well as shape the world through our interpretations. As we are socialized into the world, then, we come to understand not only ourselves, but also the other through communication.

In the physical sense, the understanding of our selves and the other is immediate and continuous. Occurring in the face-to-face (F2F) situation, an individual physically faces the other, vividly present in the "here and now" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 29; Gergen, 2002; see also Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996). Both the individual and the other immediately and continually make sense of each other, interpellating both verbal and nonverbal elements at play for as long as the situation transpires. It is here, in the F2F situation, that the other is "fully real," or, more simply, constituted through direct contact (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 29; see also Gergen, 2002). While in direct contact with

one another, both parties interpret (and misinterpret) one another inextricably tied to the given subjectivity between them. It is during this exchange of both verbal and nonverbal elements that Berger and Luckmann (1966), in particular, argue that the individual and the other are considered "close." This closeness is not, however, emotionally or psychological bound, at least not at this point. Instead, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that the F2F situation "emphatically bonds" the individual to the other in the immediate moment through direct presence (p. 29). Thus, "closeness" according to Berger and Luckmann is foundationally physical—both self and other are made discernable only through the immediacy of the direct physical apprehension of one another.

As we move away from the F2F situation, becoming increasingly distanced and, as I argue, virtual, we begin to lack the "immediate, continuous and massively real presence of the other's expressivity" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 30). It is in this physical distancing of the self from the other that "closeness" becomes abstracted, now encompassing the psychological and emotional interpretations of one another. Here both the self and the other are able to "apprehend" or discern one another over time and space by relying on "typificatory [sic] schemes" that essentialize the other in absence (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; see also Gergen, 2002). Instead of relying on the direct presence of the other, both individual and other now make sense of one another through their individual interpretations drawn from the F2F situation and other reasonable associations based off of prior social experiences with others and society at large. It is during the remoteness brought about by physical distancing that both self and other become the sum of increasingly anonymous associations with who or what they may be based off of the

interaction that took place and the individual interpretations of what those associations might also entail (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

For example, initial contact in F2F situation may have allowed an individual to discern the other as "a woman," "a salesperson" "a jocular person" and so on. Yet, now that this woman, let's call her Jane, is no longer in the immediate presence of the individual, let's call him Henry, she is discerned through the associations said individual can attribute to her based off of the previous interaction and any others associations that reasonably apply. In Jane's physical absence, Henry may discern her as "duplicitous" in her role as "salesperson" based off of prior experiences with others in that role. Henry may also apprehend Jane as "a mother" or "a single woman" and reasonably attach any other attributes typically ascribed to both of those roles to Jane. Similarly, Jane will discern Henry based off of this initial interaction and make sense of him contextually, drawing upon the prior F2F interaction and any other reasonably acceptable associations that apprehend Henry to her.

The same conceptualization holds true for interpretations of others via a text, albeit somewhat differently. If the other is distanced from the individual (herein the originator, and therefore distanced from the onset), whether physically or metaphysically, then the interpretation of the other is based on both the continual interaction with the originator through the text and the "intersecting typificiations [sic]" that apprehend the originator to the other (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 32). Instead of relying on "closeness," the other relies on the resources available to him or her in their remoteness that allow the originator to be reasonably apprehended (see Giddens, 1984). This includes, but is not limited to: continual interactions with the text, personal interpretations

of the text and the originator, and interactions with others who have interacted with the text and composed their own interpretations of it.

In particular, the Roman Catholic Church's exportation of Catholicism to new regions during the seventeenth century can be conceived in this way (King & Frost, 2002). As new indigenous peoples came into contact with the Bible, naïve to its doctrine, they apprehended it through the resources available to them. This, as I'll explain later, occurred through individual and collective negotiations of both the text and the originator (herein the Roman Catholic Church at large) that allowed indigenous peoples to connect with the prevailing tenets through adaptation and, ultimately, feel psychologically and emotionally close to the Roman Catholic Church and those who shared its belief system. Therefore, interpretations can and do occur beyond the F2F situation and, although remote, are anything but inauthentic.

Indeed, while Berger and Luckmann (1966) would contend that interpretations of the individual and the other in remoteness via a text retain anonymity and are, therefore, "inauthentic" due to the lack of an immediately discernable presence, the argument is made here that such interpretations beyond the F2F situation are, instead, "realized" in continued interaction and negotiation of one another. Although the individual and the other may not be "close" by Berger and Luckmann's standards, they become close, albeit differently, through a process of negotiation where one another becomes realized in experiencing "the other" through the mediating element, such as a text. Whether through writing, money, or more contemporary texts such as telecommunication networks and computers (i.e. technologies), interpretations via a text are, in fact, the historic basis of communicative practices thereby grounding our understanding of others and ourselves in

social exchange over time and distance (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996; Gozzi & Haynes, 1992; King & Frost, 2002; Nelson Marsh, 2006; Yakhlef, 2009; see also Boellstorff, 2008). Therefore, while these interpretations may not be perceived as authentically—as "fully real"—as those in F2F interaction, such interpretations of an individual or group via a text can be as real as the interpretation gained from the direct presence of someone. Thus, I argue that communication at a distance is continually re-presenting one another through continued interaction.

Furthermore, when conceptualized this way, it becomes clear that "virtual communication" has, in fact, existed ever since humankind disseminated a presence to others in new locations (King & Frost, 2002; Nelson Marsh, 2006; see also DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Gozzi & Haynes, 1992; Yakhlef, 2009). With the tenets of a group packaged into a text, the beliefs and values of the group became increasingly virtual, able to span space and time when distributed. Mediated through some physical representation, or a technical artifact, texts were introduced to new locations, all the while maintaining the distant presence of the other (Gergen, 2002: Gozzi & Haynes, 1992; King & Frost, 2002). As a result, texts became the communicative medium through which individuals came to interpret and effectively 'create' the other at a distance.

For example, texts like money and writing, which were fixed across time and space and contextual (King & Frost, 2002, Yakhlef, 2009; see also Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996; Ong, 2002), became introductory objects through which indigenous peoples became aware of the other that existed outside of their zone of reference. These texts introduced the indigenous populations to new ways of knowing by allowing them to conceive of another tangible existence beyond their immediate zone of reference, thereby

making the other present, in some form, to the indigenous peoples. Although the rules behind these particular texts were largely unclear to these populations who, in turn, maintained their own ways of knowing and living, the dissemination of these texts shaped both parties involved by eventually allowing them to make use of them over prolonged exposure and increased understanding of their usage.

Similarly, abstract concepts also became vehicles through which the presence of the other could be conceived and interpreted, albeit in a more engaging fashion. Unlike the texts of money and writing that required an understanding of their application and value, abstract concepts like those detailed within religious practice and governance became texts that allowed the indigenous peoples to appropriate aspects within their immediate zone of reference (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996; King & Frost, 2002). The ritualistic practices of the Roman Catholic Church, as mentioned earlier, serve as a great example of how the doctrine was adapted in new locations. Disseminated around the world, the multivalent doctrine appealed to indigenous locales as a belief system that fit local settings through adapted practice (King & Frost, 2002; see also Nelson Marsh, 2006).

Due to the ambiguous nature of many of the stories and practices within such texts, abstract texts afforded indigenous peoples a way of understanding the distant other and, furthermore, see themselves in the world of that other. In particular, the abstract texts allowed the indigenous world to conceive of the distant other as ontologically comparable through concepts like salvation and hierarchical order that identified with localized concepts and stories (King & Frost, 2002; see also Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996; Gergen, 2002; Ong, 2002). At the same time, the distant other adapted certain (and

often select) practices of the indigenous world, ontologically amalgamating both the distant other and the indigenous world. As a result, the distant other became increasingly relatable and metaphysically tangible to the indigenous population that began to understand it through its own interpretations and conceptions.

Historically, whether contextual (read: disambiguous) or abstract (read: ambiguous) (King & Frost, 2002), texts have allowed for more than the dissemination of information. While they have undoubtedly allowed people to communicate with one another and transmit messages over vast distances, texts have also performed a far greater function: they have connected one presence to another over time and space (Gozzi & Haynes, 1992). By rendering the other as relatable and present through a mediating device, texts have effectively allowed the distant other to be present in physical absence. Concurrently, distributed texts have opened a world of interpretation and negotiation of individual and other over distance.

The Distant Other: Absent Presence, Self, and Virtual Communication

Although the individual and the other are not physically present to one another when communicating over vast spans of time and space, they are represented to one another through the mediating text and each other's interpretations of the other in interaction. Kenneth Gergen's (2002) treatment of "absent presence" was chiefly concerned with such representation over distance, exploring the implications of communication through new media technologies. However, instead of emphasizing the ubiquitous nature of these emerging technologies, Gergen elucidated their ability to alter our conceptions of one another through distanced communication. With rapid advances in

new communication technologies including print and electronic media, people began communicating virtually with one another (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996; Gergen, 2002). Mediated by a text, whether a book or computer, for example, the communication between one party and another increasingly spanned time and space. As part of the distribution of texts to new locations, the immediate physical presence of the other—the F2F situation—became less prominent, instead replaced by the interpretations of a presence vicariously internalized and externalized through continued interaction.

Therefore, if communication via a text allows for a rendered presence of the distant other to another in a new location, then communication via a text is always distanced creating an "absent presence" (Gergen, 2002; see also Gozzi & Haynes, 1992). Or, more simply, any communication beyond the immediate physical presence of the other—the F2F situation—always occurs through a text that renders both communicative agents absent over distance. Thus, distributed texts afford a virtual presence that is highly subject to interpretation and negotiation over time and space within a new location or a localized population.

Moreover, unlike a presence experienced F2F, the virtual presence becomes constituted in language. Where the physical presence can be accounted for, or "apprehended," directly and through perceptions of one another, the virtual presence cannot. Instead, the virtual presence takes form in the world of words and the interpretation of those words indirectly negotiated between the distant other and the localized population (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996; King & Frost, 2002; see also Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2002). Moving from affective and cognitive senses and thus knowledge of the other, and oral communication to written communication, print media

allows for the dissemination of beliefs, values, and cultural norms and expectations. However, unlike oral communication, these thoughts and ideas can be easily ignored or contested upon dissemination into a new location. Stripped of its situational context, the meaning behind the print text becomes subject to individual interpretation, as the writer and reader are not able to interact directly or exchange feedback (Chesebro & Bertelesn, 1996; King & Frost, 2002; see also Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jackson, 1996). Consequently, the reader of the text constitutes the distant other within his or her own interpretations of the language, thereby representing the other vicariously.

Similarly, electronic communication texts allow the distant other to become represented in language, but rendered through rapidly streaming electronic transmissions that combine spoken and written word over time and space (Chesebro & Bertelesen, 1996; Gergen, 2002; Gozzi & Haynes, 1992; see also Jackson, 1996). While electronic communication allows people to communicate vocally through telecommunication technologies like the telephone, cellular phone, and, more recently, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), it has, in recent years, also started to integrate visual representation through icons, avatars, and video via webcam.

In merging oral, written, and visual forms of mediation, electronic communication continues to expand the realm of absent presence by allowing people to increasingly interpret each other through interaction over time and space (Chesbro & Bertelsen, 1996; Gergen, 2002; Gozzi & Haynes, 1992). Again, unlike previous communication forms, electronic communication, especially in emergent technologies, continues to engender user-constructed communication environments by granting more options through which mediation can occur (Chesbro & Bertelsen, 1996). As communicators engage in different

electronic texts, they actively choose how they represent themselves by constructing a personalized presence facilitated by the technology and how it is understood through managing its material elements and concurrently mediating its social elements (Hine, 2000; Jackson, 1996; see also Boellstorff, 2008; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005), of which I will elucidate more in the following section.

For now, though, it is important to focus on the fact that each individual creates a presence by which he or she is re-presented through the mediating technologies in use over time and space. This re-presentation is not only considered an absent presence of the individual, but it is also a fragmented presentation of the individual (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; see also Gergen 2002; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005). Composed of mediating elements in the technology as understood by the individual and negotiated by others in interactions, the individual as re-presented is a fragmented presentation of their physical presentation (Hine, 2000, Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005; see also Gergen, 2002). Due to the fragmented (i.e. multifaceted) nature of this presence, it must be managed and recognized if it is to fully exist (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005). In other words, communicators using different electronic texts cannot simply have a presence without managing it and negotiating it in the presence of others (Boellstorff, 2008; Hine, 2000; Turkle, 1995). Thus, electronic communication continues to blend elements of oral communication and written communication, all the while maintaining its presence as a distinct form of communication over time and space.

While such technologies undoubtedly better facilitate communication between one party and another at a distance, they also highlight the missing presence between the two parties involved in interaction. As a consequence of absent presence, individuals,

increasingly so online, become physically invisible from one another. Stripped of a definitive presence, an individual must participate in the ongoing construction of his or her identity and world, tailoring elements of the available devices to establish a presence. However, since this presence re-presents the individual in a tailor-made form through the medium, it requires a community of persons to recognize, affirm, and negotiate this mediated representation of self (Gergen, 2002; Turkle, 1995). Consequently, an individual also becomes the subject of perpetual collective interpretation.

Thus, communicators conceptualize of the other within their lives by interpreting their presence in conversation through the technology that allows them to communicate while simultaneously distanced. Consequently, each individual becomes represented in language that is highly arbitrary, the thoughts and reality of which exist in the moment and continued shared experiences between one and another. Over time, these interpretations constitute the presence of the other in absence, established yet continually negotiated over time and space.

Facilitated by the expansion of emerging communication technologies, virtual communication and absent presence emerge in the collective and ongoing interpretation of self and the world. As mediating technologies reach a juncture with increasing intersubjectivity by active agents, individuals collectively create and maintain the texts that engender and shape their world. Here, individuals experiment with multiple identities, continually constructing the self (Turkle, 1995). Thereafter, the self and the other emerge through the collective negotiation of texts, shaped by the rules that guide the text or the abstract concepts associated with it (Gergen, 2002; King & Frost, 2002). Ultimately, in lieu a formal presence, virtual communication through technology expands

the depth of the world, allowing each individual and his or her collective, yet diverse contributions to shape and reshape the self and his or her reality.

Communication Technology: Text and Context

With history established, both text and context must be elucidated to further understand the depth of virtual communication and absent presence in conjunction with emerging communication technologies like SL. While historic texts have been explored as an element of virtual communication, this section clarifies texts as synonymous with technology. In particular, the argument is made here that emerging communication technologies act as texts because they are composed of both material elements and social elements that are interpreted and reinterpreted through continual usage.

In particular, when an individual encounters a technical artifact (i.e. a technology), whether it is a cup, a book, a computer, or a software program on a computer, he or she must learn how to use the technical artifact by first interacting with it. While formalized instructions may exist for the artifact's usage, an individual only learns to construct his or her relation to the artifact by managing the material elements personally and then negotiating it with others through the available social elements (Jackson, 1996). In the case of Second Life (SL), this occurs when an individual, adept at using a computer, encounters the software that is SL. In this instance both the computer and the software (although intangible) are the material elements of the artifact that is SL—they are what Jackson refers to as the "matter of the artifact" (1996, p. 256). As the individual continues to interact with the computer and the software of SL (herein SL), he or she becomes increasingly familiar with it, attempting to discern his or her relation to

the artifact. At this point the individual perceives what the artifact can do through the social elements—he or she sees the artifact as capable of accomplishing a certain task and seeks to perform that task (Jackson, 1996). In the case of SL, for example, the individual may perceive the artifact as capable of connecting him or her to others at a distance. If, during interaction, the artifact performs the task it was perceived to be capable of doing, then it is a technology and it is said to be "functional" and, therefore, can be read as a text through which interpretations may be drawn through the technology and its context (Jackson, 1996). If, on the other hand, the artifact fails to perform the task it was thought to be capable of, then it is not recognized as a technology and does not warrant attention (Jackson, 1996).

Clearly, then, a technology can be read as a text when it functions through both the material and social elements that compose it. Existing in a context, a technology is understood as individuals come into contact with the material elements that constitute the artifact and collectively interpret its purpose (i.e. the social elements) (Houston & Jackson, 2002; Jackson, 1996). While any artifact can be understood from its material elements, though, the social elements also work in concert to allow users to realize the potential of the text. In particular, physical features of an artifact become constituted, not through their figure, form, or shape, but rather through how they are socially derived and interpreted (Jackson, 1996). At this point, artifacts are no longer confined by their material elements, which limit our understanding; rather they are understood through interpellation. Consequently, the identity and purpose of the artifact comes to fruition through the meanings ascribed to it by people who come into contact with it and interact with it (Houston & Jackson, 2003).

