The Social Construction of Virtual Reality and the Stigmatized Identity of the Newbie

By Robert Boostrom, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Abstract

Virtual worlds—persistent virtual reality spaces—are becoming available to users, often for free, via internet connections. Due to the immersive character and malleability of these communities, new forms of technology-mediated social interaction are emerging. In this paper, ethnographic research conducted in Second Life is used to outline (1) how the reality within these virtual worlds is constructed, (2) what role secondary socialization plays in these groups, and (3) the way the stigmatized identity of the neophyte user (the "newbie") is conceptualized, confronted and addressed by virtual world residents. This research suggests ways of viewing consumer behavior within virtual worlds and further social research directions.

Keywords: virtual worlds; newbie; social constructionism; secondary socialization; stigma.

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The sun shone high in the sky as I walked from the saloon toward the water tower at the edge of town. I wanted to explore the train station a bit in the hopes of finding more free clothes. I strolled down the middle of Main Street in my black cowboy hat, vest, and chaps. To either side of me, one-story clapboard buildings, like the gun shop and the doctor's office, lined the wooden sidewalks. As I approached the water tower, near the town gallows, I noticed a ruckus.

A mild argument had erupted over a shooting. When I arrived on the scene, the casualty was on his way to the saloon to drown his sorrows, cursing the shooter and the situation in general. The townsfolk questioned each other, accused each other, and the better natured joked about the whole unfortunate business. Some people seemed to be truly riled, but it was hard to tell. I followed the shooting victim over to the saloon determined to hear his tale. I wanted to know how he viewed the event and what effect it was having on him. While on my way to him, however, a newbie popped up to complicate matters.

I could tell he was a newbie just by looking at him. First, his duds—his very person—were all wrong. Nothing about him said "Wild West". All the other folks in the area were tall, proud characters in period costumes of settlers, townsfolk, gunfighters, or Native Americans. He was shorter than normal, and wearing the standard-issue white t-shirt and jeans from orientation. He did not fit in. Second, his hair was unmistakable. He had the same blonde, non-descript hairdo that I had given up months before. Third, he was having a tough time conversing. As others stood in place, turning to each other to chat, he was running up to folks and expressing his general confusion rather than trying to go with the flow of the conversation. The newbie wanted guidance.

I took pity on him, and responded to his inquiries. I was the first to really deal with him directly, as far as I could tell. I tried to ease his worries. I suggested that perhaps he should have a drink and I gave him one. He accepted this. Next, I recommended that he should consider trying to blend in by getting some western wear. I attempted to lead him to where he could get free clothing, but he had a hard time following me. Once we got where we were going, he had no idea what to look for or how to use it. I tried to explain the details to him. "You need to click on the picture on the wall." "You need to add the item to your inventory and right click on it." Everything I told him made him more confused and made me wish I was doing something else. I eventually suggested that he should work to get the clothes on and that I'd leave to give him time to change. My leaving was more for me than for him. I saw him again a few minutes later, running around town in the same conspicuous outfit he had been wearing.

This story does not come from the southwestern desert in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is an experience that I had while in Second Life (SL), a virtual world accessible through the internet. More specific than simply a virtual reality (Scroeder, 2008), SL is a virtual world in that it is a persistent social space (Schroeder, 2008; Bell, 2008). In this world, users create the objects and themes for thousands of different types of social spaces. These spaces are

used for socializing, playing games, pursuing hobbies, or even working. Users move about in these spaces with avatars, which are three dimensional agents for their actions (Bell, 2008).

The important communication tools of SL are: Dynamic written text, such as chat sessions and instant messages (IM); Static written text, such as user profiles, notes, and signs; Avatars, which are the three dimensional representations of users; Objects, which are any items that can be worn or attached in some way to an avatar; and Locations, such as a Wild West town, a museum, or a nightclub.

Dynamic text is generally synchronous, occurring in real-time or near real-time. IMs can be asynchronous, because if a resident is not in SL (not in-world, as it is described by residents in SL), then the message is stored until the resident returns. IMs can also be sent to an email account for the user. Static written text is used for a variety of purposes, such as to describe user interests through avatar profiles. Avatars, as representations of users, can be shaped and gendered in an almost infinite number of ways. Objects can be anything from a clothing item, weapon, or vehicle. Objects often have scripts embedded in them that affect how an avatar works, such as a vehicle that propels an avatar forward or a drink that makes an avatar hold it in front of her. Users develop locations by integrating objects into some kind of theme, such as a park, an oil rig in the middle of an ocean, or a tiki hut.

