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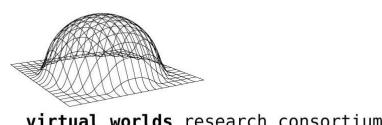
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Editor –in-Chief’s Corner

Cultural Identity in Virtual Reality (VR):

A Case Study of a Muslim Woman with hijab in Second Life (SL)

By Methal R. Mohammed, Texas A&M University

Abstract

This study investigates how the cultural identity of a Muslim woman with hijab (hair scarf) is perceived in Second Life (SL), a virtual and visual cultural environment, through a case study that the author both performed and experienced during the research for this paper. The findings reflect different forms of reaction that tended to lean more toward rejection and indifference than acceptance. I conclude that there is a need to establish an educational curriculum in SL about Islam and Muslims. This could be accomplished through a collaborative endeavor between Muslims, Muslim and non-Muslim educators, and educational institutions in order to promote what is referred to as “negotiation rather than negation” among different cultures, in order to bring better understanding, respect, and appreciation for the “Other.”

Keywords: Cultural identity; *hijab*; Second Life; Third Space; hybrids.

Editor –in-Chief’s Corner

Cultural Identity in Virtual Reality (VR):

A Case Study of a Muslim Woman with hijab in Second Life (SL)

By Methal R. Mohammed, Texas A&M University

Second Life (SL) is an internet- based virtual world that was developed and launched by Linden Research Inc. as a downloadable program. Users of SL are called residents. In 2007, Phillip Linden acknowledged that the SL community has reached one million signed up residents (White, 2007), who create their own avatars as their representatives in SL. An avatar is given a first and last name. Users are free to choose their avatar’s first name, but they must select the last name from a name-list menu. An avatar can be shaped and reshaped to look similar or different than its user. Residents of SL can interact socially through their motional avatars. Second Life is full of hundreds of sites that represent real and /or imaginary places. Avatars can be teleported to different virtual sites in SL. They can visit, reside at, and own a land for any personal or group activity and usage. SL also has its own virtual economy. Its currency is called “Linden Dollar”, which can be exchanged virtually, and also converted into real life money. Real world corporations like Reebok, American Apparel, MTV, and PepsiCo have established virtual stores in SL, where avatars can purchase and drink cans of digital cola (Itzkoff, 2007). Educational institutes such as Harvard, UC Berkeley, and Boston University even have their universities’ virtual sites in SL.

The purpose of this paper is to explore SL as a virtual and visual environment that reflects its inhabitants’ perceptions of Muslim women with *hijab*, and how these perceptions can be related to Real Life (RL) experiences. This research is a case study, both performed and experienced during the author’s research in SL. The study investigates the relation and the reciprocal impact of the “real” and “virtual” through the following questions:

- 1- How is cultural identity presented in SL?
- 2- How are Muslim women with *hijab* perceived in SL?
- 3- How does SL experience(s) affect RL attitudes and practices and vice versa?

What is Virtual Reality (VR)?

Virtual Reality (VR) is sometimes referred to as “immersion technology” as it is a highly complicated design with the power to transfer people from real life into worlds of fantasy despite the difference in time and place. Programs of virtual reality create a sort of man-computer interaction that not only opens “new worlds” of electronic versions of our real world but also construct complex combinations of the real and imaginary. Avatars, as representatives of “real” people, are then born as “hybrids” that sway somewhere between “reality” and “illusion” in a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) that relates neither to “now” and “here” nor to “then” and “there”.

According to Coyne (1994), the notion of VR is based on the premise of perception and representation. From the data-oriented view, perception is a “matter of data input” that is largely affected by the data transferred from the environment to the mind. Consequently, the body is characterized as an “elaborate input device”. The constructivist school, however, views perception as a process that is based on “cues and clues” from the environment. They believe that users of computerized simulators become effective through a state of immersion in any environment. They add that a state of immersion depends on the “state of mind, our interest, what we have been taught to experience, our personal and collective expectations, and our familiarity with the medium” (Coyne, 1994, p. 66). Constructivists prioritize practice, and believe that drawings or images make sense according to our immersion in a particular cultural practice, as a virtual reality system may be assumed to be learned within the “context of a particular practice.” Coyne (1994) argues that VR provides a “universal field of sensory input” that helps the viewer engage in applying his/her own construction, and then starts a process of “filtering”. Finally, the Correspondence theory views representation as a “correspondence to what is out there in the objects,” and argues that perceptual images are real because there is a “one-to-one mapping of the visible surfaces of the world onto the picture plan, and from there to the eye” (as cited in Coyne, 1994, p. 66).