However, material elements cannot be wholly discounted. After all, the opposing argument that a text must be perceived prior to its interpretation grounds the presence of the artifact as materially foundational (Jackson, 1996). Therefore, the materiality of an artifact must still be taken into account. Yet, the materiality of an artifact need not necessarily supersede the social elements, lest we assume the technology as deterministic. Rather, as postulated by Jackson (1996), an artifact can, in fact, be constituted through both elements when it "functions." This not only allows the artifact to become a technology, but it also allows the artifact to be read as a text that is continually constructed in a context. In other words, technology and context become "integrated as one entity" where neither exists prior to the other (Jackson, 1996, p. 248). Instead, both technology and context are constructed continually, allowing the researcher to explore how the technology is constituted in action and how it appears to remain stable across news contexts.

This is especially true for emerging communication technologies. If we are to understand the depth of these texts and their growing roles in our everyday lives, then we must comprehend communication technologies beyond their previous conceptualizations. We must reconsider our thoughts on communication technologies as a "more effective means of message dissemination" and instead emphasize how messages are received and interpreted in action (Jackson, 1996; Poster, 2007; Redding, 1972). Only when we comprehend both the material and social elements working in concert through human interaction can emerging communication technologies be properly understood from a communication perspective.

Moving now to SL, the site of the research, we can begin to understand how emerging communication technologies are continually constructed in multiple contexts over time and space. An ever-expanding virtual world, SL not only allows individuals to participate in a virtual world, but it also allows them to create the world and the objects around them. In this sense, SL acts as a material technology through which users interact. Users encounter the software through their computers via the Internet. Once the software is downloaded, users instantly begin interacting with it as they construct their identity and, later, the world they take part in. At the same time, users come to understand themselves and the world around them through the social elements of the technology. In encountering SL, users perceive the potential tasks it can accomplish. For the purposes of this research project, the social elements can be said to be communicating with others through a mediated presence at a distance. Ultimately by interacting with the technology and with others, users come to create new meanings for this world, their place within it, and themselves.

Understanding Second Life

Created by Philip Rosedale, former chief technology officer of RealNetworks, Second Life (SL) is a technology of simulation (Markoff, 2002). Unlike other online worlds of fantasy games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), SL is a virtual world program that immerses users in an online simulation of the physical world. Users enter the world, selecting from a set of predetermined avatars that can later be changed, and begin their second life on "Orientation Island," the first place users learn to interact in the online world known as "The Grid" (Boellstorff,

2008). Therefore, SL users are not gamers, at least not in the classical sense. Instead, SL users are considered "residents," free agents who can live, work, and create aspects of the world at their will.

As residents come to understand how to operate the technology of SL, residents also learn to negotiate their presence through interacting with others (i.e. becoming socialized). Although Linden Labs, the parent company of SL headed by Mr. Rosedale, outlines formally defined standards of interaction via "The Big Six" (to be discussed further), residents ultimately learn what is customary and acceptable through socializing with others within this world (Boellstorff, 2008). For example, users that enter the world and stay eventually change their avatar's appearance and adjust their language usage, conforming to the user-created norms of the world (Boellstorff, 2008; see also Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000). In this sense, residents begin to re-interpret the formally defined rules through personalized conceptualizations of what is and is not acceptable. Ultimately, residents make sense of the world through their interacting with it and with others, thereby changing the constitution of the virtual world of SL.

Additionally, SL differs from other online worlds in that it is has no predetermined settings and no gameplay-related rules for winning and losing (Boellstorff, 2008; Grossman, 2003). Unlike game worlds of Uru: Ages of Myst and World of Warcraft, SL allows its users to fully immerse themselves in whatever ways they see fit. Users have full control over what they look like, what they do in the world, and where they go. They can choose to play games, or they can get a job and work in the world at their own accord.

At the same time, however, Linden Labs maintains the clearly defined standards of "The Big Six." This standards for interaction act as laws and all residents are expected to follow them (Boellstorff, 2008). Yet, since the world of SL is also highly social and interpreted by its users, these rules are often bent or broken in interaction.

The "Big Six" of Second Life

The "Big Six" order the world of SL, obligating residents to six specific guidelines in order to maintain their presence in The Grid. In particular, residents are obligated not to assault or harass other residents. This includes acting in a civil manner by avoiding intimidating and sexually provocative gestures and language, as well as not pushing, shoving, or hitting other residents (Linden Research Inc., 2008a). As a divergence from the realm of the real, though, residents are not allowed to create or use scripts, whether in the form of objects or viruses, which are targeted at another resident. In essence, users should not target others with the direct intention of hurting them either physically or through technological disease.

Similarly, under the standard of intolerance, residents are compelled to eschew derogatory or demeaning language that discriminates on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. However, it is somewhat difficult to define what exactly constitutes "intolerance" in The Grid for two reasons. First, individual users are constituted in-world via an avatar that, for all intents and purposes, has no intrinsic connection to their physical presence. Since users actively construct themselves from the available mediated physical representations (e.g. male, female, furry [feline-like appearance], steampunk [machine-like appearance]), they are arbitrarily rendered in their

absent presence. As a result, intolerance is subjective and almost paradoxical since the interpretation can be taken to affect the avatar, the physically distanced individual, or both at the same time. Secondly, and perhaps more difficult to contend with, each particular plot of land carries its own rules and standards for interaction. These rules and standards are practices that are collectively negotiated by the landowners and the users over time, making certain actions acceptable and others unacceptable. Therefore, Linden Labs combats intolerance on a case-by-case basis where the belittling of others and the inhibition of thoughtful exchange counts as "intolerance" as determined in context (Linden Research Inc., 2008a).

Linden Labs also compels its residents to avoid indecency and disturbing the peace. Similar to the socially accepted and mandated laws of the physical world, residents are required to avoid screaming expletives and running around naked (except where explicity made acceptable), as this upsets the experience of others. In the most extreme sense, this also includes following the rules that are established by the event organizer(s) or content owner(s).

The most intriguing standard of the "Big Six," however, concerns disclosure. While the Internet and, subsequently, SL are public spaces (except where privatized through member-access spaces) (Hine, 2000), Linden Labs has redefined disclosure to include any information about a fellow resident beyond information posted in their profile (Linden Research Inc., 2008a). In other words, disclosing information about a resident beyond what is posted or noticeable from their profile page is prohibited, unless you have their personal consent. Consequently, any monitoring and reporting of remote conversations is, by Linden's standards, a violation of the resident's privacy and personal

experience in The Grid. Although not aberrant from typical methodological concerns, describing scenes and gaining access to certain information becomes somewhat difficult because of this standard.

Ultimately, SL simulates the physical world, attempting to mirror it by reproducing "standards" that each resident must follow. In so doing, SL begins to appear somewhat less unique than the utopian ideal it espouses on its main webpage (www.secondlife.com) of "Your Imagination. Your World." In particular, the reproductions imposed by its creators and the subsequent interpretations of its users almost run counter to absent presence and interpretation. If formal standards were imposed on users through rule-bound practices, then, in some sense, it would appear that there could not be much interpretation. However, because each individual engages in SL by bringing his or her own interpretations to bear on the mediating technology (i.e. the software), he or she ultimately re-interprets the standards and The Grid and chooses to fully abide or not. Indeed, as participants from various cultures come together to interact, alternative meanings are developed for the text (Nelson Marsh, 2006). Moreover, since the mediating technology contains a number of ambiguities, users are able to construct a world of their own and still pass through standards even though there may be times when they are "breaking the rules." This occurs through a process noted by Nelson Marsh (2006) who studied virtual organizational practices and it applies to SL in that individuals collectively negotiate and co-construct new meanings for what is and is not acceptable (as with landowners, parcel-owners who occupy a piece of land, and everyday users within SL), ultimately altering the way things are to the way they are understood in specific contexts. Afforded diverse interpretations due to the resources available to them

and their interpretation of these structures, alternative meanings are ultimately developed in practice as new cultures are negotiated in these practices in contexts (Nelson Marsh, 2006). Thus, through negotiating the standards and re-interpreting the patterns of practice that make the rules meaningful, new standards are constantly (re)constructed over time.

Breaking the Rules and Remaking the Rules

While Second Life maintains certain standards and guidelines for how residents should behave, there are many residents who passively and actively resist the "established" order. Although typically pejorative by nature, these residents engage in The Grid through a different set of interpretations. Operating under differing assumptions by culture or experience, some residents of SL bend the rules by constructing their own ethical and behavioral standards, thereby blurring the boundaries established by Linden Labs. In the most extreme case, these deviant interpretations result in direct negation to the "Big Six" of SL. For example, the "griefers," a coterie of malicious-minded individuals, actively abuse the guidelines of the "Big Six" by physically and emotionally harming others in SL (Linden Research Inc., 2008b). In some instances they have even attacked others in the virtual world with malicious code that corrupts avatars, deletes inventory items, or ruins account information.

To combat deviants like the "griefers," many residents have had to go beyond the "Big Six" of SL and work to establish strong community ties, norms for interaction, and, ultimately, construct informal standards for lands and groups. By banding together, many residents of SL have developed new systems of order; scripting them into the lands they own or are part of as a "greifing-prevention mechanism." In particular, some of the lands

that residents encounter not only restrict certain actions, such as flying, they also restrict the usage and creation of new items (Boellstroff, 2008). In imposing a new order these groups of residents have not only re-interpreted and thus re-created the standards of SL, but they have also reproduced existing structures from the physical world. Ultimately, they prevent those who seek to harm others from being able to do so easily or readily. Similarly, residents also have the power to report other SL residents for abuse by accessing their profile information and reporting them to Linden Labs. Depending on the severity of the offensive act, Linden Labs will temporarily ban, permanently ban and/or delete the offensive resident's account, disabling them from harming others from that specific account.

By enacting conventionally agreed upon standards, residents of SL increasingly draw socialization standards from the physical world to limit abuse in their online world. As these conventional standards "re-make" the rules, however, they also produce more restrictions in the world of SL. In particular, the negotiation practices conducted by groups of people begin to reshape the social setting of the virtual world through the new standards they produce. This is what Nelson Marsh (2006) calls "virtual order" because temporally and spatially distanced users collectively negotiate order through shared experiences combined with a reproduction of structures (p. 13; see also Giddens, 1984). Ultimately, these restrictions go beyond limiting abuse because they begin to limit the creative and egalitarian practices upon which SL was founded.

Consequently, SL is, in fact, a text of both material and social elements subject to human action. While its creators and users define its functionality, it is continually conceptualized and re-evaluated through such processes of negotiation and regular

informal standard production. As a result, SL is constantly interpreted by the multitudes of residents who ultimately shape the way in which the technology is understood and, through direct consequence, the ways in which the world of SL is understood.

If users construct the online world through adapted practices that allow them to make sense of their surroundings, then the performances that they engage in online shape the understanding of the technology (i.e. the material element). Here, users rely on practices and performances adapted from the world, but understood in the terms of the online world. As users engage in the online world, then, they inevitably recreate elements of the real world while also producing new practices and ways of understanding.

(Re)Producing Structure: Self and Other in Interaction

Since residents actively construct and reconstruct the order of their online world by drawing from practices and performances of the physical world to establish clearer order, theorizing on "taking on the role of the other," Structuration Theory (ST) and cultural performances help to explain the practices that occur within Second Life. Although seemingly inchoate, these three components of the theoretical framework pertain to SL since users bring their own set of interpretations into the online world while making sense of it through a experiencing others and the structure already in place online. Relying on practices accepted in the real world and adapting to practices accepted in the online world, users reproduce structure online. When users understand the accepted practices and collectively negotiate new practices through informal means, users produce structure online. Therefore, users engage in culturally-grounded performances that allow them to make sense of their world and (re)produce structure in new settings.

We must first acknowledge that structures come to fruition as individuals interact with one another. Therefore, the argument is made here, once again, that organizations are fundamentally communicative. SL, a diverse but highly organized community distributed across time and space, operates as a virtual organization since users collectively negotiate the structure in interaction (see Giddens, 1984). Thus, as individuals come to SL and interact with one another, they negotiate each other and the virtual world through "taking on the role of the other" (Mead, 1934). Although Mead (1934) did not emphasize the role of a text (especially a virtual technological text) in experiencing one another, his theorizing of "taking on the role of the other" is pertinent, especially with regard to virtual communication (p. 254). Since users of SL and other online worlds identify with one another and form communities, "taking on the role of the other" allows the individual to develop a sense of self, context, and others by anticipating other's responses and cooperating in social activity. In particular, as an individual comes to the online world of SL, he or she learns, through interaction and reaction, how to function as a member of the community. In the dance setting, for example, this would resemble making sense of the space and the various practices such as dancing, browsing, and lounging that occur within. As the individual interacts with the other in the online world, he or she learns the social activities and, through continued involvement, becomes a member of the community. Thus, interacting with others and cooperating in social activities online, allows structure to be produced and reproduced.

Furthermore, ST aids in understanding "taking on the role of the other" as humans interact with one another and generate social reality through an essential duality of structure and action (Giddens, 1984). Rather than argue for structure external to

individuals, Giddens (1984) emphasizes human agency (i.e. action) in coordinating

structure for daily life. As competent social agents, people actively interact with one

another in order to make sense of their world. In particular, agents actively select and

enact practices that make sense in working toward a shared purpose in their daily

interactions through the use of *rules* and *resources* (Giddens, 1984; see also Nelson

Marsh, 2006; Poole & McPhee, 2005; Weick, 1995).

Rules, according to Giddens (1984), are the formulas for action invoked in the

course of day-to-day activities that structure the happenings of everyday life. Rules can

be informal (i.e. rules of turn-taking in conversation) and formalized (i.e. codified laws),

as well as tacit (i.e. letting the other person speak before you interrupt) and discursive

(i.e. intricately established with a clear threshold for what is and is not acceptable, such as

laws). Rules, are not, however, formalized prescriptions for routines in action, like those

of a game (Giddens, 1984). Rather, the more a person acts according to these socially

constructed rules, the more socially accepted the rules become. As these rules become

increasingly accepted and generalized, we become less aware of them. Eventually rules

become so deeply embedded in everyday interaction that we no longer recognize how to

interpret the rules that guide our practices (Nelson Marsh, 2006). Ultimately, rules

become part of our practical knowledge of how to perform in various situations through

this process. Thus, rules *imply* "methodical procedures" of social interaction whereby

agents collectively constitute shared meaning and sanction modes of social conduct

(Giddens, 1984, p. 18).

Rules, however, cannot be conceptualized apart from resources. While rules

orient our interactions, resources allow us to carry out our intended actions. Resources

are, therefore, "allocative" or tangible (e.g. physical objects and possessions) and "authoritative" or intangible (e.g. talents, abilities, and knowledge) elements that are incorporated into the production and reproduction of social practices such that structures become realized in action (Giddens, 1984). Take, for example, a typical classroom setting with students and an instructor. The students "know how" to enlist the capabilities of the classroom by sitting down at their desks facing the instructor with a pen and notebook, ready to take notes from the whiteboard (allocative resources and rules). The students and instructor also "know how" to interact with one another to perform the mundane routines of the class based on the constructed meaning of a class/seminar/lecture (authoritative resources and rules). Thus, the socially constructed and deeply understood rules guide how to enact the resources available to actors in such a way that patterns of interaction become manifest as participants coordinate and work toward a common purpose. Once established, understood, accepted, and generalized, the patterns become structured in such a way so as to be discernibly similar across time and space, allowing structure to be produced and reproduced in action (Giddens, 1984; Nelson Marsh, 2006; Poole & McPhee, 2005; Weick, 1995).

Over time, the "routinization" or "standardization" of these practices allows for rules that both clarify and establish the functional elements of the structure, thereby affording "virtual order" in new locations (Nelson Marsh, 2006, p. 13; see also Giddens, 1984; Poole & McPhee, 2005). As human agents in new locales engage in these practices, they interpret and perform them in their daily lives, making manifest the "virtual order" (Nelson Marsh, 2006). It is in this process of interpretation and performance that human agents in new locales are also able to reproduce these structures

across time and space (Giddens, 1984; Nelson Marsh, 2006; Poole & McPhee, 2005). This is the duality of structure and action as detailed by Giddens and it is the "main grounding of continuities in social reproduction across time-space" (1984, pp. 26-27).