These elements were considered to provide the analysis of this paper. These elements allow for widely variable communication and action. Residents can create different environments and these environments invite particular kinds of social behavior.

What we glean from this Wild West experience is the manner in which a virtual world is constructed socially by residents of SL and the challenges that the person new to a virtual world can pose. Newbie, within a virtual world, is the title that is given to social actors who lack knowledge of the environment and in some key way can detract from the environment for themselves and others. All the social actors in the previous story were working their way through the situation with an understanding of the place and social situation except for the newbie. Each social actor was attempting to contribute in some way to the reality that was being constructed except for the newbie. Through inexperience in this case, the newbie is a potential hazard to the work of other social actors and thus the identity of the newbie is stigmatized to a degree.

With increasing interest in virtual worlds, there will be more newbies. As of now, Second Life is one of the more commonly known versions of a publicly available virtual world, but with other versions coming from companies like Sony (Sony 2007), more people will become involved. Gartner reports that by the end of 2011, 80% of people will lead some kind of life in a virtual reality much like SL (Gartner 2007). These systems allow users to have avatars, make objects, and buy things. In the case of SL, one can purchase Linden Dollars (L$) with US dollars through internet-based open exchanges much like a foreign currency exchange. Once one has Linden Dollars, one can use them to buy clothes, land, cars, or even buy new avatar body shapes and skins.

Because virtual worlds are gaining acceptance and new residents, businesses—both traditional and virtual—will have a growing interest in serving these customers; improved understanding of life within these spaces is essential to providing satisfactory service. Virtual

worlds will become difficult for corporations to ignore; they will need to know how to engage these environments effectively.

Castronova (2005) describes virtual worlds as "the logical next frontier" for marketing because of the potential for consumer interest in these spaces and engagement in the activities there. However, he also warns that marketers must be part of the environment and add—rather than try to simply extract—value. Marketers must attempt to connect to virtual world residents in a manner consistent with the established interactive structure. Social life within these spaces must be well understood rather than simply wallpapering virtual worlds with new advertising. The flow of these spaces must be respected so that residents can get marketing messages while still experiencing what they came to the virtual world for in the first place: fun (Castronova 2008).

In this paper, I will use ethnographic data to suggest how virtual reality, or a virtual world more specifically, is socially constructed. Using a theoretical framework adopted from symbolic interactionism, I will then suggest how the newbie identity can challenge that either directly and intentionally, or through negligence. I will then discuss how each resident of SL negotiates her way through this newbie identity while attaining secondary socialization, developing awareness of newbie signifiers, and taking action to shed the markers of this identity. This research shows how elements of social psychology can be applied to social life in virtual worlds and leads to ideas about how consumer behavior in virtual spaces can be viewed as identity work.

The objective of this paper is to look for the activities that define interaction and group life in SL. The rules that define interaction in this world are considered and used to form an initial understanding of the kind of reality that is constructed. The processes by which people develop an understanding of what it is to become a resident of SL, the markers associated with those that have not been successfully socialized, and the work done by individuals to attain internalized and externalized elements of the socialization process are then suggested.

Literature Review

The first course of action is to place SL in relation to the concepts of virtual reality and virtual worlds. Schroeder (2008) states that virtual reality technology is a computer-generated space that gives the user a sense of "being there" such that the user feels as if they are in another physical space. The goal is not sensory illusion, as was the idea in early virtual reality technology as described by Castronova (2005). Rather, the idea is to create a computer-generated representation of a space that the user can explore and with which she can interact. Building on this, virtual worlds are persistent virtual reality spaces (Schroeder 2008). Bell (2008) identifies SL specifically as a virtual world.

Problematizing virtual worlds, and SL in particular, requires that we establish SL as a kind of society. Taking a cue from Blumer, we can consider it a society in that groups of individuals come together to engage in activities. When describing human group life, Blumer (1968) stated:

(F)undamentally human groups or society *exists in action* and must be seen in terms of action. This picture of human society as action must be the starting point (and the point of return) for any scheme that purports to treat and analyze human society empirically. (p. 6, emphasis in original)

Therefore, what defines a society or human group behavior is the action taken. This provides us with the first set of questions to ask in the analysis of SL. What activity is occurring? What action is being taken by sets of individuals that make them a group?