From a thematic point of view, Taylor (1997) discusses four main themes of VR that have emerged with the advancement of technology. The first theme is that virtual reality is a “transcendent technology” through which the user is transformed into a “virtual technological” existence while the “body and materiality” are left behind. The second theme suggests that virtual worlds may be used to govern real space, while the third theme employs virtual reality in “preserving reality”. The fourth and last theme presents virtual worlds as new spaces to expand “capitalism and commodification for commercial and corporatist” profits (Taylor, 1997, p. 174).

Personal Experience in SL

In September 2007 and throughout a class in Visual Culture, I created my personal avatar in SL: “noorelhuda Beb.”. I then launched her into an adventurous explorative research in SL. I dressed “noorelhuda” in long trousers and a long sleeved shirt (like I dress in RL), and found a free pair of white shoes for her. I made her facial features as “typical” as I could (the basic features the system allowed me) and gave her long brown hair. From September through mid-October, my avatar roamed here and there exploring new SL sites. Though she was enthusiastic and willing to communicate and socialize with other avatars, she was neither welcomed by female nor male avatars. Other female avatars were dressed in fancy dresses, high- heeled shoes, glamorous accessories, and fashion hair styles and colors - or in shorts and mini skirts, open shirts, and high-heeled shoes or boots. They looked like movie stars in Hollywood, while “noorelhuda” looked like a conservative young lady.

However, “noorelhuda” learned to teleport herself to many different sites in the hope of establishing SL friendships. Once she found herself on resort beaches where avatars, males and females, were either naked or semi-naked. On another occasion, she found herself in a club where avatars were dancing and chatting – and once she found herself on Money Islands were avatars were sitting and counting the virtual minutes, in order to receive virtual money in return. Virtual time was passing quite slowly with “noorelhuda”. One night while I was watching “noorelhuda” sitting alone in a new site, I began to consider either dropping out of the course or, at least, the SL project. Suddenly, “noorelhuda” lifted her head, turned her face toward me, and

looked me in the eyes through the monitor. I was stunned. At that very moment I realized what “noorelhuda” was missing in SL. She was missing her *hijab!*“

As a result to my insight, I sent my avatar, “noorelhuda,” was sent back to SL as a Muslim woman with *hijab* to become my virtual representative. She took with her the idea of this research, and a question in her mind: How would avatars react to me, now that I am wearing my *hijab*?

I started collecting data on October 2007. I was randomly navigating different sites with the hope of reaching and communicating with different avatars. My plan was to meet as many avatars as I could, and to establish a dialogue with them through one question: *I am new here, can you please help me?* Some avatars reacted spontaneously as soon as they passed by me. They stopped suddenly on their way, took a moment looking at “noorelhuda”, then either commented or turned their faces away and continued on their path. I captured some of these moments in order to establish a dialogue by greeting them using either the gestures icon from the menu list, which allows me a voice communication to say “hi,” or by writing “hi” down on the chat window so they could read and respond.

Case Studies

1 - October 23, 2007

I launched into an island to find myself in the midst of a crowd. Avatars were roaming the street, some of them in a rush while others gathered in groups to chat here and there. While I was exploring the area, and greeting the avatars around me, suddenly a group of young male avatars approached me, and then stood quite closely. They exchanged their looks and their words: “Hey, look...a new visitor...looks nice,” and then they addressed me: “hey baby...do you like to join us...what is wrong with your cover...you look sexy.” I teleported “noorelhuda” into another site.

2 - October 25, 2007

I arrived on a resort island, and a male avatar responded to my request for help. He offered to help me navigate me through the island. We walked for a distance, and I asked him what he thought of my *hijab*. He did not comment. Instead, he offered me a ride in a balloon to see the site from above. He asked me to jump into the balloon, and then told me that he would follow me. As I clicked on the “sit here” icon to sit inside the balloon, I found myself sitting inside the balloon, but also on the lap of another male avatar who was hiding in the balloon. I jumped out of the balloon, and I teleported “noorelhuda” into another site.

3 - October 27, 2007

I arrived at a site for collecting virtual money (Lindens). I met another male avatar who was gentle and willing to help and communicate. He told me that I could sit down on a bench for some time and earn some money. While sitting on the bench together, I asked him what he thought of my *hijab*. He immediately replied with another question asking me where I was from. I replied that I am from Baghdad; he commented that all women in my country wear the hair scarf. I asked him what he thought of it, and how he viewed women who wore it. He replied that

it was a cultural issue. He then added that he would rather talk to me first, and then he would be able to reply. We had a long, interesting, constructive, and engaging discussion that expanded to touch upon many different social and educational topics. We found out that we were both Teachers of English as a Second Language, and that we shared an interest in developing the educational trends in this field in our corresponding countries. I accepted his invitation card to be friends in SL. I teleported “noorelhuda” into another site.