Similarly, "taking the role of the other" and cultural performances also play an important role in the sensemaking and routinization of human action. Drawn primarily from the work of American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, cultural performances are said to play a pivotal role in how individuals come to make sense of their surroundings and, ultimately, how they become socialized into the world. In line with Giddens, Geertz states that, "man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (1973, p. 5). Or, more simply, humans produce the structure of significance through which they comprehend the world. This, of course, details the depth of human interaction in culture and systems of knowledge as a symbolic process, but, like Giddens' work, falls short of conceptualizing communication as *the* symbolic process through which interaction occurs and by which knowledge is produced and reproduced. Therefore, in combining the work of Giddens and Geertz, I, like other scholars (Jackson, 1996; Nelson Marsh, 2006), argue that communication is the generative process through which structure emerges in practice and is re-constructed.

Expanding on cultural performances organizational communication scholars Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo elucidate how cultures are structures of shared meaning through communication. Granting that cultures are systems of shared meaning, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) extend the idea by stating that communication functions as the "act of transferring, processing, and storing subsystem or environmental information" in a system (p. 127). Therefore, in line with both Geertz and

Giddens, individuals act as the agents through which a structure is created, understood, and reproduced. Yet, expanding beyond Geertz, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) conceptualize culture as a communicative process through the actions and practices that members constitute. These actions, however, are not simply understood in a vacuum; rather, these communicative actions are revealed to the people who use them and those around them. Ultimately, this continual process illuminates the structure of the system and allows it to function within conventionally accepted practices.

Understood this way, communication is both a process of creation and sensemaking. While ST details the organizational elements of a structure, the cultural approach explicates the depth of communication behind the structure. Therefore, a blended approach that unites these two theoretical frames focuses attention to the ongoing process of structure through communication, especially at a distance.

Utilizing a Blended Approach for Understanding

Although these theories are typically used to detail communication as directly observed, applying them to virtual communication deepens our understanding of the dynamic and intersubjective processes afforded in absent presence. Instead of assuming that a definitive presence exists that shapes the structure and culture of a group, absent presence through a text demonstrates new avenues for ontologizing what virtual communication is and is not. It is here that we can begin to understand how virtual organizations remain stable across new contexts.

In particular, studies in virtual communication can detail how organizations exist through direct action and indirect action. Therefore, the nature of the world and our

manner of engagement with it can be expounded to include multiple interpretations brought to bear in a diverse site. Moreover, because interpretation via a text acts as a central focus of virtual communication, ontologizing moves beyond a materialist realm of effectiveness and cause and effect (Anderson, 1996). Emerging communication technologies, like Second Life (SL), instead refocus our attention to the perpetual absent presence of others and how interpretations shape virtual structures.

When problematized through knowledge about virtual communication, any site can be seen through its various extensions that allow it to function, especially virtually. For example, virtual organizations that have no physical location, like SL, still allow structure and, often, afford members increased elements of an organization that facilitate its processes (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). The lack of a physical location, then, allows the individual to be an active agent in the construction and shaping of the world around him or her, thereby altering our notions about the nature of the individual through human action and communicative processes (Poster, 2007).

Additionally, the vested power placed in the individual under this conceptualization also contests the authoritative meanings and power structures at play. Since each individual brings his or her own cultural performances to the site and mediates his or her actions through the text, he or she shapes the structure. Therefore, knowledge about the site and its functionality exists through "cultural memberships" that extend beyond what is seen and enacted in-world[1] (Anderson, 1996). Instead, structure transcends beyond its materiality as it becomes a "product of the mind" conceived

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[1] "In-world" is the term used by residents of Second Life to describe the online context of interaction. It can be thought of as, "in the virtual/online world."

through interpretation in action (Anderson, 1996; see also Giddens, 1984). Therefore, the meaning behind structure is localized, but abstracted beyond the particular collective site.

As a result of these abstractions, how we come to know virtual communication is further problematized. If virtual communication exists only in absent presence, then it can only be understood through a technical artifact or a text by which interpretations can be derived. Yet, virtual communication is increasingly ubiquitous, and, to some extent, understood in the everyday life. For example, when one person converses with another on the phone or through an instant messenger, they are "presently absent" to one another (Gergen, 2002). What is not understood, however, is how this presence is understood to be an authentic re-presentation of the individual. Therefore, further research like that presented in this thesis, intends to explore how individuals are constituted in absence and how their actions and performances demonstrate their presence to others.

Furthermore, as an extension to the epistemology of virtual communication, the way we study virtual communication must also be problematized. While virtual communication is not entirely new, as argued in this paper, the ways in which we study it require a nuanced approach. Instead of examining it from a purely standard ethnographic approach, this study endorses the redefining of ethnography as a methodology to include absent presence, mediating performances, and the fragmented self (Gergen, 2002; Goffman, 1989; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005). By including these rich elements, the relationship between theory and method and the justified argument can be deeply rooted in communication and human action.

Moreover, by extending our understanding of communication into the virtual realm, it allows scholars to derive significance in multiple ways. In particular, the cultural

performances that create structure can be explored, contrasting the notion that structure exists solely through materiality. Ultimately, then, scholars can broaden their understanding of both culture and structure to include how texts reproduce existing structures while producing new forms of order.

Similarly, through an understanding of communication in the virtual realm, the practice of virtual communication can be further theorized and modeled. As we come to understand the nature of virtual communication through practice, we can engage in meta-discourse about it. Eventually this will allow us to theorize, more clearly, what virtual communication is and how it occurs. By mapping the field, we can ultimately derive a deeper understanding of structure and ourselves. Therefore, I propose the following research questions in an attempt to further understand not only Second Life and virtual ethnography, but also virtual communication:

RQ1: In what ways do users of Second Life negotiate a virtual presence?

RQ2: What does the practice of ethnography look like in virtual settings?

In examining what constitutes knowledge about communication above, I not only explored how communication occurs in the virtual context, I also explained the practices and performances that make it realized across time and space. To help develop knowledge about virtual communication, I specifically chose Second Life as the research site due to its decentralized location and diverse population. These two attributes allowed me to not only employ Mead's (1934) theorizing on "taking on the role of the other" and Structuration Theory (ST) to explore the cultural performances in action in SL, but also allowed for an exploration of the nuanced approach to ethnography conducted online.

With Second Life as the site of research, I attempted to develop a richer understanding for the ways we communicate at a distance, specifically accentuating identity performances and negotiation through absent presence. By focusing on the practices and performances individuals engage in at a distance (i.e. through absent presence), I have detailed the ways we come to know others and ourselves virtually. At the same time, I explained how communicative practices and performances reproduce structures that are understood in context. Mediated by technology and the social interpretations of it, I have attempted to develop a more detailed explanation for technology in context.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Overview

In the previous section I provided a context for virtual communication, particularly detailing how virtual communication is inherent in all communication that occurs over time and space. Furthermore, I explained how virtual communication functions with technology by conceptualizing technology as a text of communication that is dispersed, interpreted, and understood in a context (Jackson, 1996). In discussing technology as a text of communication, I then described how all communication is "virtual" by *virtue* of a negotiated presence and socially accepted interactions that allow us to communicate and operate over time and space. Filtered through Mead's (1934) "taking on the role of the other" and Structuration Theory, the previous section explained virtual communication with sensitivity to the technology of Second Life as an organization full of cultural performances that are realized in interaction.

Based on the developments established in the previous section, I propose the following research questions to guide the analysis of this thesis:

RQ1: In what ways do users of Second Life negotiate a virtual presence?

RQ2: What does the practice of ethnography look like in virtual settings?

Although these questions look at different aspects of Second Life, both of the research questions allow me to contextualize my findings in chapter three and illustrate the claims made in chapter four. In particular, RQ1 led to findings that clarified the role technology

in identity construction and management. At the same time, RQ1 led to findings that illuminated boundary negotiation between both online and offline contexts. In using ethnography in virtual space, RQ2, like RQ1, explicated how the methodology is nuanced as it is employed on online. This included, similar to RQ1, examining virtual representation to detail how communication differs in new media and how the methods of data collection and analysis require a nuanced approach that emphasizes reflexivity and increased sensitivity toward those researched. Guided by these research questions, this chapter goes on to explain the context of the study, the methods for collection, and the methods of analysis performed during this study.

Second Life in Context

Second Life (SL) poses new possibilities for enhancing our understanding of virtual communication and emerging communication technologies. In particular, SL expands the realm of communication research by not only detailing the changing nature of communication technologies, but also explicating how such technologies function over time and space. Using the technology-context scheme proposed by Jackson (1996), this research in SL primarily explored how technology (as text) functions through its material components and through the social elements that drive interpretation. Shaped by these interpretations in diverse contexts, this study of SL also details how individual interpretations backed by cultural performances shape and re-shape the virtual world, thereby producing virtual structures and reproducing real life elements in the virtual world.

Qualitative Methods: Ethnography of Communication

Ethnography has long been employed as a method of study for understanding diverse cultures in new or previously unknown locations. Derived primarily from anthropological studies, ethnography typically involved an outside entity observing a distant location and foreign culture (Goffman, 1989; Hine, 2000; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In its most historic from, ethnography was used to classify cultures through empirical investigations that occurred in the F2F setting (Deegan, 2001; Sanders, 1999; see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Employing participant-observation, ethnographers interacted with their informants by conducting interviews, compiling statistics, and, at times, engaging in the activities of the culture being observed.

Contemporary studies that employ ethnography, however, have adapted the method by eschewing the "scientistic objectivity" of its previous incarnation for a more subjective voice (Sanders, 1999). Thus, contemporary ethnographic studies, while still employing participant observation, attempt to deepen understanding of cultural memberships through holistic description devoid of truth claims (Hine, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; see also LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In particular, contemporary studies attempt to develop "thick" descriptions that fully describe all or most of the relevant aspects of a culture's existence and systems of meaning through participant observation that acknowledges the researcher's perspective qua the perspectives and practices of those researched (Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1989; Hine, 2000; Lindloff & Taylor, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Thus, unlike classical ethnography, contemporary studies that employ ethnography focus on research made *with* cultural members who actively participate with and thereby inform the researcher about the culture.

When employed by communication scholars, ethnography is used to deepen our understanding of "other humans qua members of communication communities" (Mumby, 1997, p. 7). Thus, ethnography of communication (EOC) employs participant observation with the ultimate goal of enriching our understandings of the communicative practices that inform cultural members and shape their culture (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Emphasis is placed on the reception of messages and the resulting interpretations as activated in the continuous flow of communication of the culture (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Redding, 1972). Thus, while message exchange is important in understanding a culture, EOC emphasizes interpretation that constitutes social structure. This emphasis illuminates the relationship between symbolic practices and social structure by detailing how communication allows the culture to function from moment-to-moment in varying contexts (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002; Mumby 1997).

Since Second Life is constituted in both material (i.e. software and technology) and social (i.e. communicative practices and performances) elements, an EOC was applicable as the method of analysis. By engaging in the online world with users of Second Life, this research explored how users manage the software and technology to communicate, but also how their communicative practices constitute their presence, identities, and cultural practices across time and space. Moreover, an EOC affirmed the blended approach of Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) and cultural performances (Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1989; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) by allowing me to describe how individuals engage in and reproduce practices that are made meaningful through negotiation.

Data Collection and Procedures

This section discusses how data was collected for this study. It includes gaining access into Second Life (SL), collecting both online and offline fieldnotes of human and nonhuman texts, collecting both online (virtual) and offline documents, and the justification for conducting participant interviews.

Gaining Access

Linden Labs, the producer of SL, espouses an open policy for people who wish to take part in the virtual world of SL. Although some of the programs available to users are proprietary to Linden Labs, becoming a resident in SL is simply a matter of filling out electronic forms of personal identification, selecting a name and avatar as your presence in SL, and downloading and installing the necessary software. However, because SL is open to anyone of age who is interested in participating in the virtual world, it is a large research site to study. To manage this, I observed and took fieldnotes of the online interactions of one culture of people that I became a member of while within Second Life: "clubbers." In particular, "clubbers" are users that attend dance clubs in SL to meet new people and listen to live music. These users typically engage in the dance club by animating their avatars through a dance sphere or personal animations that enlist their avatar to dance to the music or to quietly sit in a booth and observe others. Additionally, these users actively participate in local events within the space and, in some instances, actively welcome newcomers to the space.

Entering SL and becoming a part of the "dance culture," two disparate processes, engendered intriguing results that helped contextualize the social performances and

practices that allow individuals to communicate with one another virtually. While

entering SL through signing up for a membership granted me access to these

performances and practices, becoming a part of this virtual world through engaging in

communities and coming to know others afforded me the experience to learn, understand,

and contextualize them. Although a neophyte to this virtual world, I engaged in the

process of personal engagement, exploration, negotiation with others and

experimentation that all users do to become residents. As I became a part of this virtual

world, understanding my presence within it and finding others with whom I could share

in these experiences, I developed a sense for the social performances and practices that

allow individuals to communicate with others at a distance.

Moreover, because I participated in SL before the beginning of this research

project, I was able to negotiate access into some groups, like the "clubbing" scene,

through residents with whom I had developed a rapport. This access afforded me insight

into members' interactions and both the formal and informal practices that allow people

to operate within these groups and spaces. Additionally, through both snowball and

convenience sampling, I developed rapport with other informants of the groups and

spaces I attended, helping me further contextualize the rich practices in SL.

Participant Observation

In order to address my research questions, I became a participant observer of both

individuals and groups that I became involved with while within SL. In particular, I

observed both human and nonhuman interactions (i.e. interacts with objects and space) as

they occurred online. Therefore, I treated the world of Second Life as a real-life research

site. I observed and fieldnoted online interactions as they occurred within individual and group settings. Individual settings included virtually co-located discussions and interviews in settings that participants felt most comfortable in such as virtual cafes, clubs, and my virtual apartment. Group settings included spaces where others freely interacted with others by their own volition while also discussing their experiences with me. For example, group settings included dance clubs and bars specifically when participants informed me about how to use objects within the space.

As part of the ongoing participant observation process, I primarily adopted the role of researcher, but as I developed a rapport with my participants, I also participated within the research with my participants. This included performances that were both appropriate and befitting of the group and/or space such as dancing, socializing at the bar, avatar modification, and, to a lesser extent, role-playing. Thus, I developed an evolving persona that: (1) achieved deep insight into identity management and organizational and relational processes through involvement and interaction, and (2) recognized the diverse voices and perspectives of the groups and/or spaces I was a part of as they ultimately spoke for the rich practices at work in this virtual world.

Other online data collected during the participant observation process included organizational documents, such as websites, and visual media such as digital photographs. The primary purpose of the organizational documents I collected was to contextualize organizational practices on a macro-level and then juxtapose them to the micro-level of individual residents and groups. In particular, these documents provided a context for how residents in SL functioned within the virtual world with regard to the ideals espoused by Linden Labs. Due to the itinerant nature of these virtual documents, I

electronically saved and printed copies that were then kept in a secured file in the event that a dispute about authenticity arose.

Visual media including digital photographs were taken and documented with the consent of those being researched. Through the collection of digital photographs, interactions and online practices were frequently detailed and contextualized alongside observations and fieldnotes, as noted in chapter three. Moreover, visual media allowed me verify my presence in the virtual world—my "being there"—by providing a visual artifact of my performances online.

Ultimately, through observing and participating in this virtual world, I was able to collect interviews, visual media, and fieldnotes that allowed me to make sense of the cultural performances and practices operating virtually. Although minimal due in part the time constraints for this study, I learned a great deal about these virtually (re)produced performances and practices. In-world involvement and interaction facilitated rich insights that allowed me to develop an understanding for the relational dynamics and social performances and practices of identity, identification, presence/representation, and agency that allowed me to contextualize and answer RQ1.

Qualitative Interviews

In addition to writing fieldnotes, and collecting online documents and visual media, I conducted ten qualitative interviews with five participants. Although the number of interviews conducted is relatively small, the composite time of all the interviews totaled approximately 23 hours and also resulted in approximately 65 pages of copied transcription from interviews within the virtual world. Also, although unusual, I

interviewed all of my informants in SL as if we were meeting F2F. Moreover, instead of questioning the representation before me, I accepted it as a distinct identity performance from which rich description and insights could be derived. Since I had come to know these people or met them through informants that I came to know well, I felt that they could speak for the social performances and practices that occurred in this virtual world. This not only allowed me to develop a rapport with my informants, which inevitably led to other informants, but also it allowed me to answer RQ2 by illustrating how many of the practices of ethnography can, in fact, be carried into virtual settings.

