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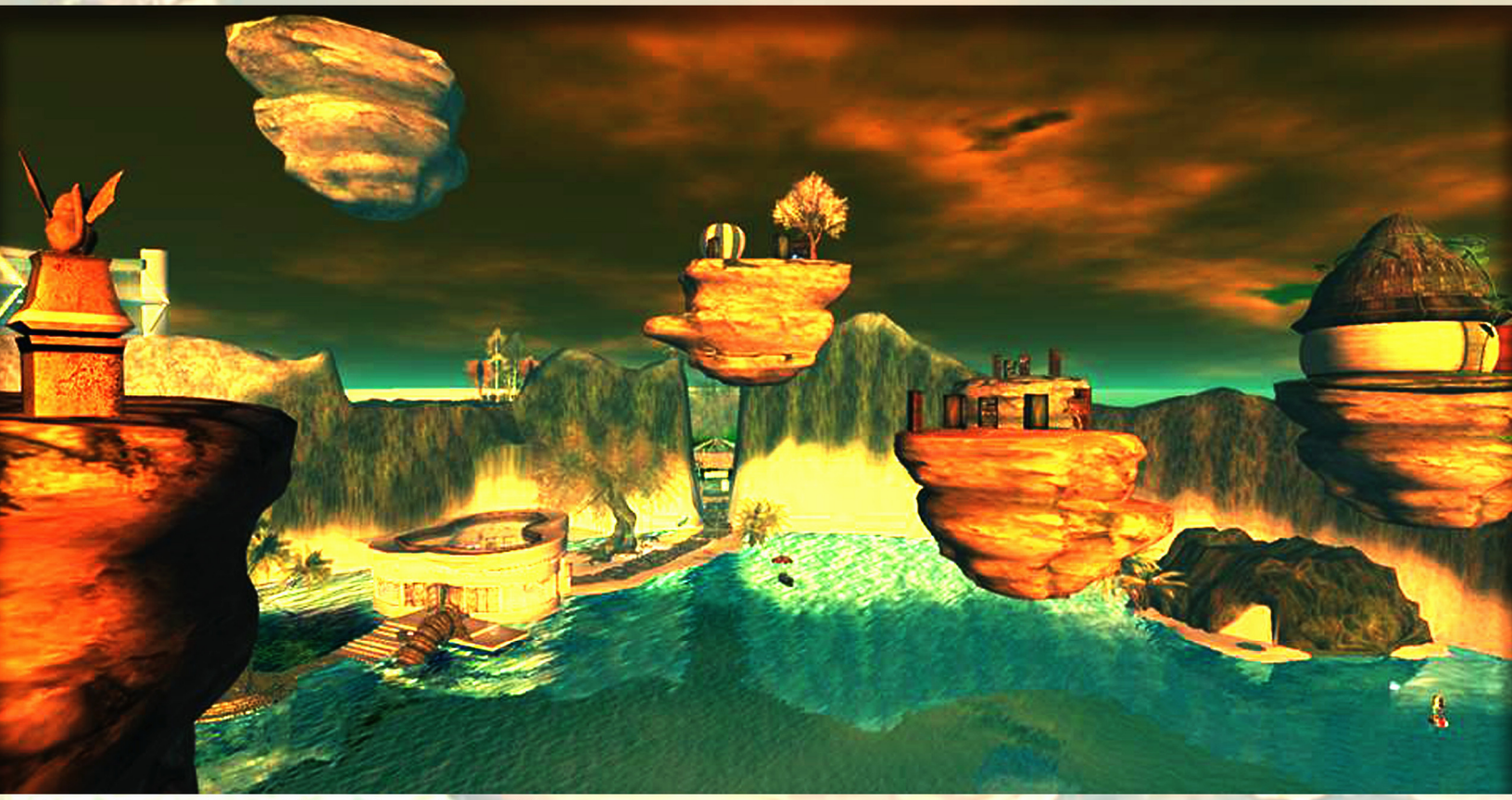

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Professors and Virtual World Professionalism: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Just as there are now questions about professionalism and professional boundaries in social networking environments such as Facebook or LinkedIn, there are also questions about what it means to be professional in virtual worlds like Second Life (SL). In an effort to understand professors' lived experiences with professionalism in virtual worlds, specifically in SL, I conducted a qualitative study: a hermeneutic phenomenology. Participants included 10 professors from various countries, and they were assigned pseudonyms for this study. The findings indicate that avatar attire is an important aspect of professionalism for many professors, and professors were able to maintain professionalism in their virtual world classrooms with both human and non-human avatars.