What an individual does in SL can be viewed sociologically from a few different perspectives. First, there is the action people take. What actions do individuals undertake in SL, and how does the action of a collection of people contribute to a kind of group life? In other words, what activity does the individual undertake to inhabit a social role? Blumer (1969) suggests that if associative interaction can be identified, then one can witness roles being enacted and culture being performed (p. 115).

Creative use of SL communication tools provide the context for interaction. Residents are creating a reality using elements of their communication tools. Understanding the reality that is created in these environments parallels questions of how reality is created in our everyday lives, leading us to consider how virtual worlds might be analyzed by applying other elements of social theory. Berger and Luckmann (1966) provide a useful perspective in their conception of the social construction of reality.

When we discuss SL, a computer-mediated virtual world, it is not the first society to which anyone belongs. SL, as is suggested by the name, is a secondary social environment. Therefore any socialization process would be secondary socialization. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) define it, "Secondary socialization is any subsequent process that inducts already socialized individuals into new sectors of the objective world of his society" (p. 130). It is a socialization process that makes use of primary socialization, and yet it is distinct because the skills that make one a successful social actor in a primary environment will not all carry over to the new, secondary environment.

Defining a socialization process as secondary suggests that elements within primary socialization can be leveraged. Some might argue that the socialization process is not secondary due to the amount of information that must be learned to function effectively. Referring back to the introductory story, the newbie in the Western town had difficulty maneuvering, interacting, and using clothes and other inventory items. This suggests he was having a difficult time learning how to navigate in SL. Although that skill set might be a large hurdle for some, it is not always so. Many come into SL after having used games or other devices that would provide some experience making the SL environment feel more intuitive.

Beyond technical issues of maneuverability, however, are important aspects of group participation. To get to the Western environment, because of where it was situated, the newbie would have needed to search for it and select it. Selection of the environment suggests familiarity with Westerns on some level and hence a degree of experience in interpreting the actions within the space. Most environments in SL have components of social environments learned through films, television, books, or other narrative sources. For example, those who participate in an

environment such as a Dr. Who-themed area are bringing their knowledge of Dr. Who to the space to interpret the social action there. Previous knowledge can be applied.

Socialization is essentially training the individual to be capable of inhabiting an identity. Social processes develop the understanding of the roles in society and prepare the individual to assume an identity. The individual becomes acutely aware of how to properly fit within the social group as a member of that society. When socialization is either neglected or lacking, their action becomes negatively labeled. Berger and Luckmann (1966) point to this when they discuss those who have not been successfully socialized (p. 165). They describe this situation as a kind of "asymmetry" between the reality that is held by the individual and the reality that is held by the group.

This kind of labeled identity fits with Goffman's work on stigma. Stigma, as used by Goffman, refers to attributes associated with a stereotype of a discredited identity. Goffman (1963) states that stigma is related to information about an individual's "abiding characteristics" as opposed to thoughts, feelings, or intentions (p.43). Labeling an individual with a kind of stigmatized identity can often come from visible characteristics. The individual may carry some kind of symbol that is used by others to assign stigmatized identity. Conversely, an individual might lack a prestige symbol that would socially place her outside of a stigmatized identity. This relates to what Goffman (1953) wrote about symbols of class status, saying that, "A sign of position can be a status symbol only if it is used with some regularity as a means of 'placing' socially the person who makes it" (p. 295). In other words, symbols that appear with some kind of frequency can designate that someone should not be labeled with a stigmatized identity because that symbol or object vouches for the individual's status.

The final question shaping the current research is "How does the hypothesized stigma identity function and what does the label do?" In the case of the newbie, the label becomes a way of grouping those with whom one interacts with hesitation. The label also serves as a kind of corrective action. Making individuals aware of the stigmatized identity will lead individuals to find ways to remove stigmatized symbols and present prestige symbols. To learn how this works, the individual may look for those that have been socialized and so rid themselves of the stigma associated with a lack of socialization. Goffman (1963) calls these individuals "heroes of adjustment" (p. 25).