Again, although the dataset was limited by the number of interviews and by the time-constraints of finishing a thesis in a timely fashion, I believe the data derived from the current study was substantive as key elements of analysis were repeated and clarified in interaction. Of course, some elements of the practices in SL were not fully illuminated due to the time-constraints and data collection period. In such cases, the data was not used or only mentioned briefly in excerpts within chapter three with respect to my participants' experiences. Furthermore, I contextualized the data that was analyzed and repeated in interviews through my personal observations and through visual media collection. Although not fully triangulated, the comparison of data in this cross-section proved substantive in that rich elements of analysis emerged across all three aspects of collection.

These interviews proceeded in a semi-structured fashion with questions that primarily addressed the participant's experiences and perspectives as he or she operated within the research site (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In structuring these interviews, I developed a content model that explored: (a) the arrival of each participant to the virtual

world of SL in an attempt to explore socialization in virtual settings; (b) identity

construction and negotiated presence; (c) similarity and difference in online and offline

identification; and (d) personal histories, experiences, and perspectives of each

participant. Example questions included: "Explain how you became part of Second

Life?"; "How long have you been a resident in Second Life?"; "Would you mind walking

me through your arrival story?"; "How did you become familiar with the world after you

arrived?"; "How did you construct your presence in this world?"; "Could you explain to

me why you chose particular elements for your presence in this world?"; "In what ways

have you altered your presence in this world?"; "How has your presence changed in light

of the interactions and/or encounters you have had with others?"; "Could you explain to

me the ways you let others get to know you?"; "In what ways is your presence in this

world different from your offline presence?"; "How is your presence in this world similar

to your offline presence?"; "Could you explain any elements of your offline presence that

overlap with your presence in this world?"; "In what ways is Second Life liberating to

you?"; "What are your thoughts on "The Big Six" guidelines that govern interaction in

this world?"; and "In what ways do these guidelines affect you?"

In particular, using this content model not only allowed participants to describe

the richness of their presence and roles within SL, but it also allowed participants a

chance to discuss elements of SL unanticipated by the researcher. Therefore, new

elements of analysis were often developed during or after an interview. Ultimately, the

responses derived from each question contributed to a well-rounded content analysis of

each participant and his or her perspective and presence in SL.

Due to the setting of the research site and in conjunction with virtual ethnographic methods (See Boelstorff, 2008; Hine, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), all interviews were digitally transcribed during interaction. These interviews were then downloaded into raw text documents that will be stored in password secured files on my laptop and my external hard drive. To further verify the authenticity of each interview, a photograph and/or screenshot of the researcher and the participant was taken during the interview and complied with the transcribed interview. Participants were at liberty to answer any questions they wanted. Also participants that wished to remain anonymous were coded with an additional pseudonym and concealed identity at their own discretion.

Data Analysis Methods

Following standard ethnographic guidelines (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), participant observation and fieldnotes, document collection, visual media, and interviews were compiled during the data collection process. Due to the virtual settings, data derived from the research site was particularly contextualized through analysis that emphasized communication practices in the virtual context (Hine, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Informed of theoretical perspective of this study, I filtered the data through a process of triangulation and attempted to explain, or at the very least link and clarify, one element of data to others observed and collected (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In particular, the juxtaposition between one type of data and another was used to develop a deeper understanding of Second Life as a space where the tension between one's real-world life and online life come into conflict through interaction. This emphasis was further refined during the collection process and then used to explicate an

understanding of virtual worlds as spaces of negotiation between real-life and virtual-life. In particular, the intent behind these virtual ethnographic methods was to examine the ways in which users treat Second Life as both a virtual space and a real space, and also how they manage this tension through interaction and negotiation.

With substantial data collected and formed into an extensive set, I used a qualitative analysis program created by Dr. Sharlene Hesse-Biber, T. Scott Kinder, and Paul Dupuis, titled "HyperRESEARCH" to code the data with sensitivity to grounded theory. In particular, grounded theory that emphasizes discovery of emergent elements and theoretical development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, analyzed data was first examined and coded for repetitions, metaphors and analogies, and theory-related material using word lists and key words in context (KWIC) in the attempt to develop categories that clarify the findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In particular, data was openly coded as "each incident compares to other incidents" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219), thereby developing clear categories while attempting to establish relationships among codes and categories. During this stage of the data analysis, categories were established and ascribed attributes that allowed them to be clarified and easily understood. Also during this process some categories were collapsed into other categories due to similar attributes noticed in incident comparison and frequency. Concurrently, data was also coded through *in vivo coding* that emphasized key terms used by social actors (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). While these codes were somewhat "fuzzy" or ambiguous due to their localized meanings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 215), cultural insider knowledge I have developed through participant observation and member-checking clarified these concepts, constructs, and

themes, categorizing them into more definitive categories. All coded data was filtered through a codebook, facilitated by HyperRESEARCH, that listed all categories, codes, annotations and examples of each category, and the a short description of the "decision rule" used to classify a code into a category (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Once emergent categories were developed, classified, and sorted in order of prevalence and prominence, I attempted to make connections between the categories through the processes of integration and dimensionalization (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This process emphasizes reshaping categories in an attempt to develop greater meanings for each category, as well as produce new categories or themes that span multiple categories. To accomplish this task, axial coding was used to explicate causal conditions, context, action and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Ultimately, axial coding was used in an attempt to unite previously separate categories in order to explicate the data in theoretically sound ways of knowing.

As categories become theoretical constructs/themes grounded in the data, I then attempted to engage in the process of dimensionalization. At this point, each construct was examined again and referenced to the incidents that composed it in an attempt to tease out variations or dimensions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In particular, this process led to the dimensions of the two overarching themes "Virtual Incarnation" and "More than just Meat and Bone and Coursing Hormones" detailed in chapter three. Given the time constraints of this study, though, these themes were not developed to the point of "theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather, these themes were substantially

developed with sensitivity to the participants' experiences and perspectives and then filtered through the theoretical framework previously discussed in chapter one. Ultimately the data was reasonably developed to a point where overarching themes were developed in such a way that substantive claims, backed in the findings, were made with regard to communication research.

Using the rich analysis derived from grounded theory as practiced through ethnography of communication, I go on to explain the social practices at work in the virtual context. In the next chapter, informed of social practices as performed in the online world of Second Life, I go on to describe and explain these practices, particularly focusing on communication as the generative process through which these performances occur in varying contexts. In particular, I detailed how these social practices construct and shape individual identities through continuous negotiation. As clarified in the next chapter, the process of continual negotiation renders the individual, the context, and the individual's "soul" present in interaction. At the same time, the next chapter clarifies the duality of structure and action by illustrating communicative practices performed in SL that allow users to function over time and space.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

How is it possible for individuals to come to know one another and organize when virtually distributed across vast spans of time and space? Research on virtual spaces tends to focus on communication technology (the Second Life software in this case) in one of two ways: virtual spaces are technologically determined (i.e. that is determined by the inherent material properties of the technology) (Fulk & Collins-Jarvis, 2001; Rice, Collins-Jarvis & Zydney-Walker, 1999) or socially determined (i.e. that technology use and the creation of virtual space is a social construction process) (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Walther, 1992). Recently, research has refocused the empirical lens upon the balance of both of these research perspectives in that both the material properties and the social construction process influence both the material and social elements in technology use (Crider & Ganesh, 2004; Jackson, 1996; Leonardi, Jackson & Nelson Marsh, 2004). In the case of Second Life (SL), this empirical balance contributes to an understanding of the construction of virtual organizational spaces by illuminating the active processes through which individuals experience the virtual setting and shape its organizational practices.

I begin this section by adumbrating the themes developed in my exploration of SL as a virtual organizational space. I then clarify the dimensions of each theme, using the voices of my participants while also relying on my participant-observations to help me tell the story of SL. I am particularly sensitive to my participants' experiences, detailing only the pertinent information they allowed me to share. Finally, I explain how the

findings illustrate the claims made herein and urge for an empirically balanced approach that examines both the material and social elements in technology use.

An Overview of Themes

Entering and becoming a part of Second Life (SL), two disparate processes, engender intriguing results that helped contextualize both the social performances and practices and the manipulation of the technical artifact that allow individuals to operate within a shared virtual space. Through participant observations, fieldnotes and interviews, a substantive dataset was formed. Through the lens of grounded theory, this dataset was soon analyzed using both open and *in vivo* coding. By focusing on keywords in context and then cross-referencing them to other components of the dataset, codes and categories became apparent. As the codes and categories became solidified, contextualized across the dataset, themes emerged that illuminate the active processes at work within SL.

Two major themes developed during the analysis of data in this study. The first theme, "Virtual Incarnation," became apparent through participant-observation documented in fieldnotes and residents' descriptions about the active process of identity negotiation in this virtual world. Beginning with an initial interest in SL, residents explained the process of visiting the official website (www.secondlife.com), downloading the software, entering the Grid for the first time, learning how to "get by" through "roaming around" and searching for places and people of interest, and then finally learning how to fully customize their presence in-world. While each resident's had

unique experiences, all of the residents described similar events affiliated with entering and becoming a part of the virtual world.

The second theme, "More than Meat and Bone and Coursing Hormones," developed less transparently. Coupled with but separate from "Virtual Incarnation," residents' descriptions about in-world relationships revealed deeper elements of the organizational processes at work in SL, as well as intricate aspects behind the active process of identity negotiation. As residents shared experiences and mutually self-disclosed to one another, they became closer in the form of community members, friends, family members and intimate couples. Residents' descriptions of these increasingly intricate and involved aspects of identity negotiation further illuminated the emotional and intellectual connections that developed as residents began to renegotiate the boundaries of their in-world relationships between one another and the repercussions they faced both in-world and in real life. Since each resident's experiences occurred differently with those they developed intimate relationships, each was considered in context and compared only through the intensity of emotion and connection forged in becoming intimate.

Virtual Incarnation

Unlike the F2F situation where an individual's presence is immediately discerned in the "here and now" of his or her physical presence and taken for granted as an objective reality, an individual's presence in the virtual space of SL is constantly negotiated (Dibbell, 1993; Pearce, 2006; see also Gajjala, 2002). From the moment an individual selects his or her initial avatar in the registration process, his or her presence is

the subject of continual negotiation that he or she and others will construct in interaction.

In entering the Grid, the individual not only makes sense of the virtual space of SL

through questioning, discussing and negotiating it with others, but also continually

"becomes" as others interact with him or her. As the individual continues to make sense

of the virtual world and as others continually come to know the presence before them, the

persona of the individual becomes materialized in negotiation. Thus, the individual's

presence becomes "virtually incarnated" when it is understood beyond the observation of

his or her appearance and is, instead, apprehended in negotiation that occurs in the

following three dimensions: (a) Entering the Grid, (b) Getting By and Becoming A Part

of the Place, and (c) Personified Incarnation.

Entering the Grid

The first dimension of virtual incarnation involves the active process of "entering

the Grid." This begins when interested individuals first encounter Second Life's website

at www.secondlife.com and begin the registration process when they click the button

titled "Get Started. Free Download." From here, incoming "potentials" create a username

by typing in a first name of their choice and selecting from a list of preset last names.

Incoming potentials are then directed to enter their real birthday and e-mail address,

allowing SL to "verify" their age and place them in the age-appropriate grid (Figure

A.1).[2] After entering this information, incoming users are taken to the next page where

they are free to select their virtual representation from a variety of basic ready-made

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[2] Second Life has two "grids" or virtual worlds. One is for adolescent residents under the age of 18 and the other is for adult residents 18 and older. The birthday verification that occurs on this page is the only verification for age that occurs, so it is possible for adults to be in the adolescent grid and for adolescents to be in the adult grid.

avatars (also known as "avs") that include male, female and furry (feline-like human) representations (Figure A.2). Once the individual selects a basic ready-made avatar, he or she is then taken to a page where they must agree to the Terms of Service (TOS) offered by Linden Labs and realized in the Grid. After agreeing to the TOS, the individual is propositioned to upgrade to a premium account, but for most who are not educators or business people, this is unnecessary unless one desires to own land.[3] The interested individual then continues on to the next page where the software of SL automatically begins downloading on his or her computer. Since the file is approximately 70.5 megabytes, it takes a while before a person officially enters the virtual world.

Once the software is successfully downloaded and installed, the interested individual is ready to enter the world. Booting the program and signing in through the application, the interested individual enters the "new" world and is digitally reborn, embodied as the avatar he or she chose during the registration, naked then rapidly clothed on Orientation Island. Before the newcomer can do anything, though, a display immediately pops up on their screen. This display is titled "The 'Big Six' Behaviors" and it is here that users become informed of with the formal rules for conduct in SL. During this time the newcomer is expected to read through this display and take note of the now detailed six behaviors they are supposed to eschew: intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure (of others without their permission), indecency, and disturbing the peace. Of course, users can simply scroll to the bottom of this display and completely avoid reading

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[3] Premium accounts are billed monthly, quarterly or annually and allow a user to buy and own land. Basic account holders cannot buy land, but can rent it and build on it. Educators and businesses receive a 50% discount on land purchases. Linden Labs also kicks back some money in the form of Linden Dollars (L$) to premium account holders to help them build on their lands, but also, as many informants noted, to help spur the economy of Second Life.

the document altogether. Thus, while Linden Labs attempts to make the rules known, understood and clear, each user, guided by his or her own volition, will ultimately make sense of the world in their own way. Whatever the user decides to do at this point, he or she must click "I Accept" before being let loose to inchoately move through Orientation Island.

A map of this island instantly appears on the screen in the upper right corner—its border, illuminated. The interested individual quickly learns from another pop-up message that the island has four parts and that they must complete various tasks in order to get a puzzle piece from each part of the island. It is here that the interested individual must begin the socialization or, rather, indoctrination process. This particular process of learning how to operate in the world does not occur through others, though. Urged on by the various pop-up messages that appear when entering different parts of the island, the individual must actively work through the four-piece puzzle aided by his or her volition and the software. The user can start at any part of the island he or she wants, but he or she must complete the three tasks on each part of the island in order to obtain the puzzle piece for that section. In roaming the island each incoming user learns to modify his or her appearance by learning how change the avatar's clothes, body shape and size, as well as sex (Figure A.3). Users also learn how to move, specifically how to walk, run and fly, as well as how to operate objects like cars (Figure A.4). Finally, users also learn how to talk and use social actions by using the keypad (and microphone), as well as "/action" which emotes a particular action from the communication screen. Thus, as the individual moves around and engages in the four parts of the island, he or she learns how to operate as a functional member of this virtual society as socialized by the software.

When the tasks are completed and the puzzle pieces obtained, the individual process of becoming a part of SL is complete. Since the user has actively worked the puzzle at large, it is assumed that he or she "knows" the basic functions that allow him or her to operate in and navigate the world of SL. The Grid opens to the user and he or she is free to go almost anywhere even though he or she probably has no clue where to go or what to do. If the individual process of becoming a part of SL leaves the user alienated, he or she may choose to leave. If, however, the user ventures into the Grid, the socialization process continues through others. The user begins to interact with places and people he or she finds, becoming familiar with the world and continually learning the full extent of his or her functionality in the Grid.

Therefore, for those that stick around and survive the initial shock and senselessness of this virtual world, the processes of roaming and searching become the ways they interact in the virtual world. As users continue to navigate the world, they also become increasingly familiar with movement and operation functions beyond the software guides on Orientation Island through their individual interactions in the world. Choosing particular events and places of interest, users also actively find areas that they enjoy frequenting. Over time users begin to meet others in these places and start interacting with them. As users socialize with one another, new users learn more sophisticated operations for how to "get by" within particular places and also in the virtual world. Through continual interaction, users come to actively negotiate one another's presence, becoming present and, later, known to each other through shared experiences and mutual self-disclosure. Ultimately users that stick around and learn the

functions of "getting by" begin to see themselves as part of the virtual world, affiliated with the places and people they interact with that render their identity online.