1. Introduction

My foray into virtual world professionalism began with conducting interviews for my qualitative research. I was scheduled to meet a participant on one of the many islands in Second Life (SL), and I decided to teleport there a little early so I could explore the island before the interview. I clumsily entered the interview area, arms akimbo and feet flailing frantically for the ground below. I took one step and fell face first into the nearest body of water. Attempting to avoid being an accidental Ophelia[1], I struggled to free myself from the watery mess before the interview. Although I was early, I did not have much time. I continued to wrestle with the water, arms swinging and head bobbing. Finally, I fought my way up and managed to do so before the interview. I arose feeling grateful for averted interview awkwardness and thankful that avatars dry quickly. I could not help but wonder, however, what the person I was meeting would have thought if she, too, had appeared in the area early and found my avatar taking an unintentional dip.

Figure 1. My avatar on the SL campus of the institution where I received my doctorate, the University of Alabama

The aforementioned experience led me to think more deeply about the relationship between professionalism and virtual worlds. While analyzing the data for a qualitative study I completed on faculty members' lived experiences with persona in virtual worlds, I found that participants addressed several pertinent issues related to professionalism in SL. I analyzed the professionalism data from that study again, and those results comprise the Findings for this current study.

[1] Ophelia, a character from William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, drowned

1.1. Purpose

According to Allen and Seaman's (2014) Babson Survey, enrollment growth for online learning has once again exceeded the growth for higher education overall. Although the growth in online education was lower than it has been in the survey's 13-year history, there was still an increase of 3.7% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The survey also indicated that more academic leaders see online education as "critical to their long-term strateg[ies]," as the number of leaders who share that perspective increased to 70.8% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). As administrators and faculty members continue to integrate online learning into higher education, understanding what it means to interact in the online environment will continue to be important as well. Furthermore, leveraging opportunities to increase and maintain student engagement, student learning, and innovation online will also be integral to the constancy of online learning in higher education.

One way some professors are choosing to increase learning, engagement, and innovation in their courses is through the use of virtual worlds. However, unlike more traditional online learning environments, most virtual worlds allow users to select avatars. In the virtual world Second Life, for example, these animated ambassadors can take on human or non-human forms. For a faculty member teaching in or with a virtual world like SL, which avatar is most appropriate: human or non-human? How will faculty members maintain professionalism in an animated environment? The purpose of this paper is to provide insight on faculty members' perspectives on professionalism in virtual worlds, more specifically, the virtual world SL.

2. Review of the Literature

1.1. Professionalism Online

The literature about online professionalism and faculty often centers around faculty members' interactions on social media sites. For example, Cain, Scott, Tiemeier, Akers, and Metzler (2013) investigated "e-professionalism" and professors' use of Facebook. They stated that online 'etiquette' involves both what a faculty member posts online and how a faculty member responds to the posts of others (Cain et al., 2013). Even though some faculty members were friends with their students on Facebook, the idea of professionalism was still an important one, as 55% of the 159 professors who completed the survey used privacy settings to make certain information on their pages unavailable. Valetsianos and Kimmons (2013) also broached the topic of faculty professionalism in their phenomenological study on faculty members' experiences with online social networks. The qualitative study included data from three professors, who all reported that they gave thought to professional boundaries when dealing with students and other faculty members or staff online. Other studies have included conversations about students assessing faculty members' professionalism (Todhunter, Cruess, Cruess, Young, & Steinert, 2011). While these studies are indicative of faculty members' concerns about professionalism in online environments, there is limited literature available on professors' ideas of professionalism in online environments like virtual worlds that allow professors to choose avatars.

1.2. Avatars and Professionalism

There are some earlier works, however, that address the connection between avatars and professionalism. For example, Fedeli's (2009) study on online tutoring in Second Life provided insights on professionalism and avatar choice. The study showed that students who were considered SL "newbies" did not initially think to associate their tutor's avatar appearance with her professionalism (Fedeli, 2009). More seasoned SL students, however, indicated that the attire, animations, and mood

devices could communicate a great deal about a tutor's professionalism in SL (Fedeli, 2009). That perspective assumes that the tutor's professionalism in SL is connected to the prowess s/he shows when using these various tools. Fedeli's (2009) study also showed that as the newbies grew more accustomed to SL, they began making changes to their avatars, and when asked what types of avatars they would use when teaching in SL, they replied that they would use different avatars for different contexts. For example, while some students highlighted connections between avatars and real-life appearances, others discussed the use of non-human avatars in a teaching context (Fedeli, 2009).