Identity work becomes important to shed a stigmatized identity. This social action achieves two goals. First, it is an attempt by the individual to obtain the necessary information from secondary socialization to truly function within the group and gain all that group life has to offer. This is a kind of internalized sense of socialization. Second, the unsocialized individual is trying to present signs of socialization and manage her identity in such a way that she is not seen as unsocialized. This is a kind of externalized sense of socialization that shows the individual is aware enough to avoid actions that would label them with an unsocialized identity.

These two aspects of identity work, internalized and externalized, are similar to Hochschild's (1979) discussion of "emotion work." Hochshild describes surface acting as a presentation of emotions to others and deep acting as the sensing of emotions within oneself. Her discussion of surface acting becomes surface socialization and her discussion of deep acting becomes deep socialization. And, much like her conception of emotion as being something that we change internally through work that happens on the surface, identity work is done to take the

presented identity of the socialized individual and change the internal sense of how socialized one is. The results of surface work become deep, and the individual interacts with herself. This brings us back full circle to Blumer (1969) and his thoughts on interaction with the self:

(T)he process of self-interaction puts the human being over against his world instead of merely in it, requires him to meet and handle his world through a defining process instead of merely responding to it, and forces him to construct his action instead of merely releasing it. (p. 61)

The ideas cited above provide a scope for this paper, and in many ways, this study is reminiscent of other work that has been done in virtual spaces. For instance, Kendall (2002) uses a similar sociological perspective to investigate activity in a Multiuser Dungeon (MUD). This work, however, looks specifically at the newbie experience. Providing a deeper understanding of the way that socialization works in virtual spaces can give insight to businesses that wish to develop better products and services to assist virtual world users in adapting to their new environments.

Method

The research approach for this paper is much in line with previous studies related to virtual spaces such as online communities that communicate through online forums (Kozinets 2002), MUDs (Kendell 2002), or virtual worlds designed for gaming (Taylor 2006). Kendell (2002) described her work with MUDs as an online ethnography, and noted that an ethnography of a world in which people communicate through written text is, in a sense, "writing about writing" (p. 233). To a degree, that is also the case with Second Life; much of the communication in these spaces tends to be in text (though speech capability was made available during the data collection period). Additional to the text, however, is the visual presentation of the virtual world. In virtual worlds, much like the physical world, the look of the space and its inhabitants influences the action taken. This required that screenshots and field notes be used to capture some data that would otherwise be lost if the sole source of data was the chat log.

In some ways, this work might be viewed as part of the next generation of netnography. Kozinets (2002) defines netnography—his term for ethnography on the Internet—as a "qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer mediated communications" (p. 62). In outlining a series of steps for finding virtual locations and performing netnography as a marketing research data collection technique, Kozinets tended to steer marketing researchers away from active participation in MUDs and chat rooms as they "tend to be considerably less market oriented in their focus," but this is likely due to the predominant state of these worlds at the time of his writing. Within the last few years, markets in and around virtual worlds have gained importance and generated interest (Castronova 2005, Malaby 2006). Because of this, what may have seemed like a waste of time when Kozinets outlined netnography—marketing researcher immersion in virtual worlds—appears to have great potential and may eventually need to be considered as a standard element of effective marketing campaigns.

Data for this paper were collected through online ethnographic/netnographic research. There were essentially four data sources. First, I spent several months in SL as a resident. This period lasted from July 2006 to January 2007. This period was characterized by exploring the

spaces in SL and getting a general feel for what SL was. Also during this period, I chatted with fellow residents and began joining groups to gain familiarity with the environment (as well as joining groups for fun). Over the course of these several months, I was in SL for a couple of hours a week for a total of approximately 50 hours.

Second, a formal period of data collection and participant observation in SL occurred from February 3, 2007, to April 15, 2007. This is the primary source for data within this paper and provided the bulk of my information about what makes up the social fabric of the virtual world and the elements of the newbie identity. Field notes were collected during this period and many chat conversations with consenting participants were also obtained to gain insight on the types and purposes of interaction.

Third, unstructured interviews with five subjects were held within SL using the computerized chat feature of SL. Interviews were conducted with subjects who reviewed and emailed back informed consent forms. Chat sessions for formal interviews generally lasted approximately an hour and a half, with the shortest interview lasting about forty minutes and the longest interviews lasting about one hour and forty-five minutes. Subjects were selected based in part on their ability to contribute to an understanding of how socialization occurred within SL. Three subjects were encountered through avatar-to-avatar interaction during travels within SL, one subject was approached through contact information at a shop that she ran in SL, and one subject was a relative who became interested in trying SL while data was being collected for this project. Time spent in SL, doing formal participant observation and unstructured interviews, was approximately 100 hours.