Getting By and Feeling A Part of the Place

The second dimension of virtual incarnation begins as users interact within the Grid, figuring out how to "get by" through actively finding places and people that further socialize them and, later, render them present to one another. Left with few devices after completing the socialization process on Orientation Island, new users are ushered into a world without a sense of purpose. Although new users "know," by virtue of the procedural tasks on Orientation Island, how to "get by" in this world, the actual process of "getting by" becomes a series of personal actions whereby users navigate through the virtual world and, if they stick around long enough, come to understand their relation to it. Thus, while Orientation Island attempts to prepare new users for life in the Grid, the rough and tumble experience of "roaming around" becomes the means through which users "get by," coming to identify with places and people, and ultimately making sense of the virtual world.

After Orientation Island, the world becomes widely available to the new user in such a way that he or she likely has no idea where to go or what to do. While the new user is free to go almost anywhere on the Grid as long as the land is not private and as long as he or she obeys the rules in place on the lands he or she visits, it is likely that the new user begins, instead, by taking account of the familiar yet foreign landscape immediately surrounding him or her. It is here, while noticing the digital flora and fauna,

the new user begins to see Second Life for what it is: a new world where almost anything is possible.

New users now have a fundamental choice to make that will determine what becomes of their digital self. Compelled by curiosity, new users can choose to begin their existence in this familiar yet foreign world, or, doubting its purpose and annoyed by the character operations, they can choose to leave and potentially never return. It is at this pivotal moment that the reality of Second Life comes to bear on the new user: the world in SL is either recognized as an artificial re-creation of the real world with overly-complex controls or the new user begins to suspend disbelief in the artificiality, slowly learning how to become part of this world through interacting within it and negotiating with others.

Although the actual number of users that leave at this point in the process is unknown,[4] it is clear that those that choose to become part of this world develop a sense for it through a process of personal trial and error that begins with "roaming around." It is during this process that users explore the virtual world around them with curiosity. Often relying on the Search feature or hopping from island to island, users attempt to find something that intrigues them and, eventually, establishes a connection to this world. As Magdalena, an informant, details in the following excerpt, roaming around is the rudimentary process that allows users to find places and people that interest them in such a way that they come to see themselves as part of this virtual world:

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[4] It is interesting to note that while media reports estimate 1.2 million people or more use Second Life, the actual reportage for residents that log in to Second Life on a weekly basis is only between 300,000 to 800,000. Moreover, no clear statistics can be found for the number of unique users that are part of Second Life. In other words, of the 300,000-800,000 "users" that log in on a weekly basis, it is unclear how many are from a single unique user operating multiple avatar accounts (Shirky, 2006). Thus, the number of "try me" users (i.e. users who enter and leave shortly after entering) is unknown as much as the number of residents is obscured.

> [14:31] Magdalena: It took me a long time to get into the steampunk communities.
> [14:32] Magdalena: But before that, I roamed around.
> [14:32] Magdalena: Used to look at the Event listings in Search and would go to anything that had to deal with storytelling or discussion.
> [14:33] Magdalena: Found a wonderful community with a Halloween/Lovecraft theme called The October Country. They would stream radio plays 24/7 and held weekly dances.
> [14:34] Magdalena: I got to know people there, ended up living there for a while, even worked there as a greeter.

Similar to moving to a new location in real life, SL requires new users to find places and people they enjoy based on personal interest. While "Event" listings in the Search feature may point new users toward sites of interest, much like a real world welcoming guide, users must ultimately build their own connections to this world through personal volition and a measure of hap and circumstance. In Magdalena's case, this meant searching for places that included storytelling and discussion, which luckily led her to "The October Country" where she found a community teeming with vibrant individuals who shared in her interests. It is here that she was able to bond with people, facilitated by the atmosphere of the island, and eventually call it home—a residence where she logged into and out of SL. Thus, as Magdalena's experiences illuminate, SL can interest users to become active agents in what they wish to get out of this virtual world through a process of engagement, exploration, negotiation and experimentation.

Although the process is somewhat tedious, marked by learning new controls and functions, it is not too terribly different from, say, entering college in a new location after high school. Let me clarify this analogy, as there are similarities and differences. In order to make sense of the virtual world, much like entering college for the first time, each user must engage in the process by making sense of their surroundings. Although the learning curve is slightly higher for SL, as users must learn new controls, the basic principle is the

same as in real life: newcomers must come to affiliate themselves with the new space they have entered in order to operate within it.

Therefore, as an individual navigates the new space and affiliates him or herself with it, this individual begins to develop a deeper sense for their surroundings by exploring what is available to them. This includes finding places of interest and understanding the functions of how to get by on a daily basis. In the college experience this would be tantamount to figuring out where the cafeteria, classrooms, and administration building are located, while also learning what it means to be a *college* student. Of course, this does not occur in a vacuum. The individual learns the whereabouts of specific places and what it means to be a part of the new space through personal trial and error and also through negotiation with others, which is facilitated by an immediately discernable presence.

Yet, unlike the real life college setting, newcomers to the virtual world must also actively negotiate and contextualize the space too. In other words, we take for granted the college setting as an objective reality because it is immediately present in the here and now; we can see it and physically experience it by ourselves and with others who facilitate affiliation with and contextualization of the space in co-location. In SL, however, we do not take the setting for granted. Rather, in order to affiliate with and contextualize the place, we again render it present through interaction. In other words, newcomers make sense of space in SL by negotiating it and their presence with others. Otherwise it is merely nonsensical visuals on the screen. Thus, as users enter a new space, they actively work to incarnate it through their interactions. Here users come to realize the visual manifestations before them through personal experimentation and

negotiation with others that contextualizes the space. As users continue to interact within

the space and with others, they also become incarnated to others through the negotiation

of their presence. As Misty, another informant, explains in the following excerpt that

contextualizes this process in SL, feeling "a part of the place" occurs when a new user

interacts within the space and comes to know others who then provide context to the new

user through continual negotiation and shared experiences:

> [The blues club] was not my favorite place at all until I acquired a number
> of friends there. Then I felt "a part" of the place [. . . .] I was probably at
> [the blues club] about 3 or 4 times a month, and I would say that I
> probably made one new friend each visit and I would estimate that by the
> time I had made, say, 5 or 6 friends there, I started going more often on
> the chance I would run into any of them.

Thus, the virtual space and the self become realized as the newcomer experiences the

space through both personal exploration and negotiation with others who contextualize

the setting while also participating in the user's presence through shared interactions.

To further illustrate this process, I have included an excerpt from my fieldnotes

that details the level of familiarity acquired in actively negotiating space. I pay heed to

the character functions that I learned on my own and through others who provided

context for operating within the dance club (i.e. the virtual setting). As you'll notice in

this typical interaction in SL, I eventually became comfortable enough with the

technology that I was able to use it for multiple purposes. Ultimately, I became "a part of

the place" in such a way that character operations, interactions, and various settings were

not only familiar, they were second nature (Figure A.5 and Figure A.6):

> It is a quiet Thursday evening in early February at my real life
> residence, but I'm not interested in what is happening here. Instead, my
> thoughts are drawn to my computer sitting in front of me at my coffee
> table where the login screen to Second Life (SL) is open, displaying a
> random image of a landscape covered in snow while a young woman

dressed in a pink fur coat holds a snowball in her hand. As I enter my avatar's name and password and click "Login," the login screen fades to black as a grayish-indigo loading bar appears in the middle of the screen. The screen now quickly displays the last location I was in while in-world as the loading bar continues to fill up, closing in on finally loading.

When the loading completes, I find myself in my apartment, an amorphous blob standing on something as the world begins to rez[5] in around me. My skin, hair, and clothes load quickly, now forming a more defined representation of me in-world, while the apartment slowly comes into focus. In a matter of seconds, my immediate surroundings are clear: the landscape is fully detailed and the objects are clearly fashioned and textured. I'm standing on my bed, the last place I was when I logged out previously from SL.

I move forward, stepping off the bed while quickly taking in the seaside view from my apartment. As I walk down the stairs, I hear an airy "ding" that denotes a friend is online. While I am almost certain it is Christy, my friend I am planning to meet, I cannot verify this until I open my Friends window by right clicking on myself and then navigating the dark gray pie-chart that appears in the middle of the screen. As I move my cursor to the slice that says "Friends. . ." and click on it, my Friends window pops up. Chrity's name is bolded, indicating she is online. I click on her name in this window and it opens into a communication window akin to something you would find in either a chatroom or in an instant messaging program:

[20:32] Erik: Hey! Want to go to [the blues club]?
[20:32] Christy: Sure. I will meet you there.

With confirmation, I open my Inventory by clicking on the little button titled "Inventory" on my screen. A new window opens, this one listing all the contents I carry with me as Erik. Since I'm interested in meeting Christy at the blue's club, I effortlessly navigate to my Landmarks and find the one that will take me to the blues club where I will meet Christy. I double click on it, commanding the landmark to teleport me to the blues club.

Another airy "ding" signals the teleport and my screen goes black as a loading bar appears, detailing my arrival to the new location. When the loading completes, my character appears in the middle of the screen while the rest of the world begins to rez in slowly. The blues club is a relatively popular place with high traffic depending on the time of day, so rezzing can take a little longer than it does in other locations.

After a couple of minutes, the world around me is fully detailed. Walking toward the blues club, I begin to look for Christy. The doors

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[5] "Rez" or "rezzing" is a common expression used in SL that refers to making an object appear, as well as creating an object. In this particular instance, the world is rezzing in—appearing around me—as objects become clearer, defined and textured. When an individual logs into SL and when they enter new locations, he or she typically has to wait a few seconds while the world "rezzes in."

automatically swing open as I enter. Eric Clapton's "After Midnight" floats through the air of this jovial, but dark club. The ambiance is not depressing or gloomy though, rather the navy brick walls, lively music, and hopping dance floor emote a spirited yet smoky vibe. Vinyl records and posters adorn the walls, contributing to this vibrant place and, as usual, the dance floor has at least 20 people swinging, sliding, and simply having a good time. I don't see Christy in the mix, though.

As I turn to left, moving toward the bar here, I notice Christy sitting at a booth. Her figure appears cubic from a distance, but as I draw closer, her shape becomes softer and rounded. She stands, her black skirt-top swaying as she moves forward. Her face becomes clearer, illuminating her deep blue eyes, and her fiery auburn hair moves slightly with each step she takes closer to me.

[20:40] Erik: Good to see you! Ready to dance?

[20:41] Christy: Of course!

[20:41] Erik: I'll get the dance ball[6].

I quickly reposition my view inside the club, now looking at the ceiling for one of the rainbow colored dance spheres labeled "Couples" in the top center of the club. When I find one, I right click on it and navigate the window that pops up. As I click on the "Couples" button in this window, two smaller spheres, one blue and one pink, instantly appear around where I am standing.

I reposition my view again, now focusing on the space between Christy and I. As I touch the blue sphere, another pop-up appears asking to animate my avatar. I click "Animate" and start dancing some sort of dance. At first it looks strange, since the pink sphere is moving around me alone, but as soon as Christy clicks on the pink sphere that animates her avatar, we move effortlessly on the dance floor as if we both knew how to swing dance.

[20:43] Erik: So how have you been?

[20:44] Christy: You know, busy. It's good to see you, though. You?

[20:44] Erik: I am well, and it is great to see you too.

The music plays on as we dance together, our conversation continuing into the night as if we were standing right next to each other.

Undergoing the same process of engagement, exploration, negotiation, and

experimentation detailed by Magdalena and Misty, as well as other informants, I learned

[6] "Dance balls" or "dance spheres" are user-generated objects with operational codes that, with individually granted permission, animate your avatar. The smaller spheres discussed in this example are the "place holders" for the animation through which the avatar is brought to life—moving based on what the operational codes prescribe it to do. Animation spheres are typically used for dynamic movement animations, such as dancing, and can also used for other objects in-world, such as amusement park rides and sex beds.

how to operate within the virtual world. While the virtual world was hard to navigate at first, I eventually experimented with the technology and learned new controls that allowed me to function more coherently. Moreover, once I mastered the controls, the virtual world became a place where I resided. I rented an apartment for the duration of the project where I not only conducted research, but also met with others and enjoyed their company from time to time.

Ultimately, an individual makes sense of the virtual world through the process of engagement, exploration, negotiation, and experimentation, coming to know the practices and operations for getting by. As an individual recognizes others as an integral part of his or her presence in the virtual world, he or she also learns what it means to be a resident of SL. It is during this time of negotiation and experimentation that the individual sees how others look and notices how they interact in this world. If the user feels compelled, and this is typically the case the longer the user wishes to be a part of the Grid, he or she will likely change his appearance from the basic ready-made avatar at this point, now learning in-depth how to modify his or her digital representation to fit "who [they] want to be" in form and interaction.

Personified Incarnation

The third dimension of virtual incarnation occurs when the individual, adept in the character functions, modifies his or her avatar so as to project a personal representation of him or herself in-world. While the basic ready-made avatar facilitates in-world communication and allows a user to navigate the world of Second Life, the basic representation selected when entering the world of SL begins to lack personality

once a user starts to *become* part of the world. At this point the user realizes that the

initial representation is, in fact, too basic—it is dull and fails to encompass how they "see

themselves to be." Thus, users, having explored the world and having been exposed to

others, typically "create a look" for their avatar that is personalized "based on how [they]

want to look."

During this time, users consciously search for items to modify their avatar (Figure

A.7 and Figure A.8). Whether they create their own modifications, find "freebies," or go

to a store, users seek skins, shapes, hairs, clothes and other accessories that allow them to

represent themselves as they see themselves to be. Free to alter their appearances in every

way imaginable, users create a look with which they personally identify. Actively

selecting their modifications from the available resources, users construct an image of

self they believe best represents them. Whether users choose a look that is similar or

dissimilar to their real life self, they become attached to their digital representation.

Personifying it through individual tailoring, users eventually become invested in their

digital representation in such a way that they identify as the avatar in the virtual space.

As Magdalena highlights in the excerpt below, avatar modification is a process

whereby users search for items that allow them to create a look and become attached to

the personalized representation they produce:

> I wanted my avatar to be a fantasy version of me. It took over a month, but
> I finally had enough money to buy a nice African-American skin and a
> couple of hairs. I've always based my appearance on how I want to look[.
> . .]and yes, I have many different looks but this is my core avatar.

Magdalena, a highly involved resident of SL, notes that avatar modification is, in part, a

"fantasy version" of the self extended virtually. It is here that we are clued into the notion

that people can and do create representations that are wholly dissimilar from their

physical real life selves. Since users have the power to create and manipulate their representation with the appearance editors and an unending number of skins, shapes, and hair, users can become whoever or, as is the case of furries, "steampunk" machine-people, and unworldly and mythical beings, whatever they want from whatever the system allows. Yet, Magdalena also makes one incredibly important statement regarding digital representation that is echoed by others in SL: the idea of a core avatar. While Magdalena has many different looks—while she can easily change her appearance to one form or another—she retains a core look that is her virtual incarnation. Other residents, as Powers details in the excerpt below, also confirmed this:

> [My avatar] has looked like this since Oct of 07. This is the form [I return] to. I have maybe 60 other avs that I use, but THIS is Powers. I do this as a "comfort" thing[. . .]besides, this is what my friends look for when they look for Powers.

Thus, the core avatar is the virtual incarnation—the self (as discussed at present) *now becoming* embodied on-screen—that the user sees as him or herself in the virtual world. As Magdalena's excerpt details in part, a youthful African-American woman with a unique sense of style is this "core look" that Magdalena sees herself to be. This look *is* Magdalena "translated" from real life to her "second" life. Yet, Magdalena can and does take on other forms that represent her, with the important distinction that they are a look—a sort of derivation from the core—that she engages in for entertainment, as the figures (Figure A.9 and Figure A.10) and short excerpt detail:

> [14:50] Erik: And the second picture?
> [14:50] Magdalena: That was for a party!
> [14:50] Erik: It looks more advanced, almost something out of Final Fantasy!
> [14:51] Magdalena: One of my favorite dance clubs, Drama Libre, has a rotating theme.