The topic of professionalism and avatars was also discussed in McArthur's (2010) pilot study of professionals in SL. In a review of companies' policies on professionalism in SL, the study found that out of the 37 respondents, five of them had to adhere to company policies that addressed the issue of non-human avatars; three of the policies allowed non-human avatars (McArthur, 2010). Although these participants were not faculty members, they, as well as their companies, did have concerns about professionalism in virtual worlds.

A number of other studies have investigated various aspects of avatar creation such as motivations for avatar creation (Lin & Wang, 2014) and the psychology associated with selecting an avatar (Wu, 2013). However, these research reports do not directly address faculty members' perspectives on the professionalism associated with their avatars in a virtual world.

1.3. Conceptual Framework

This study is framed by the concept of persona. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Baldick, 2008) says that persona is as follows:

> *The assumed identity or fictional 'I' (literally a 'mask') assumed by a writer in a literary work; thus the speaker in a lyric poem, or the narrator in a fictional narrative... Some theorists of narrative fiction have preferred to distinguish between the narrator and the persona, making the persona equivalent to the implied author.*

In virtual worlds such as SL, users become authors of their simulated selves. They imbue their avatars with characteristics that may or may not be in keeping with who they are in real life. Sometimes participants may choose to have a delicate interplay between real-life aspects of themselves and elements that are relegated to the virtual world. The idea of professionalism is also directly tied to the concept of persona, as SL users can opt to select characteristics that are in keeping with their perspectives of professionalism.

3. Methodology

The research question for the current qualitative study is as follows: What are professors' perspectives on professionalism in virtual worlds? The specific method of qualitative research is hermeneutic phenomenology as detailed by van Manen (1990). However, the study could be more accurately categorized as a virtual hermeneutic phenomenology, as it is a hermeneutic phenomenology that was conducted in a virtual environment (Blackmon, in press). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows researchers to access participants' lived experiences and provide interpretations about those experiences. However, the goal is not to explain or control through the relaying and interpreting of those experiences, but to move closer to the phenomenon in question (van Manen, 1990). The 10 participants for the study are the following:

Participant's Name	Description
Participant 1: Frank	Department chair and university professor; southeastern U.S. university with at least 5,000 students; 10 years teaching at current institution; began teaching in SL in 2006 and has taught more courses than he can remember
Participant 2: Greg	Associate professor; western U.S. undergraduate university with 3 or 4,000 students; six years at current institution; taught one online course completely online using SL as part of the course
Participant 3: Ian	Associate professor; university in the southwestern U.S.; also taught at a university in the midwestern U.S. with around 13,000 students; 14 years at midwestern institution; taught over 40 sections of a course in SL and has taught in SL for seven years
Participant 4: Carla	Associate professor; doctoral institution in the southeastern U.S.; nine years at current institution; taught one class in SL for several semesters
Participant 5: Eva	Full professor; doctoral institution in the southeastern U.S.; 30 years at current institution; taught two classes for the past two years with the traditional online format and SL
Participant 6: John	Senior research fellow; United Kingdom (UK) university; four years at current institution and seven years at a previous UK university; taught at least five courses completely in SL for several European universities
Participant 7: Martin	Senior lecturer; Australian distance university, mid-ranked; eight years at current institution; taught two classes in SL twice
Participant 8: Adam	Junior lecturer; university in southeastern Sweden; about 12 years at current institution; taught two courses in SL, with multiple sections of one course

Participant's Name	Description
Participant 9: Emma	Research fellow; UK distance learning university; four years at current institution; taught SL section of one course
Participant 10: Mel	Clinical assistant professor; midwestern U.S. comprehensive public university; eight years at current institution; taught three online classes using SL for some parts of the classes for one year

1.1. Participants

The 10 participants for my study came from institutions throughout the United States and in the UK, Australia, and Sweden. Instead of recruiting participants via snowball sampling or announcements, I chose to select participants based on the SL literature. I used EBSCO, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, ERIC, a university's library search database, and Google Scholar to find articles about faculty and Second Life. When I located an article that discussed a faculty member teaching in SL, I recorded that faculty member's contact information and contacted her/him for my study. I specifically selected faculty members who had experience teaching at least one course in SL or using SL for a portion of a completely online course in a higher education context.