Finally, information was collected from various sources outside of SL. During the time of the research, there were residents running blogs, news websites, instructional videos and "machinima" (films created using computer-generated worlds for animation—for more information, see Jenkins 2006). These various sources were generally used to provide information about how to negotiate the SL space.

Data was collected in a word processor during in-world sessions and field notes were written in an iterative process during and immediately after sessions. Screen shots were also used as a data collection method to capture information regarding surroundings quickly. Field notes and chat logs captured for use in this study totaled approximately 159 pages with over 70,000 words. These pages were reviewed with coding assigned to different recurrent elements. An overview of the coding was then entered into an observation log to provide a broad categorization of the data contained in individual files.

Because interviews were done within SL using chat, the interview text does not appear the same as normal tape transcriptions. To maintain the character of the original interviews, all quotes in this paper are presented much as they would appear in SL. Each line that is presented here was one line from the actual chat log for the interview. No corrective notation is added to the interview quotations so that the exact quote from the respondent is maintained.

Results

As stated earlier, the questions that are being reviewed within this paper are how group life works in SL; how the interests, goals, and rules of group life are learned through secondary

socialization; and how the individuals work to shed the stigma of the unsuccessfully socialized identity, the identity of the newbie. To demonstrate this, perspectives gained through ethnographic research are presented below and considered regarding the way a virtual world is socially constructed and the way that the identity of the newbie is conceptualized generally and dealt with by individuals specifically.

Social Construction of Reality

As was discussed in the literature review, to examine a virtual world under the lens of sociological social psychology, one must consider what action is being taken and consider how individuals are receiving secondary socialization to properly function as members of the group. Within SL, the first important thing to consider is the formal and informal structure behind interaction and the rules used in social situations. Below are descriptions of both formal rules and other types of rules—both explicit and implicit—that are applied to interaction in SL. After these are considered, a general discussion related to socialization in SL is presented.

Formal rules of the user agreement.

One element of virtual worlds that easily demonstrates its structure as a community is that there are explicit rules of activity. SL has specific user rules as part of its terms of service, described as "Community Standards." These rules directly address what are referred to as the "Big Six" behaviors that infringe on the rights of others, which are intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure (sharing another resident's RL personal information without consent), indecency, and disturbing the peace (Community Standards, n.d.). These rules are enforced by the developers of SL, Linden Lab.

Not only are such rules posted, but an effort is made to make it clear to residents that rules are enforced and that punishments may be inflicted on those who do not follow them. Linden Lab posts police blotters. These are available either from the SL web site or as an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed. In this manner, one can keep up to date with the areas in SL where issues are occurring and can note the action taken, such as suspending the resident from all SL activity for a period of time.

Other rules.

While there are formal rules that are considered enforceable throughout SL, there are also localized rules and suggestions for conduct that residents generate. Again, these can be enforced through SL police departments, but more often they are just taken as suggestions for properly interacting in a particular space.

One informant, Vrekasht[1], was a friend that I met while visiting a Star Trek-related area of SL. She was a fairly new resident, and she was an excellent informant because I was able to learn from her what it was like to gain familiarity with SL and what it is like to become a highly involved member of a community with a very specific mission, such as creating information and displays related to Star Trek. In an interview with her, she described a situation when she and some friends saw someone attempting to break the rules and the way that this was handled:

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[1] All names for me, informants, and locations that are given in this document are modified to maintain privacy.

Vrekasht: *LOL* Marty tried to take me to a nightclub the other day, and the first thing that happened was a naked dancing fat man started chasing us around

Vrekasht: Yeah

Me: That's nice. Hey, if you wanted that, you'd club in rl. Am I right?

Vrekasht: Heh

Vrekasht: I think the sort of mod/overseer/greeter had a hand in this - because a giant box suddenly started covering him that said "PLEASE PUT YOUR DICK AWAY"

Me: LOL

Me: That's hilarious.

Vrekasht: Yes *L*

In the situation described, it is not apparent whether any further sanctions were placed on the offending individual, but it is clear that some kind of action was taken to publicly sanction the offender and demonstrate that deviations from the rules and social norms of the club would not be tolerated.