[14:51] Magdalena: And they rebuild the parcel[7] every week to match the theme.
[14:52] Magdalena: Recently, the theme was Madhatter's Tea Party.
[14:52] Erik: Oh that must've been a blast!
[14:53] Magdalena: And so I put together that avatar. I already had the Tiny bunny and the dress. And I have a friend who gives me a copy of almost everything he builds, which is how I got the axe.
[14:53] Magdalena: I just bought a tiara and asked on one of the steampunk group chats if anyone had a full-perm heart I could link to the axe.
[14:53] Magdalena: Voila.
[14:54] Erik: Equipped with stopwatch and all!
[14:55] Magdalena: Heh. My backstory was that I was the secret lovechild of the Queen of Hearts and the White Rabbit.
[14:55] Erik: Hahah! How inventive!
[14:56] Magdalena: I'm not much of a builder or a dedicated roleplayer, but I find playing with whimsical personas fun.

As Magdalena details above while describing role-playing at a party, while it is possible to "shapeshift" and become "anything," most residents that are highly involved in SL retain a core look that they and others know them to be. In essence, then, the donning of other looks acts much like wearing a costume for Halloween. Anyone can appear to be different, masking oneself for a specific purpose, but attempting to continue such a persona for an extended amount of time, while fun, is also taxing. Although it is possible to continue wearing the mask, most informants noted that dedicated residents typically return to a core look that "reflects their real life self" in the virtual world. This self is the core—the "real true self" experienced virtually—and it is through this representation that individuals experience the virtual world for better or worse.

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[7] Parcels are typically "slices" of land or parts of an island "rented" to an individual from a landowner. The parcel that Magdalena is referring to is a part of an island in Second Life.

More than just Meat and Bone and Coursing Hormones

When the individual's presence is apprehended in negotiation with others in this virtual world, his or her persona becomes materialized. Continually interacting within the space of Second Life, the individual's presence becomes incarnated in the form of the avatar. Once virtually incarnated, the individual becomes experienced in others through continual negotiation. As this occurs, the individual's persona moves beyond their representation on the screen and becomes known through shared experiences and mutual self-disclosure. The individual and those he or she continually interacts with begin to identify with one another. Over time and through varying degrees of intimate interaction, they come to see each other as distinct people dispersed across time and space in the following two dimensions: (a) Becoming "Soulful," and (b) Coming Together and Coming Apart.

Becoming "Soulful"

The first dimension of this theme occurs when the individual, virtually incarnated in continual negotiation with others, becomes known beyond his or her digital representation. Revealing more about him or herself through shared experiences with others and mutual self-disclosure, the individual begins to experience others and they, in turn, experience the individual. As the interactions become more intimate, they become "soulful" when they understand one another as unique beings extended virtually.

When the individual and the other progress beyond the vicarious manifestations on screen—interacting more intimately over time—they begin to uncover the "true self" of one another. This occurs when the individual sees him or herself in-world through

their avatar and communicates to others though this representation. Although the motivations behind creating a specific look are as unique as the people in Second Life, avatar modification is one of the primary ways people experiment in-world and, naturally, become attached to their avatars. And while it is possible to keep the ready-made avatar look, most users who return to SL frequently or who are heavily involved in SL (i.e. "residents" or "dedicated users") choose to modify their avatars because they want a look that "reflects their real life self," as Misty describes in the following excerpt:

> [20:38] Misty: I was not interested in becoming a part of any community. I mainly wanted to create a look that reflected my rl personality and age.
> [20:38] Erik: And you went about that searching for items that reflected that, correct?
> [20:39] Misty: yes - maybe not so deliberately, but as I look back on it, yes. I didn't like the way most girls dressed, and figured out they were quite young, so searched for a more
> [20:39] Misty: sofisticated [sic] look.

Indeed, even when users modify their avatar as a "fantasy version" of themselves through becoming feline-like "furries," "steampunk" machine-people, comic book superheroes or mythical beings, to name only a few, they often retain a core look—a "core avatar"—that functions as their personalized primary representation through which they experience the virtual world. Thus, users become attached to their avatars in SL through the modification process that goes beyond changing appearances. As users create or choose from the available avatar skins, shapes, hairs, and clothes, they construct a representation that is a virtual incarnation of the self. It is this virtual incarnation—usually in the form of a core avatar—that not only allows users to be comfortable in their digital skin, but also acts as the real life self in virtual space.

However, attachment to the self represented online is, obviously, not enough if we are to understand the deep practices at work in the virtual world of SL. If attachment as it

has been described herein were all it took to be a part of this virtual world, then there would be no need for individuals to interact with others. Users would, instead, create and modify their digital representation much like a role-playing game, selecting the sex, character class, and style as they saw fit, before continuing on by interacting with computerized artificial intelligence lacking a spirit, or, as one informant noted, "a soul."

Let me elucidate. If a resident of a virtual world like SL is to fully become a part of the virtual world, he or she must do more than become attached to his or her virtual representation. As users "create a look" that functions as the real life self translated in virtual space something else is going on. While creating a look functions as an experimental and an almost ritualistic practice that allows a dedicated user (i.e. a resident) to become who he or she sees him or herself to be, thereby becoming virtually incarnate in this new world, it is also a step in moving beyond the physicality of the real life self. As Magdalena details in the following excerpt, operating as "soulful beings," or "becoming 'soulful'," is about going beyond the physicality of real life and becoming deeply engaged with others in such a way that we become collectively whole while individually separate:

> My Human 2.0 "thesis" is that we like to think of ourselves as soulful
> beings. We are more than just meat and bone and coursing hormones.
> Immersing ourselves in online environments give us the feeling that we
> can truly be ourselves without the needs and the constrictures [sic] of the
> "meat" to hold us back. We can be who our mind's eye think [sic] we are
> or are meant to be, which can make us a bit more vulnerable. It's one thing
> to be rejected for having a plain face or a heavy body. To be rejected or
> spurned when we are trying to be the best version of ourselves. . . it hurts
> tremendously.

In other words, in order to become "soulful" the user must not only render present and consciously negotiate a body and a context, he or she must also render a soul. As the data

demonstrate, this occurs through the avatar modification process—a form of experimentation—whereby users "create a look" for their avatar that becomes the core representation through which they experience the world. This core representation is more than a personalized manifestation though; it becomes a symbolic representation of their soul. Thus, users do not simply negotiate what they look like, but rather the act of personifying their incarnation is also about symbolically representing their soul. This is the representation of the self as "our mind's eye think [sic] we are or are meant to be" and it becomes realized in continued interactions with others over time.

As others see and recognize the representation of self that is presented to them, the user becomes known, interpreted, and understood over time through continual engagement and negotiation with others. The ongoing dialogue that ensues between the user and another begins to draw both closer as they share interests and experiences. Eventually the user and the other become integrated as social actors in this virtual world, connected through the various places they attend together and their shared experiences. Once this occurs, the individual and the other begin to move beyond mere perceptual recognition and social engagement—the social interactions that occur between both parties start to develop into something deeper.

It is at this point that the user and the other come to know each other beyond the digital manifestations operated by someone behind the screen; they come to see each other as the real self virtually incarnated. This occurs through a dynamic process of communication between the individual and the other whereby both parties participate in one other. This means the individual and the other negotiate and interpret what each other means through communicating with one another in such a way that they begin to see their

self within the other. Although separate, the individual and the other witness their self in

the other through communicating commonalities; this eventually allows both the

individual and the other to identify with one another. It is here that the individual and the

other become realized—understood as conscious beings—as a part of the other,

constituted within the other and affected by the other, yet separate and individually

whole. As Magdalena contextualizes in the following excerpt, SL facilitates the notion of

becoming "soulful" by allowing individuals to build deep connections with others

through shared experiences and admiration for one another:

> [15:48] Magdalena: The great thing about SL is that it can be a blank
> canvas for you to create .... something.
> [15:48] Erik: True.
> [15:48] Magdalena: And if you do it well ... you can gain appreciation ...
> a sense of accomplishment ... groupies, even. :D
> [15:49] Erik: Haha! I bet!
> [15:49] Erik: Actually, I have seen it in some lands.
> [15:49] Magdalena: That applies to whether you build houses, make
> dresses, DJ, script, make art ...
> [15:50] Magdalena: And the communities I've seen here encourage all of
> that. And it can allow people to 'geek out' in ways they may not have
> access to in RL.
> [15:51] Erik: I can totally see that!
> [15:51] Magdalena: In one of the steampunk communities, it's not rare for
> someone to announce publicly, "I love you guys ..."
> [15:52] Magdalena: Maybe it's because a bunch of people have come to
> the person's aid.
> [15:52] Magdalena: Maybe it's because they just told a joke that no one
> they know in RL gets but a bunch of people here understood and
> appreciated heartily.
> [15:53] Magdalena: Maybe a massive session of silly punning and in-
> jokes has just concluded with people rollicking with laughter in RL.
> [15:54] Magdalena: Of course, as with all other communities, there are
> arguments, upsets, gossip, backbiting, people breaking away. We tend to
> put it all under the umbrella of 'drama'.

Thus, the process of becoming "soulful" occurs, as Magdalena notes, through coming to

know others and becoming connected to them in ways that are not available in the same

way in real life. By using the technology to "geek out" and reveal a part of the self that is rarely seen in real life, an individual is able to open up to others and feel accepted for what he or she finds personally interesting. If an individual possesses skills and talents or learns them in SL, he or she can also be further valued, appreciated for their accomplishments in the virtual world in a gratifying way that is not easily obtained in real life.

It is here that the individual and the other become known to each other, connected and "vulnerable" through their mutual self-disclosure and shared experiences. As the individual and the other become more intimate with each other through integrating and bonding with one another, they foster deeper connections that allow them to develop a heightened sense for the real life self that becomes all the more apparent through continued shared interactions. This is when, as Misty clarifies, both the individual and the other come to see the core of the individual behind the avatar:

> I would say that I have seen the true core and heart of a couple of people – seen the true center. I would never been allowed to see that face to face. I have also allowed them to see me much more intimately than anyone in real life has.

Becoming connected at this level is no simple task, to be sure, but online environments like SL facilitate this process by allowing users to interact with one another in an immersive space that is free of procedural tasks (like missions in a online role-playing game) and open to interpretation (on the surface as character modification and, deeper, as understanding one another). They allow users to suspend disbelief in the

apparent artificiality before them by engaging in the world and becoming a part of it if they choose to do so.[8]

Thus, when users engage in the world, immersed in the virtual reality through personal exploration and the interactions they have with others, they begin to look beyond the "cartoons" presented on-screen. With increased involvement in SL, connections develop that draw users closer to their avatars, the places they frequent in-world, and the other users they share experiences with during their time in SL. As users become more intimate with one another, moving beyond mere socializing and becoming "soulful," the boundaries between SL and real life become somewhat blurred. Users start to feel a part of the lives they lead in SL, rendered present to and emotionally involved with those they have interacted with on intimate levels. Eventually relational dynamics change between users and the consequences of their interactions become more apparent. Users begin to see that they are not only vulnerable to one another, but also capable of enriching or damaging the relationship they have forged with profound repercussions in both SL and real life.

Coming Together and Coming Apart

The second dimension of the overarching theme occurs as relationships between the individual and the other become progressively intimate. With disbelief suspended, the individual and the other exist together in the here and now of this virtual space. Real life becomes enmeshed in the "second" life, blurred by what it means to be with another person. As users visit with each other, plan future outings and, in some cases, become

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[8] Of course, this is also only true if the user survives the almost evolutionary process of "getting by" through roaming and searching for people and places.

more intimate by coming together as community members, family members[9] and

"partners,"[10] the dynamics of their virtual presence changes. Relational expectations

become elevated as the individual and the other begin to examine where the relationship

has gone and also determine where it is going. It is here that the individual and the other

renegotiate what the relationship means, choosing to enrich the relationship through

continued interaction or choosing to damage and end the relationship through distancing.

Thus, while relationships in Second Life can be the source of profound connection not

easily found in real life, they can also be the source of immense pain and frustration.

Removed of physicality, time and space, users come together through continued

interactions where they share experiences with and open up to one another in a more

immersive and liberal fashion. Afforded a degree of anonymity through the mediating

technology, users tend to feel more comfortable in what they disclose to others. Not only

are they able to choose what they want to reveal to others in interaction, but also they are

not judged as "harshly" for what they feel, think, or look like in real life, as November,

another informant, jocularly contextualizes in the following excerpt:

> […] It's a world with many many [sic] highly intelligent people who
> for whatever reason, be it lousy looks, body odor, or plain bad
> manners, are alone, and can suddenly sport a jock bod [sic] and talk to
> beautiful women […] or men.

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[9] Some informant reported having SL family members. These are not, however, biological family members in SL. Instead, these are people that the individual has become connected with in such a way that they classify them as family. For example, one informant reported having a SL sister who worked with one of the escort services in SL, while another informant reported having a SL brother in a steampunk community.
[10] "Partners" is the term used to classify a relationship between two consenting adults in the virtual world of SL. Being "partnered" is also a status reflected in a resident's profile under the designator "Partner." If both residents have agreed to be partners, their names are listed next to the "Partner" designator in each other's profiles.

Thus, this virtual world is more commonly thought to be a place where users come to socialize and to build relationships with others unrestrained of the limitations that they believe inhibit them from socializing in real life.

Facilitated by the technology that, as Powers notes, makes everything seem "like a game," users often assume that SL liberates them from their physical constraints and the immediacy of their real world lives. In light of this users go in, as Powers details further, "without their 'defenses' up" and become more vulnerable. As users interact more readily and intimately with others, they lay their emotional armor down and begin to take their relationships to new levels. Since users have generally come to know one another through shared experiences at the places they frequent and through continued self-disclosure, users tend to take their relationships to more intimate levels. Thus, without their defenses, people become vulnerable and this leads to a blurring of the boundaries.

Therefore, venturing into the realm of increased intimacy in SL is a precarious feat at best. It is here that users begin to see another side of the people they have come to know, as Misty details in her experiences with others:

> I'm beginning to find that most people in sl are lonely people - at least seeking something. And they are all married! Which is fine! I'm married myself. But it's weird you know? […] Well, not really when you think about it. If you are single and lonely, you go to a club or eharmony or something. If you are married and lonely you go to second life because you have complete control over when and how much you see people.

Thus, the mystique of the other begins to unravel. While users come to know one another through unique in-world experiences that allow them to open up and become "soulful" to one another, users that choose to become more intimate are now expected to reveal deeper information about their real life selves to one another. What was once considered

private, such as the personal life of the user, is now expected to become, in part, public. Although users maintain control over what information they choose to disclose, it is at this stage in the relationship that the boundary between SL and real life becomes increasingly permeable. The self that has become known in SL comes into question, converging on the real life self as users begin to renegotiate the boundaries.

If users choose to blur the boundaries between SL and real life, they also choose to, whether knowingly or unknowingly, become more vulnerable through new information that may not be as readily accepted and may also endanger their emotional health and physical safety. For Powers, revealing information about himself typically occurred within the virtual world, facilitated by events and discussions the led to conversations where the "topics […] became more involved." Much like real life, Powers reported that he spent time in-world with his various girlfriends, coming to know more about each of them through their shared experiences in-world. However, many of the relationships he had soon came to an end, usually because his then girlfriend at the time "[met] someone else." As Powers details in the following excerpt about one of his girlfriends, the quick disappearance or loss of such a relationship can lead to emotional repercussions that reverberate in real life:

> [21:05] Powers: As I said, SL is all about relationships- and connecting
> [21:05] Erik: Then what, do you suppose, is the reason that relationships
> end so easily on here too?
> [21:05] Powers: could be
> [21:05] Powers: Usually my relationships end becasue [sic] she meets
> someone else
> [21:06] Erik: Hmm. So there is no real committment [sic] then?
> [21:06] Powers: No. In fact, my last gf left me on some trumped up bs
> thing, then partnered with another guy within a couple weeks
> [21:07] Erik: Why do you suppose that is?
> [21:07] Erik: The committement [sic] issue, that is.
> [21:07] Powers: She didnt [sic] have the guts just to tell me the truth

> [21:07] Powers: Because we forget that those cartoons on the screen are
> real people and we dont [sic] SEE them hurt

Facilitated by the technology, users are able to easily disappear from those with whom they have become intimate. Bonds are severed quickly and, in some instances, aimlessly. Users instantly and, in some cases, unknowingly, lose a connection they spent a great deal of time developing. Turning away from becoming "soulful," they forget that the "cartoons on the screen are real people" and never witness the depth of their pain. Thus, while users move beyond the physical representation of self when forming relationships in SL by becoming "soulful," they also come to rely on the medium—"the cartoons on screen" and the technology itself—and their own personal authority to distance themselves without the repercussions felt in the F2F situation.