1.2. Data Collection

Traditionally, hermeneutic phenomenology involves asking questions to participants aloud as opposed to asking questions in writing, an idea van Manen (1990) emphasized in his work. However, I decided to employ virtual hermeneutic phenomenology (Blackmon, in press). Virtual hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to conduct interviews in a variety of forms in virtual spaces (Blackmon, in press). I conducted text-based, semi-structured online interviews with each participant for 30 minutes to one hour completely in SL. Employing a virtual hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to interview participants about their lived experiences with professionalism directly in the environment where those experiences took place. The data for this smaller study, as noted in the Introduction, came from a larger study I conducted on faculty members' lived experiences with faculty personae in virtual environments. The larger data collection process consisted of three interviews per participant with one set of questions for each interview session: the first interview explored each professor's general understanding of persona, the second interview probed each professor's experience with persona construction, and the third interview focused on each professor's experience with persona interaction.

1.3. Confidentiality

Each participant was given a pseudonym for the study. Although participants' comments are associated with their SL handles (login names), those handles were not used in the transcribed data, the larger study, or any smaller studies.

1.4. Data Analysis

Because virtual hermeneutic phenomenologies employ methods that are similar to van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology (Blackmon, in press), I used qualitative coding and isolated themes based

on van Manen's (1990) approach: "the wholistic or sententious approach, the selective or highlighting approach, and the detailed or line-by-line approach" (p. 93).

1.5. Quality Assurance

In order to ensure that the participants' lived experiences were accessible, I used peer debriefing. The peer debriefer was a faculty member with many years of university-level teaching experience, and he reviewed the data I wrote about participants' lived experiences. I did not have to transcribe the data because the interviews were text-based. Because there was no transcription, participants could just refer to their SL accounts to see the text from the interviews.

1.6. Findings

The data show that although professionalism within and outside of the virtual world is important to professors, there are differences in what professionalism means to professors in the virtual world. While some participants indicated that the professional/unprofessional dichotomy was related to the choice between a human or non-human avatar, others thought that professionalism was related to their avatar's attire.

Avatar Choice. Some professors communicated a direct connection between professionalism and avatar choice, more specifically, the choice between a human or non-human avatar. For example, when explaining factors that may influence the definition of professional image, Ian stated, "Outside factors only include wanting my students not to be distracted by an unusual avatar, as opposed to someone/my avatar that is more representative of who I am in RL [real life]." Ian expounded on the phrase "unusual avatar," saying, "Well, I've seen colleagues of mine who have avatars of dragons, aliens, or some other inhuman or animalistic character. I did not want that and thought it would be more distracting, albeit entertaining." Similarly, Carla used the phrase "professional image" during one of her interviews. When explaining her definition of "professional image," Carla responded, "I think the term is all encompassing. We are expected to look like humans and dress in professional attire." She continued, "...I always appear in human form and my appearance looks pretty much like I do in real life. I don't allow vampires or non-humans in my classroom (too distracting)." Carla provided other examples, such as having her avatar dress in a suit for conferences that take place in virtual worlds.

Eva's perspective was similar to Ian and Carla's. When discussing her avatar, Eva said, "I just wanted her to fit in…I didn't want her to be the avatar who was a horse or wore a toga for class. I ask my students to dress like a teacher--and that's what I wanted for myself too." Like Eva, Martin also wanted to avoid choosing an avatar that was "too outrageous," which for Martin included "anything non-human, the wrong sex (I have had a few male students come in as female)...not too sexy or over-the-top with costume." Emma, too, expressed that choosing certain types of avatars could distract students. She stated, "I didn't want one [an avatar] that would be too distracting. If you are a furry or a tiny, that distracts people into talking about what you look like." Mel saw a connection between avatar choice, professionalism, and the seriousness of course material. She stated, "I have seen some animal avatars that look fun but I wanted to portray the activity is serious and we are there to learn. So we do not allow animal avatars...."

Although there were several participants who emphasized the connection between professionalism and the choice of a human avatar, one participant, John, had a different perspective. John stated:

> *People who've come in [into Second Life] more recently go straight to being professional looking. I've not followed that trend I think because I resist that move towards conformity. And maybe my professorial image in the physical world is not so determined by peers anyway.*

He added, "I felt I needed to look accomplished...that was the image I wanted to project and that was where I saw my professionalism being not wearing something that looked normal, although that's also important I realise now." John continued, "But there's too much normal in the real world :-) don't want to bring it into here [virtual world]."

John and the other participants are similar in that they all adhere to professionalism in the virtual world classroom. John also ensured that his avatar interacted with students in a professional way, which is consistent with his comments about his real-world interactions with students and the perspectives shared by other participants in the study. Unlike the other participants, however, John did not view a non-human avatar as a distraction or indicator of unprofessionalism; he saw the choice of a non-human avatar as an opportunity to display the highest level of professionalism. John's professionalism was tied to a material message about his prowess as an expert in SL, and the non-human avatar, for him, was an opportunity to show his professionalism and proficiency.