At this point, my observation was going well as I was meeting more avatars at different sites. My plan was to continue collecting data for a longer period of time, and then to analyze the data. But the plan soon changed dramatically when “noorelhuda” decided to visit an old site that she had visited several times during the last two months.

4- October 30, 2007

The site was a beach resort with a dancing spot, cafeteria, a few shade umbrellas, chairs and tables. As I arrived at the site, I walked around to have a look. I suddenly noticed that my *hijab* was turned right side to left. I needed to fix it. I looked for a place far away from the crowd where avatars were dancing and sunbathing on the seashore. I sat down at one of the sitting shades and started fixing my *hijab*. While I was busy fixing my *hijab*, I suddenly heard sirens and an announcement through a loudspeaker which I could not understand. However, I decided to stand up and walk around even though my *hijab* was still not fixed properly. As I walked few steps away from the shed, an avatar male policeman approached me, lifted his two hands up, and started strongly pushing me back. I was shocked, and unable to understand what was going on with this policeman. I just could not believe it. I was trying to protect myself, but did not know how and what to do it. I was unable to avoid the policeman avatar’s hostility and aggressive behavior. He continued pushing me back, as I was stunned and paralyzed until I found my self pushed into the sea. I was sinking down, deep down into the waters. I was drowning down until I disappeared. I was “killed.”

All of a sudden, I realized that it was my avatar who was drowned and killed and not me, the “real” person in my real physical body. I gathered myself and teleported my avatar into another site. The experience had shaken me. I could not visit SL for almost two months, and started thinking: Could such an incident happen to me in Real Life? Why couldn’t it?!

Findings

There was a growing interest in communicating with “noorelhuda Bebb” after she wore *hijab*, especially from male avatars. They were more interested in “noorelhuda” than were female avatars. Avatars’ reactions to “noorelhuda” as a Muslim female with *hijab* in SL tended more toward judging her through her appearance, rather than through her level of education, communicative skills, mutual interests, or way of thinking. Finally, SL culture reflected an unwelcoming, mostly rejecting, indifferent, and unfriendly culture toward “noorelhuda” as a Muslim woman with *hijab*. There was a lack of communication, rejection, and hatred against “noorelhuda” that ended with “killing” her.

Emerging Themes

Five themes emerged out of this study. The first theme is central to negative stereotypes about Muslims - particularly Muslim women - as backward and illiterate. Such negative stereotypes have “maintained currency over time,”(Zine, 2007, p.240) and helped create the Orientalist Muslim as an inferior cultural identity. According to Said (1987), Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted difference between the familiar Europe, the West, us, and the strange, the Orient, the East, them”(Said, 1987, p. 43). The second theme is “Gendered Islamophobia.” Zine (2007) defines “gendered Islamophobia” as “specific forms of ethno-religious and radicalized discrimination leveled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes” (p. 240). The Muslim women’s dress code signifies not only their religion but also their cultural, social, and political orientations. Muslim women with their dress codes are not viewed as innocent sights anymore; rather they are “constructed as an object of fear and desire” (Zine, 2007, p. 242). The third theme is lack of communication. SL is a virtual world where avatars sway in a space that belongs neither to the “here” and “now” nor to “then” and “there.” They fluctuate as “hybrid” cultural identities in-between reality and fantasy, in a “third space” where cultural differences “negotiate” any possible communication. Hybridity, as a philosophical concept, according to Bhabha, has come to mean all sorts of things concerning mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). Bhabha explains hybridity as an “in-between” term that refers to the “third-space” as a space of cultural separation (p.55). It is the location where cultures encounter one another, and practices of interacting and transforming powers occur. The “third space” is an in-between interstitial space that may open the way to conceptualizing an international “virtual” culture, where transculturation may establish itself. Transculturation, as Mirzoeff (1999) argues, is a three-way process that involves the acquisition of certain aspects of the new culture, the loss of some older ones, and the creation of a coherent body of the old and new fragments put together (p. 131). In this “third space” a “hybrid” cultural identity is created - the liminal negotiation (Bhabha, 1994) of cultural difference that expands into a continuous exchange of cultural meaning. Bhabha argues that “everyone is shaped by their social experiences and their own heritage, as well as the experiences and histories of everyone that they come into contact with”(as cited in Rajan, 1998). The fourth and last theme is “Retriggering”, which I borrow from Creswell (2007). Creswell explains retriggering as a process that agitates an old feeling of threat or fear that had been experienced and is associated with the new situation (p. 346). For example, “noorelhuda’s ” experience in SL had a great effect on my RL experience. Visiting SL retriggers “noorelhuda’s” fears of being “drowned” and “killed” in SL by a policeman with no explanation. “noorelhuda’s” SL fears have been transferred to my Real Life in that I fear a similar Real Life incident just because I am a Muslim woman with *hijab*. This is especially strong because I live in a Western country. The *hijab* in the West is viewed as a means of rejection to the Western norms of “seeing” the female body as a sexual site; therefore, it is interpreted by the West as a way of resisting dominant Western views of the female body.