In some instances, however, users cross the boundary between SL and real life by sharing in each other through other mediating technologies such as message boards, e-mail, Twitter, web logs (blogs) and Skype, among others.[11] Although still distanced in their communication through such technologies, users begin to lower the boundary between SL and real life through personally and, in the case of Skype, physically rendering themselves to one another at their own accord. It is here that users come to know one another with incredibly unpredictable repercussions as November details in the following excerpt after giving out her e-mail address to a man she met in SL:

> [20:40] November: I did what I thought was enough "research" on him to
> know that he wasn't an ax murderer, so when he asked for my email
> address, I didn't hesitate.

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[11] Almost every informant reported using some other mediating communication technology when they talked about fostering deeper connections with others. For example, Magdalena cited Twitter (an online micro-blogging site), blogs and message boards as a few of the main technologies she used to keep in touch with others in the Victorian and steampunk communities. Similarly, two informants cited using Skype (an online video-conferencing and instant messenger service) to talk to others they met in SL.

[20:41] Erik: What reserch [sic] did you do? Google?
[20:41] Erik: research*
[20:41] November: I googled, I dogpiled, I searched through his [employer's] website and public records.
[20:41] November: He wanted to send me a large poetry file.
[20:42] November: He did send it to me, and it was very good.
[20:42] Erik: So he was generally interested in you?
[20:43] November: generally?
[20:43] Erik: Well, you said that you danced and chatted and then you exchanged information. Did you ever feel, earlier on, that he was intersted [sic] in you?
[20:43] Erik: interested*
[20:44] November: Yes. I did know, and I was very intrigued by him.
[20:44] Erik: Naturally, given your shared interests.
[20:44] November: I did nothing to discourage him really. Just set firm bounderies [sic].
[20:45] November: Then the phone calls started.
[20:45] November: Big eye roll.
[20:45] Erik: Phone calls? How did he get your phone number?
[20:46] November: I think my email [sic] must have shown my last name. I used a yahoo account, but you know, I didn't think about that I had my name associated with it.

While November did not talk to this man over the phone, she did, however, talk to him through Skype. November "tried to reinforce the boundaries" during their chats on Skype, making it known that she would not "do anything to harm [her] relationship with her husband," which worked until this man became belligerent with her about their relationship. He began to accuse her "of all kinds of stuff [. . .] like talking to everyone in SL about him. Paranoid stuff." Continually hurt by his accusations, November eventually decided that she didn't want to be friends with this man anymore. That's when "it totally spiraled out of control" as November details further:

[20:53] November: Well, the problem was that we had this whole rl thing -- you know exchanging ideas, music, we are very compatible on several levels.
[20:54] Erik: I see. Yes. You didn't feel that that was a violation of the boundaries though, because he was generally good at staying within them at first, right?

[20:54] November: I know I let the boundaries get pushed a little. That was my mistake too.
[20:54] November: Well, and I was very hungry for the intellectual stimulation he was providing.
[20:55] November: I was willing to pay a little of attention to him to get that. you know?
[. . .]
[20:58] November: He really got to me. Fed my ego, Fed my brain, and then blam, could back hand slap hard enough to make me cry.
[20:58] November: So I finally had enough - wasn't enough good to outweigh the bad, and I said I was done.

November ultimately ended the relationship, but the aftershock of it still affected her in real life. Recalling the eventual demise of their relationship, November stated, "You can attribute too much or too little emotion [behind one's words] - especially in an argument." Therefore, while shared interactions brought them together online, they also tore their relationship apart.

Ultimately, SL allows people to develop deep connections with others that are easily facilitated and maintained in-world through community memberships, events, and shared experiences. However, when these connections become increasingly intimate, they begin to blur the boundary between SL and real life. It is here that the virtual world of SL comes to bear on the user. If the user chooses to become involved with others by sharing in one another more intimately, then he or she also becomes subject to the pain that may occur when the relationship disappears.

Moreover, when a user connects with another by moving beyond the virtual world, typically engaging in interactions at a distance through other mediating technologies, he or she also endangers the stability of their real life. Although the user and the other have become known to each other through becoming "soulful," the information revealed hereafter may allow the other to have access to the user's real life in

ways he or she never anticipated nor desired. Since the process of maintaining firm boundaries is constantly negotiated between the user and the other, it is dependent on how users have rendered the context of the relationship. Thus users must actively negotiate and clearly enforce the boundaries as the relationship moves into new contexts or else the relationship may venture into realms that not only endanger their mental health, but also their physical wellbeing.

Summary

The virtual world of Second Life is ripe with possibility. As an interested individual chooses to enter the Grid and become a part of this virtual world, he or she actively negotiates his presence through interaction with others in this space (see Giddens, 1984; Jackson, 1996). Moving from Orientation Island to particular places of interest, the individual becomes virtually incarnated—rendered present—as he or she is understood through continual negotiation. Over time, the individual becomes a dedicated user—a resident—who has shared in others and has also become sophisticated in the character functions that allow him or her to operate within the world (see Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1989; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). Compelled by personal volition, the resident may modify his or her avatar by personally tailoring the digital manifestation in a process that personifies their virtual incarnation in the form of a "core avatar."

In personifying the virtual incarnation, a resident not only creates a core avatar that acts as his or her primary representation, it also acts as a symbolic representation of his or her soul realized in continual negotiation (Dibbell, 1993; Pearce, 2006). This

occurs when residents share in and experience one another, moving beyond the digital representation through shared experiences and mutual self-disclosure. Thus, residents render present and consciously negotiate a body, a context and a soul with one another (Dibbell, 1993; Pearce, 2006). Over time and through varying degrees of intimate interaction, they come to see each other as unique beings. As a resident becomes more intimate with another, he or she begins to renegotiate the context of the relationship with positive and negative repercussions felt in both SL and real life.

In reiterating the voices and experiences of my participants, I have described and detailed the world of SL to provide context for the study of communication technologies in use. The findings illustrate the claims made, highlighting the core problematics of presence, agency, representation and authority experienced within the virtual setting of SL and within ethnography. Additionally, the findings emphasize how individuals negotiate and manipulate the technology to experience the virtual setting and shape its organizational practices. Thus, the findings answer the research questions while also identifying the rich practices that allow individuals to operate within SL.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Structuration Theory (ST) and Mead's (1934) theorizing of "taking on the role of the other" aid in our understanding of cultural performances in the virtual world of Second Life by illuminating the dynamic processes that allow individuals to organize over vast spans of time and space. In particular, these perspectives reveal the processes of interaction and negotiation within the virtual world that users rely on to make sense of each other in this space, and thereby produce and reproduce structure. At the same time, the virtual context contributes to our understanding relational processes as they occur online through "taking the role of the other" when individuals interact more intimately. These findings reveal two central components that influence how individuals virtually organize—rendered presence and the negotiation of the online and offline boundaries—while also detailing the nuances in conducting ethnography in a virtual setting.

Rendered Presence

As users engage within the space and encounter others through which they negotiate each other's presence, they render both the online context and the other users present in interaction in several ways. First, the introductory processes of SL urge users to render the space through interaction. For instance, when users select an avatar from the available choices during registration, they begin the process of negotiation required to become part of the virtual world. When users are digitally reborn on Orientation Island as the avatar of their choice, they are immediately prompted to experience this world as a

real space with real rules for civil conduct and engagement through the "Big Six" pop-up window that requires compliance. Although new users can chose to read or ignore the rules presented to them and merely click "I Accept," the following software guides of the island encourage users to treat their in-world interactions as real and as seriously as they would in real life. Thus, as users navigate the island, they are indoctrinated into the virtual world through experiences that contribute to the interpretation of its reality.

This is particularly relevant as users finish working the four-piece puzzle of Orientation Island and enter the Grid as lone individuals without a sense of purpose. Informed of the basic practices for "getting by," new users enter the Grid with two options: they can either choose to engage in the world and become involved in it, or they can choose to leave the world for whatever reason and never return. For the users that stick around, they are once again urged to suspend disbelief in its artificiality and experience this virtual world as real through personal exploration in the form of roaming around. In particular, as users find places of interest, they learn to further manage the technology by engaging in the performances of a place by rendering them in observation of and negotiation with others. For example, as a user finds a dance club in SL and watches others, he or she learns how to dance by following what others do or by asking them. Over time, the newbie to the dance club not only learns how to use the dance spheres, but also learns from others that he or she can buy or make their own dance animations that can be used instead of a club dance sphere. Therefore, as the user engages in the virtual world, interacting within the space and with others, he or she learns how to manage the technology with increased sophistication while also learning and enacting the practices of being a resident within the virtual world.

Second, although the intricacies of the roaming process may differ for each user, the process of making sense of the virtual world is stabilized by the practices of interaction and negotiation with others. In particular, these practices extend our understanding of Gergen's (2002) "absent presence" by, instead, refocusing our interpretations of one another through a rendered presence realized in interaction. For instance, as users engage in the virtual world and find places of interest, they rely on one another to not only render the space, but also render each other's presence through interaction. Therefore, as users interact with one another through SL (i.e. the mediating text), they become "close" through their shared interactions conducted at a distance (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Aided by their avatars and the social spaces within the world that bring them together, users interact with one another and make sense of each other through communication. They begin to share experiences and slowly disclose personal information about themselves to one another, allowing them to develop a sense for the person that moves beyond the digital representation. Relying on shared experiences and relating them to their personal "typificatory schemes" and the anticipation of how one another will react, the individual and the other become involved in one another in such a way that they begin to see each other through their interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934; see also Gergen, 2002). Although the individual and the other are not physically co-located during these interactions (see Gergen, 2002), such continued experiences at a distance bring both partners together and allow them to render present through the technology in use. In other words, both partners move beyond the avatar on the screen and start to recognize each other as unique beings vested with powerful ideas, motivations, and emotions when they identify with one another through interaction. Over

time, this identification is enriched when they empathize with one another and become a part of each other's lives in the online context (and, in some instances, the offline context) through communication that renders each individual's soul in interaction. Thus, the avatar becomes a representational medium that facilitates communication between one person and another—a vessel through which the individual and the other render present to one another through interactions that have developed into a meaningful dialogue interpreted over time and through mutual involvement in one another.

Additionally, rendered presence, or rather "absent presence," may also explain why some users leave SL after the individual socialization process that occurs on Orientation Island. For instance, although this virtual world is vaguely familiar with its buildings, trees, and operable objects, it requires new operations that users may find difficult to master at first. In particular, users must learn to manage the software on their own during their initial foray into the virtual world. Although the software attempts to facilitate individual involvement with the aid of the software guides, users ultimately struggle to make sense of this virtual world that, instead, becomes fully realized in interaction with others.

In other words, the software (i.e. the material element) initially renders users absent because it prescribes how they *should* perform within the virtual world instead of allowing them to negotiate these performances with others in interaction (Gergen, 2002; Jackson, 1996; see also Giddens, 1984; Mead, 1934). In particular, while users may perceive tasks that the software can carry out (i.e. the social element), they are instead discouraged from engaging in them by first *individually* working through those that are "required" to operate within this virtual world (see Jackson, 1996). Thus, the software

attempts to instill a sense for the formalized order, yet, at the same time, the software never exposes this individual to situations that require interaction and negotiation that would allow the technology to "function" (Jackson, 1996). Instead, users are ushered through the island by software guides that fail to foster a connection to this world with others who make it real through interaction. Thus, the disillusioned newbie may leave and never return to SL after his or her initial foray.

Third, another example of how rendered presence contributes to interaction and virtual organizing occurs when users personify their avatar through the modification process. In particular, when a user modifies his or her avatar to create a core avatar, he or she is engaging in more than the transformation of his or her appearance. Rather, the user is creating a personified self through which he or she will experience the virtual world. This is the representation that the individual knows him or herself to be and it is the person that others will know and look for in the virtual world. Moreover, since users continually negotiate one another in interaction, they norm the standard of personified incarnation by recognizing one another in how they choose to represent themselves. Thus, as users personify their incarnation, they further engage in the interpretation of this world as real by "becoming" their avatar and interacting with others as if they are physically within the space.

This is particularly important because it demonstrates that, although users lack the "immediate, continuous and massively real presence of the other's expressivity" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 30), they are able to render it present through continual interaction. In particular, as users personify their avatars, they also "fill in" the anonymous associations by creating a presence that resembles "who [they] see

themselves to be." Therefore, the act of modifying one's avatar becomes a process through which the user re-presents him or herself online so as to experience the world and others as they would in real life, albeit mediated by technology (see Dibbell, 1993; Gergen, 2002). Thus, while users may modify their digital representation so as to be something from fantasy (such as feline-like furries or cyborg humanoids), they are still creating a presence—a core avatar—that resembles their "true self" through which they negotiate the virtual world around them.

Moreover, the core avatar is more than a digital extension of the offline self. Rather, as these findings demonstrate, the core avatar *becomes* the self in the online context through continual negotiation that is constructed in interaction. Therefore, unlike the F2F situation that affords both partners a physical presence that is taken as an objective reality, the current study illustrates that users consciously work to stabilize their presence through such practices that allow them to materialize one another's presence in negotiation. In other words, the act of personifying one's incarnation—modifying one's avatar—becomes one of the many ways that users attempt to stabilize their presence while also making sense of others in an environment where nothing can be taken for granted. Thus, contrary to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) conceptualization of "closeness" as an "emphatic bond" in the F2F situation, these findings reveal that users render present to one another through conscious social constructions that materialize the "here and now" of the online context and one another in continual interaction and negotiation.

At the same time, these findings also demonstrate that structure is made material in the modification process as users re-create their presence to become incarnated online

(see Giddens, 1984; Jackson, 1996). As users manage the software and negotiate with others through interaction, they enlist the rules and resources required to modify their representation and thereby produce a self that operates in-world. As this occurs, users also rely on the socialization of individuals who come to SL and help stabilize one's individualizations both individually and collectively. Ultimately, then, structure and agency always come together as users engage in the structure reproduced in SL through individual and collective action that, in turn, produces structure in the processes of negotiation and interaction.

Negotiating Boundaries

Besides rendered presence, the negotiation of the boundaries between SL and real life also shapes how users interpret one another and organize over vast spans of time and space. In particular, as users become more involved with one another through continued interaction, they implicate both their online and real-world lives in the process. For instance, users experience the tension between the online world as real and virtual when relationships conflict with their offline lives (Li, Jackson, & Trees, 2008). Findings in the current study demonstrate this through the lack of negotiation in "setting firm boundaries" as the relationship enters the offline context and impacts the individual and his or her real-world relationships. Similarly, users also experience the aforementioned tension through the loss of a relationship online, whether through the deliberate lack of contact or a real-world death. Thus, while users are encouraged to develop intimate relationships online, they must also continue to negotiate the boundaries of any relationship and be cognizant of its effects in the offline context.

Additionally, real life to online interaction contributes to the aforementioned tension. Since users come to SL with their own life experiences, they enact an identity that is developed with regard to the real-world self (Baym, 2000). Therefore, while it is possible for users to enact a totally different identity online, "their real-world self and life experience, although invisible, affect this new online life." (Li, Jackson, & Trees, 2008, p. 93). Thus, as users mutually self-disclose and become more intimate through shared experiences, they also negotiate their relationships through maintaining remoteness as a form of emotional distance between the online context and the real-world context. This explains why some individuals choose to only be community members, close friends and family members in SL.

Of course, the liberating features of SL also contribute to a blurring between one's real life and one's "second" life. In particular, while users maintain their real-world selves in online interaction, they sometimes fail to negotiate and, later, reaffirm the parameters of a relationship as it becomes more intimate. Instead, facilitated by the open and often genial environment of SL, users easily enter new levels of intimacy with others online without fully contextualizing the effects to the offline context. This explains why some users who have committed real-world relationships find incredible discomfort when the relationship formed online enters the offline context.

Ultimately, these findings indicate that research on identity construction and virtual organizing needs to consider the specific features of the technology that facilitate interaction and relational processes. In particular, the current study reveals that users actively make sense of each other and organize (i.e. the social element) when they manage the specific elements of software (i.e. the material element) through interaction

with distributed others (Jackson, 1996). Thus, the text of SL becomes a technology when it "functions" through collective management and negotiation in action. In other words, it becomes a technology understood across multiple contexts through continual collective interaction.