Attire. Because Second Life allows users to shop for an assortment of clothes, shoes, jewelry, and other accessories, several faculty members chose attire for their avatars that was in keeping with their ideas of professionalism in real life. For example, Greg said, "I guess I wanted to make sure that I maintained the same sense of professionalism that I try to do in the real world." He continued, "Thus, I dressed my avatar conservatively and I try to interact with students professionally." As with the previous theme of Avatar Choice, professionalism, for some participants, seems to be tied to realism. When Ian was asked if he had concerns when constructing his persona in SL, he stated, "No real concerns as this is simply an extension of whom I am in RL...so just making sure that what I do here I would not mind doing in RL...again, that professional image and behaviors." Both Greg and Ian wanted the attire and behavior for their avatars to mirror their real life attire and behavior. Likewise, when Carla discussed what influenced her avatar choice, she stated, "Professional image." Carla added, "We don't have dept. rules [departmental rules for Second Life], but the university asks that we maintain a high level of professionalism." When describing professional attire, Carla stated, "I always dress for my classroom professionally- a suit or casual pants or skirt/sweater, much like in a classroom (traditional style)."

Eva valued showing professionalism and sharing aspects of her personality through her avatar. She stated, "I knew I wanted a professional appearance--and I tried to develop some way to personalize my avatar to be somewhat like me. Thus, I have a sparkly bracelet and 'bling' shoes--I love bling!" Mel, too, seemed to want both professionalism and personality. Mel said, "I remember looking at clothes and thinking that is too risqué or immodest to wear with the students." She also noted "wanting to look contemporary but professional," which seems to speak to an aspect of personality or personal taste. Not only did Mel note the importance of professionalism with creating an avatar, but she also highlighted professionalism's connection to authority, saying, "...A professional demeanor helps maintain authority in a virtual world."

As stated earlier in the Findings, all of the participants valued professionalism and wanted their real-world professionalism to carry over into the virtual world classroom, even if they had different ways of expressing that professionalism via their avatars.

4. Discussion/Implications

1.1. Connections to Extant Literature

Although most of the participants thought of a professional persona as directly connected to human avatars and "professional" attire, John expressed a different point of view. Fedeli's (2009) study surveyed students about avatar choice and online tutors, and the data from my study show that there are similarities between faculty and students' perspectives. For example, just as those students saw purposefulness in using non-human avatars, John did as well. Also, the more experienced SL students in Fedeli's (2009) study stated that an online tutor's well-equipped avatar was an indication of the tutor's professionalism, which is also consistent with John's thoughts on avatar professionalism. However, some of the students from the study highlighted the virtual world/real world connections between tutors and their avatars, a perspective that is consistent with a majority of the participants in my study.

Unlike the concerns about professional boundaries in online environments such as Facebook (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), participants in the current study did not mention challenges with professional boundaries in SL. The challenge for participants in this study was making sure their personalities and individual perspectives on professionalism were accurately displayed via their avatars: whether the avatars were human or non-human. Although John and the other participants differed on the use of non-human avatars, they all agreed on the importance of professionalism in the virtual world classroom.

1.2. Broader Implications

Another point for consideration brought up in the current study, and broached in Fedeli's (2009) study, is the appropriate time to use a non-human avatar. Although some of John's students had to get accustomed to his non-human avatars, perhaps there is an opportunity in that discomfort. The use of non-human avatars could be beneficial for challenging preconceived notions of professionalism. Perhaps there is a delicate balance between distracting and dismantling. The role play and context noted in Fedeli's (2009) study and supported in the current study could change the ways professors choose to use non-human avatars. These studies could give game or virtual world designers additional points to consider when deciding whether or not to eliminate the choice of non-human avatars for the sake of professionalism. There are times when non-human avatars can negatively challenge professionalism, and there are times when the use of non-human avatars can enhance professionalism.

5. Conclusion

This study provided insight on professors' lived experiences with professionalism in virtual worlds and found that there are myriad ways for professors to maintain professionalism when using virtual worlds. Although attire and human avatars were useful for some professors' professionalism, one participant was able to maintain professionalism with a non-human avatar. Although the literature on professionalism in virtual worlds is still growing, the current study adds to the larger conversation about professors' perspectives on professionalism in virtual worlds, particularly in SL. Future studies could explore aspects of professors' professionalism in specific courses from both professors' and students' perspectives.

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