Early in my experiences in SL, I began going to virtual nightclubs. Many clubs are very similar to RL. There is music, which generally provides the theme of the club and in some way fits with the *décor*; there is space for avatars to dance; and there is a standard mode of dress. One of the first sites visited for this research was a jazz club. I quickly learned from this place that clothing one's avatar is an extremely important practice in SL and is essentially a duty owed to the community. Whereas everyone else at this club was wearing some degree of finery, with male avatars in suits and tuxedos and female avatars in lovely gowns, I was wearing my newbie outfit which consisted of blue jeans and a white t-shirt. I soon wore a sport coat over this outfit to disguise it to a degree, but after a time I purchased a tuxedo.

What I describe as my experience seems in many ways common. This has led some places, to include the one I mention, to post rules for patrons. For example, one jazz club I liked to attend posted a list of rules and suggestions for conduct. Not all of the rules on this list were "rules." The sign that was posted began by making a suggestion regarding the attire of patrons, stating specifically that clothing was not optional and implying formalwear was preferred, though not mandatory. Some clubs have more rigid rules, such as requiring avatars be in formal attire and providing free suits to help residents meet the requirements.

Other clubs require less formal attire. For instance, I attended an '80's music club where all of the avatars were wearing some form of casual clothing. Mine was the lone avatar that was not wearing clothing that either had denim or leather, but at the time my avatar was a dinosaur. (In figure 1 my avatar is the raptor dancing in the foreground.) This club did not have formal rules for dress, but the informal rules – the "unsaid" rules, as they might be described—suggest that the attire should follow a particular protocol.

Figure 1

Secondary socialization. Residents of SL need to learn how to operate in the new environment and effectively interact with other residents as a kind of secondary socialization. Some of the keys to this have already been discussed. First, residents need to have a basic understanding of the rules. Beyond presentations of the rules, however, residents need to learn what communities are in SL and how to properly interact within them.

Secondary socialization is primarily achieved by watching how other members of the group interact. For instance, I learned through interaction that most greetings in SL include the first name. All avatars have a label above them that provides their names and one group affiliation[2]. For instance, assume my avatar's name was Alton Wickerstrom. Upon meeting someone, they would say something like, "Hi, Alton!" whether they knew me or not. I began to realize that this was the expected form of interaction throughout most of SL. Even when meeting a stranger, one is open to this kind of greeting.

As SL is a diverse community with many different groups, localized behavior is also important to understand. For instance, at some clubs, one learns that the preferred form of communication when two avatars are face to face is not chat, which all within 30 virtual meters may "hear," but IM, which is not distance-sensitive and which is private. Quite often I would be in a club with a dozen or so avatars with all of them dancing and none of them chatting. This did

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[2] During most of my time in SL working on this project, I had a group affiliation listing me as an RL researcher. My group affiliation varied from this only in situations when I joined a new group and my affiliation would default to the new group without me realizing it. For instance, I joined a group that was interested in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy books and this changed my group affiliation to "Mostly Harmless" for a few days.

not mean that communication was not happening; it sometimes meant that communication was occurring in private IM channels.

Stigmatized Identity of the Newbie

During my research I became aware of the stigma associated with being new. Newness for me was experienced as a kind of awkwardness when I would realize that I was somehow out of alignment with my environment. By recognizing my own awkwardness, I came to realize two things. First, there was a general negative impression of the new person in SL, usually referred to as a "newbie." The negative impression was not usually very strong, and not universal, but also not uncommon. Second, the status of newbie is one that, for every individual, must be overcome. No one joins SL as a veteran resident. All members must pass through the experiences of the newbie to some degree.

In this section, I will provide some resident definitions of the newbie. Next, I will describe behavior that is explicitly deviant and ascribed to the identity of the newbie. Then, elements of the newbie that are more subtle and more difficult to see in oneself will be explored. I will then conclude with examples of action taken to perform identity work to divest oneself of the label of the newbie.

Defining newbies.

I gained an interest in understanding the newbie identity early in my research. For a couple of interviews, the status of newbie was something that I would bring up to learn the informant's thoughts. However, in three of the five formal interviews, the topic of newbies came up while discussing other things. For instance, Julia was chatting about exploring new areas in SL. She stated that if a place was interesting, then it was either empty or, if it was somehow sexual, it was filled with newbies. This is the conversation that followed:

Me: Tell me about newbies.