Additionally, the current study considers how technology and context are continually constructed through both their social and material elements (Jackson, 1996). In particular, as users encounter the software of SL (i.e. the material elements), they begin perceive its potential to perform various operations and tasks (i.e. the social elements). For example, one user may perceive the software as capable of sustaining a long distance relationship. However, as this individual interacts with the software on his own, he or she may find that this particular expectation isn't possible, at least not in the moment. This is not, however, a failure of the technological artifact to "function." Rather, as this individual comes to interact with others through continued interaction, he or she negotiates his or her perceptions of the technological artifact and interprets its functionality in the moment *with* others. Thus, the current study demonstrates that functionality is achieved when users continually negotiate the software of SL across multiple contexts and perform tasks through the merging of expectations virtually enacted and stabilized.

Moreover, since the technology of SL is understood through continual interaction, it offers scholars a rare chance to understand how both online and offline contexts are negotiated and managed through the technology in use. In particular, an individual's identity develops with regard to his or her real world self translated online through virtual incarnation. However, as users become virtually incarnated to one another through

continual interaction and negotiation online, they also engage in active boundary management between their online and offline lives. Therefore, the online self must also be considered as it coincides with, conflicts with, or departs from one's offline self. Like previous research (Baym, 2000; Li, Jackson & Trees, 2008), the current study demonstrates that an individual's online and offline lives are interdependent and must be considered as users interact within and manage both.

A Nuanced Approach

In addition to illuminating key components that shape identity construction and virtual organizing, this study also highlighted key nuances in employing ethnography in a virtual setting. Although not wholly dissimilar from standard ethnography, these nuances clarify a level of sensitivity that must be taken into account when conducting ethnography online. In particular, these findings contribute to the on-going discussion about the crisis of representation in ethnography as well as the researcher's role in reporting the findings.

Although the virtual world of SL is highly provisional, studying the rich practices at work within it becomes possible through interaction. Much like standard ethnography, this occurs as the researcher enters the research site and engages in it through participant-observation. As the researcher develops an understanding of the site—becoming a part of the scene—he or she also comes to know the practices that members enact and engage in to function socially.

However, unlike standard ethnography, the virtual setting requires active engagement on the part of the researcher. Where a researcher can enter an organization in

a physical setting and develop an understanding for the physical space, roles, and routines from day to day participant-observation, the virtual setting does not necessarily operate under the same elements and assumptions. Instead, the researcher must actively learn the practices and performances of the virtual space by consciously making sense of it through taking note of every element of the virtual organization. Thus, the researcher not only has to document his or her participants, but also his or her own transformation within and understanding of the virtual setting over time.

In other words, the virtual ethnographer does not simply observe from the sidelines nor participate marginally, instead he or she becomes a member of the community by negotiating his or her presence with others and engaging in the practices of the space (Hine, 2000). In virtual ethnography this means that the researcher suspends his or her authority as he or she enters the research site and becomes one with his or her participants through interaction. Because of this, the researcher is completely vulnerable and cannot take for granted the role of author of the space, but instead must become socialized. Thus, I argue that the researcher becomes a "participant-reporter." This means that the researcher first observes and actively engages in the practices of the space with his or her participants during the study. Then, as the researcher learns these practices, understands their importance, and makes sense of the space through interaction with others, he or she reports the findings in contextualizing his or her experiences with those of his or her participants.

Although not wholly dissimilar from typical ethnography, I clarify this nuance because it invites scholars from across the academy to engage in the potentially uncomfortable dilemma such an argument poses for future qualitative research: the crisis

of representation. In particular, this argument details the fine line between participant and member, yet also pays respect to the performance of reporting with particular sensitivity to the participants who, I argue, are *the* authority of the study. Therefore, only the participants can delineate the meaning behind their practices as they socially construct them in their shared interactions. Ultimately, the role of the researcher, I argue, is to interpret and clarify these practices as he or she makes sense of them through his or her ongoing cultural membership, while letting the participants speak for the study. Thus resulting in a multiplicity of voices from both researcher and informants that speak for the rich practices at work.

The Spaces Between

In addition to developing our understanding of identity construction and technology in use, this research has implications for Structuration Theory (ST) and ethnography. First, it demonstrates the importance of inter*action* in producing and reproducing structure across vast spans of time and space. Consistent with previous research (Nelson Marsh, 2006), it clarifies the process of standardization that occurs in the virtual world of SL as users rely on practices accepted in the real world and adapt to the practices of the online world. Through interaction, users negotiate the standards of the virtual world (i.e. structure) and, in turn, produce structure online in creating new standards that work toward a shared purpose (i.e. action). Thus, "virtual order" is made manifest when users across multiple contexts engage in the accepted practices and create new standards that both sustain and reproduce structures across time and space.

In addition, these findings demonstrate the importance of specific features of the technology that become realized in the duality of structure and action. In particular, while

the software of SL schools users in how to act in the virtual world when they enter

Orientation Island, users learn how to *inter*act in the virtual world through negotiation of

the technology with others. Therefore, the features of the technology that the software of

SL highlights such as character movements, modifications and object creation and usage,

become the subject of interpretation within the individual who ultimately learns how to

use them with others. Thus, users perceive multiple expectations for the software and

collectively negotiate those performances in interaction over time and space by engaging

in the technology in the moment (Jackson, 1996). Furthermore, these findings illustrate

that users learn how to manage the technology when they create a presence that is

interpreted in negotiation, personified in modification, and rendered present through

continual interaction. Thus, users (including the researcher) make sense of the space by

actively and consciously learning the practices through which the space and others

become rendered.

Besides explaining technology in use, these findings identify the importance of

the multiplicity of voices in conducting a virtual ethnography. Since the virtual world of

SL is a space of negotiation and interpretation, its rules, practices, norms, and mores are

in part taken from the real world and in part produced in action within the space.

Therefore, any attempt to fully understand the deep practices at work can only occur

when the researcher becomes part of the study through sharing in the experiences with his

or her participants and engaging in the technology in the moment. Thus, the researcher

does not speak for the study, but rather the multiplicity of voices from the amalgam of

participants and researcher explains the practices at work. These findings illustrate the

importance of participant authority, representing their voices and perspectives as they intended them to be presented.

Additionally, this study, like others (Baym, 2000; Li, Jackson & Trees, 2008), highlights the real—virtual tension of the virtual world of SL. As the findings illustrate, users primarily experience this tension when relationships online conflict with real-world life. Since the world of SL requires users to negotiate each other's presence through continued interaction, it also encourages users to share experiences and mutually self-disclose. It is through continued interaction that users express trust in one another yet become vulnerable through sharing personal information (Li, Jackson & Trees, 2008). Thus, as users engage in the world and interact with others, they also engage in boundary management between real and virtual space in deciding what to reveal to one another. As the current study demonstrates, the boundaries become blurred when a user does not clearly negotiate the relationship as it becomes more intimate and enters new contexts. Therefore, if firm boundaries are not set nor negotiated, then users experience conflict as the online relationship threatens one's real-world life. Similarly, if the user is not open and honest about his or her real-world life, he or she may damage online relationships when relationships become intimate and new personal information is revealed that conflicts with its development. These findings suggest that research on technology in use in virtual spaces must also consider relational processes and emphasize the interdependence between both virtual and real space.

Aside from questioning identity construction and management, the current study has contributed new elements to organizational sensemaking in virtual settings. While previous research (Gergen, 2002: Gozzi & Haynes, 1992; see also King & Frost, 2002)

informs us of an absent presence through virtual communication, this research contributes

to our understanding of identity construction and virtual order through the development

of a rendered presence that materializes through interaction. Instead of focusing on the

lack of a physical presence that occurs as we communicate at a distance, results from the

current study demonstrate that users render one another's presence and, in intimate

interactions, soul in continued interaction. Although the visual nature of SL facilitates

this, the findings illustrate that the actual process—the interaction with and negotiation of

one another—materializes the persona of each person. Thus, the avatar is merely a

specific element of the technology in use that facilitates identity construction and

relational processes.

Although the current study offers deep insight into some of the preliminary

identity and organizational practices at work in SL there are limitations to this study and

limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, this study was limited

primarily by the learning curve of the software. While I downloaded the software back in

September of 2007, it took me at least two or three months before I learned how to use

the software to perform various basic tasks in the virtual world. This made it particularly

difficult to find places to interact in and others to interview initially, yet it is the essential

process that provided the context I needed to clarify how users enter the world and,

eventually, become a part of SL.

Second, this study was limited in the amount of time actually spent in the research

site. Since the research site exists outside of the real world, engagement in the virtual

world of SL occurs whenever you choose to become involved in it. Thus, while I

downloaded the software two years ago, I did not spend two full years in the research

site. Rather, I spent the first three to six months engaging in the research site at my own leisure and then became further involved in it as I became comfortable using the software to perform various tasks. Thus, while the findings are particularly intriguing and substantive, they could be further contextualized with more time in the research site and with more involvement in multiple communities in the virtual world.

Finally, future research should extend the current study by focusing on the dialectical tensions that emerge when participants exchange personal information and open their relationships to the offline context. In particular, such research should attempt to explain the relational tension between users negotiation of their committed real-world relationships and their committed online relationships in SL. Similarly, future research should elucidate socially constructed family relationships that occur in SL and delineate their overall purpose. Are these relationships merely a more clearly developed and negotiated intimate bond or do they serve some organizational purpose? The economy of SL should also be examined in future research. Since many new users literally "buy into" the world of SL, especially during the modification process, the economy affects how they orient themselves within the world in terms of identity. Therefore, future research should explore how the economy influences users' experiences and potentially fosters an environment of commodity fetishism.

Virtual spaces like Second Life continue to be intriguing sites of interest for communication scholars. Although distributed across multiple contexts, research of these virtual spaces reveals that people organize through interaction with others through the technology. Therefore, by understanding how people interact in the virtual world, we are

better able to understand how people identify, relate, and organize virtually through

interaction.

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APPENDIX

A Collection of Visual Media in Figures

Figure 1: Second Life Registration

Figure 1: The "basic details" required for Second Life registration. Note that new users are free to type whatever they want for their first name, but that they must select a last name from list of names available in the drop down menu indicated by the drop-down arrow box (image by author).
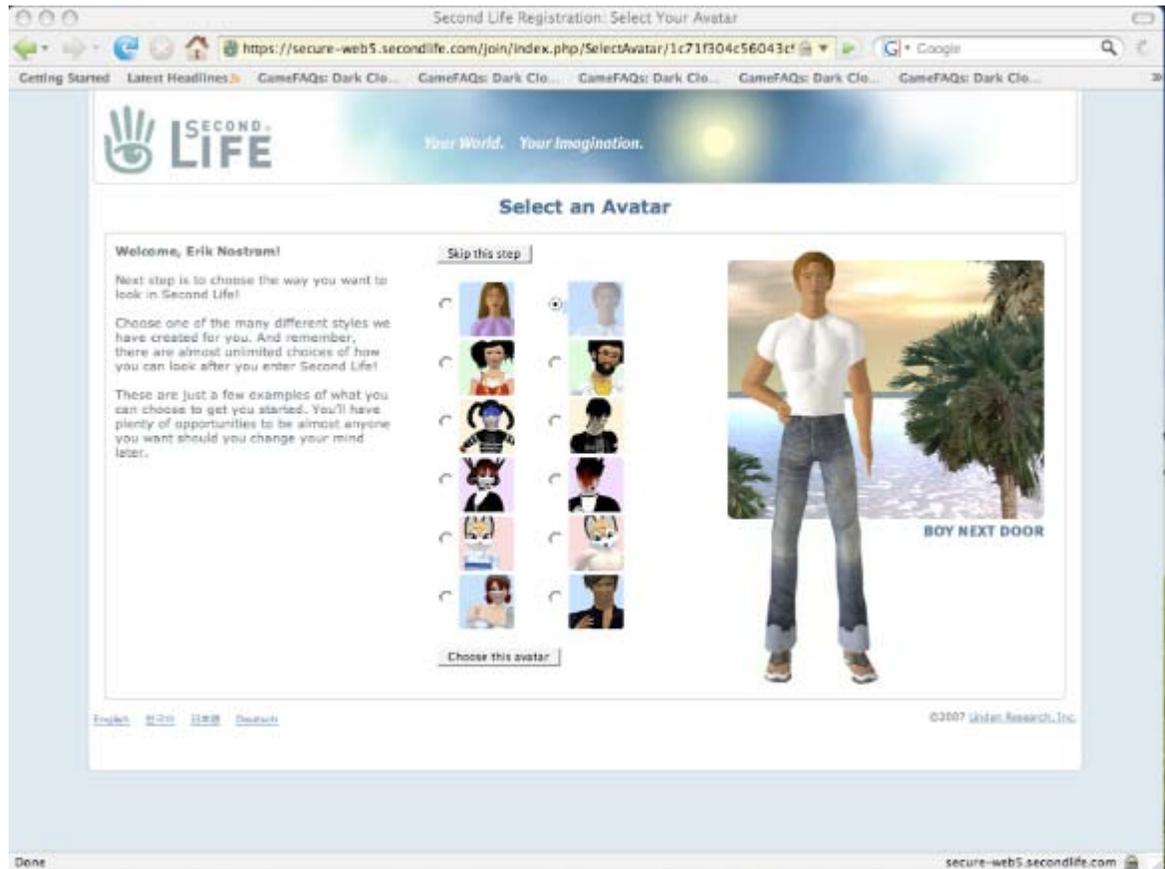
Figure 2: Avatar Selection at Registration

Figure 2: A snapshot of the selection of avatars available to new users at registration. Users pick one of these avatars by selecting the radio box of the avatar icon they wish to re-present themselves as when they are born in Second Life. Also, notice the "furries" in the second row up from the bottom (image by author).

Figure 3: Character Modification on Orientation Island

Figure 3: A snapshot of the one of the four parts of Orientation Island. The particular part of the island focuses on character modification. In this image we see: one of the pop-up software guides that schools the users in using the software (upper left), the four-piece puzzle of orientation island that also highlights the three tasks users must complete indicated by a star (mid-left), the inventory that includes various items for character modification (mid to lower right), and the reference map of Orientation Island (upper right) (image by author).

Figure 4: Movement and Object Usage on Orientation Island

Figure 4: A snapshot of character movement and object usage on Orientation Island. Again, we see: the pop-up software guide (upper left), the four-piece puzzle (mid left), and the reference map of Orientation Island (upper right). In this particular picture I am using a Segway to move run over a rat as directed by the pop-up software guide (image by other).

Figure 5: Dance Floor and Dance Spheres

Figure 5: A snapshot of the dance floor in one of the clubs I frequented during my time in Second Life. The small silver spheres are dance balls that animate an avatar within the given space that the sphere is programmed to occupy. This snapshot also shows us what "rezzing" looks like as grayish figures and parts of people slowly come into focus and become textured (image by author).

Figure 6: Dancing with Christy

Figure 6: A snapshot of Christy and I, dancing in Toby's. The rainbow sphere attached to the pole in the upper right is a "Couples" dance sphere that animates two avatars at once (image by author).

Figure 7: Avatar Skins and Shapes

Figure 7: A snapshot of a sexy advertisement for skins and shapes. These character modification items make the avatar more realistic by altering skin tone, body features (i.e. breasts, abs, and muscles), and body size in designer files that immediately alter an avatar when a user buys them and wears them (image by author).

Figure 8: Buying Character Modifications

Figure 8: A snapshot from within a skin and shape store. This particular store, like many others, allows users to try on a demo version of the skin and the shape if they are interested. This image also shows us the price in Linden Dollars (L$) of a typical skin and shape in Second Life. L$800 is approximately $3.33. Thus, users literally "buy into" Second Life if they do not know how to create or modify their character on their own. Finally, the most intriguing thing about these products is that they are typically marketed through sexy images of what a users avatar could look like (image by author).

Figure 9: One of Magdalena's "Steampunk Looks"

Figure 9: A snapshot of one of Magdalena's steampunk looks that she created through an avatar shape and skin generator. This is one of the derivations of Magdalena's core avatar that she can take on by simply dragging the items from her inventory onto her avatar (image used with the explicit and expressed consent of Magdalena).

Figure 10: Princess of Hearts

Figure 10: A snapshot of Magdalena's "Princess of Hearts" described in the excerpt in-text (image used with the explicit and expressed consent of Magdalena).