Discussion

People in VR do not only transport virtual representations of their physical bodies; they also take their cultural, social, gendered, and personal history with them. Discourses that dominated VR in its prime were built on the idea of the disembodied person, while new trends in cultural and social processes argue that the “corporeal body is an integral part of human experience as the body is interpreted as a cultural product, gendered, and ethnic entity”

(Murray& Sixsmith, 1999, p. 322). Though VR is a virtual world, avatars are cultural representations of their “real” people in a quest of a “virtual” identity. Cultural identity in cyberspace differentiates virtual identities, and helps situate avatars in a specific social structure (Hoffman, 1998). Cultural identity is the product of cultural beliefs and practices that one may not realize easily. VR for so many people may be an outlet that helps them escape their reality, and find ways to cope with identity struggles through the safety of fantasy.” (Jagodzinski, 2006). A player identifies with his/her avatar as an object, as avatars can be compared to empty shells that are filled with the player’s emotions, feelings, and state of mind. As stated by Hampton (1999), “individuals do not enter into cyberspace as clean slates but bring with them aspects of their lives”(p. 1578). Aggressiveness in SL, according to Jagodzinski (2006) is the “acting out of aggression toward the Other through the imaginary and symbolic orders as the subject fends for itself and abjects alterity” (p. 288). VR, then, enables its players to intensely transfer their “hidden” selves into their avatar. An avatar becomes an virtual counterpart that exists in the imaginative space and time, it becomes, “like a ghost - a guardian angel or devil - capable of magically acting through the will of the player”(Jagodzinski, 2006, p. 289). The act of killing “noorelhuda” raises many questions, one of which is: to what extent can a serious and dangerous virtual act against a Muslim woman in SL be practiced in a “real” life situation? The internet and the hyperspace should not be “viewed as tools that maintain social relationships...but as closed environments that serve as a context for alterations to personal identity, relations with others” (Hampton, 1999, p. 1578).

Muslim woman with *hijab* in “real” life have become the victims of politicized Islam, and their dress code and *hijab* have become very provocative forms of political ideologies rather than a religious obligation to the Westerners. The *hijab*, however, stands for more than simply a religious representation of Muslim women to the Westerners; rather, it conveys a Muslim culture in its political, social, religious, and historical aspects (Ashrif, 2001). The *hijab* is viewed as an “Oriental” political message as Islam has come to “symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians”(Said, 1978, p. 59). Though Muslim women’s dress code and *hijab* were exploited to hide weapons in some colonized Muslim countries such as Algeria in its anti-colonial struggle against the French, it was also a statement against the French policy to “Westernize” Algeria, and to impose the “Western” perception of “Womanhood” on it (Zine, 2006). According to Zine (2006) the practice of veiling for Muslim women may be also interpreted as “resisting the hegemony of sexualized representations of the female body” in the West (p. 243). Women’s bodies in Islam can by no means be viewed as a sexualized site for exhibition, as they are in Western culture. Berger (1977) argues that, “in the nudes of European painting we can discover some of the criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sites” (p.47). The woman’s body in Islam is viewed as a source of sacred beauty that should be dignified and elevated by covering it rather than exposing it.

Conclusion

It is a must to establish an educational curriculum in SL to help clarify religious and cultural misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims through a collaborative and cooperative endeavor between Muslims, Muslim and non-Muslim educators, and educational institutions. Such curriculum should aim at promoting “negotiation rather than negation”, and should establish a social action in an informal setting in SL, hoping it reflects on RL practices to bring better understanding, respect, and appreciation for the “Other”.

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