Me: How do you spot them?

Julia: they are either nice or a pain in the ass :)

Julia: if they are very new - the walk :)

Me: Yeah, I must admit, I haven't "corrected" mine yet, despite the area of the research.

Julia: but I remember how I was helped when I was new. and if they are nice, I help them as well

From this brief discussion, we see that (1) when a place is filled with newbies, it is about as bad as if it was empty. In other words, either way, one will not have pleasant social interaction in this location. We also see that (2) although newness makes a newbie, it is not the criteria by which they are spotted. Julia's mention of "the walk" is a reference to the use of animation overrides for an avatar. At the time of the interview, I was just becoming aware that I needed to address this which is why I mentioned that I had not yet corrected my walk.

The final thing that we see is (3) that she recognizes that she was once a newbie, too, and that if the newbie is "nice," she will help the newbie as she was helped when she was new. This was a common theme. Based on my experience, most SL residents try to be friendly and helpful to each other. For the vast majority of subjects, the Community Standards are not something that needs to be read for civil interaction. Most residents are understanding, helpful, and assist newbies to the extent of their own patience.

Newbies, from Julia's description, simply need to learn more about the environment. They need to understand the tools that are available to them in SL to live better second lives. This concept was echoed in the ideas of another informant who stated that those who used chat over IM were generally newbies. From his perspective, too, the newbie simply did not know the tools available to more effectively operate in SL.

Another informant, Vrekasht, contrasted "newbie" with "noob," stating that she thought that the first sounded more like a term of affection but the second was only meant as derogatory. She only used the term newbie to describe herself at the time she was interviewed, which was about a month after she had started using SL. When I asked her how she used the term in reference to herself, she said, "Apologetically, usually. *giggles*." Calling oneself a newbie is a way of seeking forgiveness and understanding.

Deviance and the newbie identity. One of the informants for this study had a job logging abuse reports with Linden Lab against disturbing patrons for a club. We planned to meet for an interview on a Sunday morning, but he was dramatically delayed. When he arrived for the interview, we started by me asking him about work:

Antony: how are you Alton

Me: Good! How was work?

Antony: jeesh

Antony: so many reports

Antony: newbies

As this suggests, Antony's felt most of the situations within SL when there were issues with residents ignoring rules were the fault of a newbie. The key to understanding the behavior, much like when looking at these situations in RL, is intent. When someone intends to break rules or ignore conduct standards, then they go beyond being a newbie and may be referred to as a griefer. While we were discussing how weapons work in SL he stated that some weapons just "grief" people.

Me: Now how would you define grief?

Antony: upsetting people in here that are doing there usual daily thing

Antony: taking time out of there way by interfering with there life

Antony: for no reason other than to pick onthem

Those who grief, based on Antony's perspective, tended to be newbies who looked at SL as more of a game rather than a place for people to interact socially. He assumed most griefers simply did not properly understand life in SL.

Lack of knowledge and the newbie identity. Though Antony blamed most of the abuse reports in SL on newbies, he also had spent a lot of time helping newbies manage life in SL. He mentioned assisting them with finding good clubs, and objects that were within their avatar's inventory.

As the quote from my interview with Julia suggested, I had to learn how to fix my walk. I learned from walking with other informants that my walk was jerky and less efficient. I learned through Vrekasht, who had been in SL for far less time than I had, that an animation override would provide more fluid movement for my avatar. From Julia, I received an animation override and some suggestions for getting additional poses to work with the override.[3]

Julia was assisted as a newbie by people that helped her learn about taking pictures in SL and picking outfits. She mentioned that if newbies were nice, she helped them as she was helped. I was one of the newbies that she was willing to help. Not only did she provide the animation override, but she took me to a blues club and showed me around. What she was doing was providing me with the tools to have an enriched experience in SL. She was attempting to help me achieve internalized secondary socialization by showing me one of her favorite clubs and externalized secondary socialization by providing me with a better walk through the animation override.

Avoiding the newbie look. Developing a better understanding of SL is the way one works toward an internalization of the secondary socialization process. This is important, but part of achieving internalized socialization is showing externalized socialization and looking the part. In this way, it is important for one to act in a way that distances one from the stigmatized newbie identity.

My first act was to move myself away from the newbie look. Figure 2 shows me as I looked for the first few months in SL. I had made some early adjustments to my avatar, making myself shorter and heavier than most, but my face was the standard clean-shaven look and my hair was the dead-giveaway newbie style. As a resident who participated only a couple of hours a week, I slowly learned the importance of paying more attention to these details. I changed my usual look around the time that I began formal data collection for this project. Figure 3 shows my avatar in a look that is more like what I usually have now, with a purchased tuxedo, pointier head hair, and facial hair.

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[3] I met Julia because I had seen her work as part of a collection of vendors who sold poses and animations. I contacted her originally to collect data for a related project, on markets within SL for gestures and the purchasing of communicative competence, but she was extremely helpful in other areas as well.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Changing these elements of appearance help to present oneself to others as someone who knows what he is doing in SL (though I still have a hint of newbie about me most of the time). Informants and my experiences in SL led me to see the importance of finding ways to make an avatar look distinctive. This leads back to the idea of the market in SL. Much of the money spent by those interviewed was spent on items that would change avatar appearance. For instance, I asked Cassius about his first purchase:

Me: So, what sort of stuff have you bought? When, where and why did you spend your first $L?

Cassius: hmmm... think I spent it on hair

Cassius: There's a natural desire to fit in, and newbies definitely stand out

Me: Yeah, I started to feel that myself after a while.

Cassius: I've bought a few clothes... this suit for example.

Cassius also mentioned within this interview that it was other residents, people who had been in SL for a long time, that suggested buying hair. In this way, Cassius found "heroes of adjustment" in veteran users. They were people who were no longer newbies and could guide Cassius.

The type of consumption discussed by Cassius, and the reasoning behind it, is representative of many residents in SL. Purchases are made to present a look and define a person as socialized into SL. Clothing, hair, and objects are purchased to show that one belongs. This can be done in a general sense, as Cassius describes, or it can be done to present a look that defines an individual as belonging to a particular group.

For example, after Vrekasht had been in SL for about a month, she began building small replicas of characters from Star Trek television shows and movies. With some encouragement from others, she began selling these virtual plushies for a few L$ as an attachment for avatars. Plushies were briefly worn on the shoulders of those in the Star Trek community along with other objects, such as Star Trek uniforms. Though she sold the plushies at one area in SL, they were worn in other areas related to Star Trek. In effect, they became a symbol of group membership.

Discussion

This study suggests that secondary socialization in SL has several important components. First, it draws heavily from RL. Conceptions of reality narratives and proper social interaction are pulled from the world in which primary socialization occurred. The action that Blumer asks us to look for which makes up group life suggests that the multiple narratives combined in SL have the potential to create a new narrative to feed back into RL. SL, like RL, is a world of creativity that is shaped by residents. It is not a game with set rules. It is actively altered by those who participate in it.

Second, the success of secondary socialization is something that SL residents evaluate in each other and themselves. Those who either act in a way that is uncivil or unsocialized are stigmatized. This stigmatization leads to reduced interaction with fellow residents. However, the stigma is one that everyone senses in herself at some point and most members of SL are willing to do what they can to assist a newbie. SL, again like RL, has social identities that vary in desirability and identity work can be done to learn how group life works and thus leads to socialization.

Third, living in a virtual world requires the individual to collect virtual stuff. One cannot be anything but a newbie in the eyes of others if one's wardrobe is empty and one has not spent the time, effort, or money to alter one's appearance. It is possible through creativity and search activities to present a socialized appearance; however, the market offers the quickest solution to looking the part. Also, free items tended to be items that required less work by the person who made them so purchased items can be of higher quality. Identity work can be pursued by shopping. What Goffman noted about RL applies to SL as well; status symbols can be part of the identity work toolkit. It is through consumption that we can become socialized and express our connectedness to the rest of the group.

Consumption to develop a particular kind of identity varies depending on the group to which one wishes to belong. Being a member of the group at a jazz club is different than being a member of the group in a Wild West town or at the Star Trek museum. Future research might be done to survey members of different groups to see if the same categories of items are purchased to pursue socialized identities across social groups.

Additionally, it would be of interest to marketers of physical world products to provide support for virtual communities matching up with their products and receptive to corporate involvement. Some companies have already tested the waters by providing their own spaces in Second Life and offering items that fit with the spaces that they have created. Based on this research, a better approach might be to identify a particular kind of community in virtual worlds and provide items that would be of common interest to community members.

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