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Samarita Ibanez: An Identity Journey from First Life to Second

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Abstract

When we are given the chance to have a Second Life online, we often choose to modify our offline selves with a little something extra, e.g. younger looking skin or a taller figure, or we choose a slightly different direction in terms of race and/or gender. This paper explores the construction of a Second Life avatar's identity in terms of race, and gender. In Second Life, users can embody a virtual body similar to or different from their offline body. Avatars are created by people who sit in front of a computer with a set of lived experiences, identities, characteristics, and beliefs. This work describes one avatar's journey into Second Life, focusing on the intersections of offline and online materializations of raced and gendered identities. In creating a second self, how do power imbalances based on gender and ethnicity within global space shape the creation of an avatar? What social and communicative issues emerge through Second Life existences? In order to respond to these questions, an ethnographic study as well as interviews with three different users of Second Life were conducted to examine the steps an individual takes when he or she becomes a resident of Second Life.

1. Introduction

Cyberspace offers an abundance of opportunities to create, interact, communicate, and retrieve information, and increasingly members of minority groups use the possibilities available in cyberspace. Race and ethnicity are having an impact on the development of the Internet (Hill, 2001; Kang, 2003; Nakamura, 2008), as ethnic content providers offer all the services that mainstream sites offer, but with a different focus. Websites that cater more to ethnic minorities are offering a fresh approach to online spaces and could shape the future of cyber communities in general.

While growing up in Kyrgyzstan, I was a member of the main ethnic group (Kyrgyz), but when I arrived in the U.S., I became the 'Other.' My new classmates constantly asked me where I was from. Growing up in a post-Soviet country, I never identified with any particular race. I was also never categorized into any race by anyone around me; I was just a Kyrgyz – or, to be more precise, a 'kirgizka' (female Kyrgyz). The only time I remember learning about race was in my sixth-grade geography class. We never called ourselves White or Asian – we were just Russian or Kyrgyz, depending on our ethnicity. As a result, it was challenging for me to suddenly be part of a minority in another culture, where I was seen as "different." Some people "exoticized" me by labeling me "Asian", while others called me "Russian", because Kyrgyzstan was part of the former Soviet Union, and it was too confusing for them that I was actually Kyrgyz but spoke fluent Russian. I believe some of my friends thought of it this way: "She speaks Russian, so she must be Russian."

When I registered for an account in Second Life, I wondered how people chose to represent themselves. I was interested in exploring the journey and the process in which avatars like my own start a Second Life adventure. We often dream of second chances in life, and we are given just that opportunity in the digital space called Second Life. But do we choose to be ourselves or someone else? How do we decide who to be and what to represent in Second Life? I wanted to explore the beginning of our Second Lives, which start with familiarizing ourselves with the new world – Second Life. This also involves picking names (both first and last), choosing a visual image to represent ourselves, choosing whether to disclose our actual names in the profile, and the reasons behind our decisions for those actions.

Interacting with people from different cultures or ethnic groups can often involve a very high degree of strangeness and a very low degree of familiarity; such circumstances may lead to intercultural communication apprehension and degrees of uncertainty (Neuliep & Ryan, 1998; Wang, 2004). How does this statement apply when we study cyber cultures? Just like a person feels entering a brand-new culture, I was nervous about how I would be perceived. I felt as if I was interacting with people outside of my own culture, I felt as if I was coming to America all over again, but this time, the rules were slightly different. In Second Life, I could at least hide my offline facial expressions and my incompetence in manoeuvring.

As an exchange student in Michigan, I learned a lot by observing and then imitating actions so I would better fit in with my classmates. Just as I learned a lot by observing American teenage behavior in high school, I learned behavioral patterns from Second Life residents. In offline life the wearing of certain clothes gave away my identity as a foreign student, so I went shopping for new American clothes better to fit in. In Second Life, using a system-provided avatar and displaying a lack of customization marked me as a new member of the online community and to fit in, I again had to go shopping.

My research on avatar ethnicity, gender, and identity in Second Life began with the creation of an avatar. In Second Life, people can choose a virtual body similar to or different from their non-virtual,

offline body. The virtual space provides numerous representations of people, places, businesses, and events. Avatars are created by people who sit in front of a computer and possess their own set of lived experiences, identities, characteristics, and beliefs. In creating a *second self* or a *cyberself*, how do power imbalances based on gender and ethnicity within the global, offline space shape the experiences of the avatar creators? What social and communicative issues emerge through their Second Life existences?

Second Life is a growing 3D cyber location where avatars representing people from many different backgrounds communicate every day, and where individual avatar creators create and shape their avatars based on their own beliefs about identity, gender, ethnicity, race, etc. This paper explores the construction of an avatar's identity in terms of race and gender. It is a cyberethnography and a narrative of multiple voices interviewed during the study. In this paper, I interweave in my own personal narrative or cyberethnography with the narratives from three other participants. The paper starts with a conceptual framework, and then an ethnographic 'thick description' of Second Life by explaining to the readers how the process of avatar construction works. The paper concludes by pointing to further areas worth exploring in further studies of identity performance in virtual worlds, in particular as virtual worlds continue growing in importance and the number of participants in their construction.

2. Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study is to contribute to feminist and cultural studies of virtual worlds. When I started this research, it was my goal to explore the issues behind producing cyber-selves in Second Life, where visual representation of oneself plays a big role in friendship formation and identity formation both online and offline. I engaged in cyberethnography and interviewed three different avatars. My participants are three women (including myself) and one man.

Ethnography involves making the researcher's physical, mental, and ethical self vulnerable and responsive to the community through participation, as 'instrument of measurement' for the researcher on his/her journey of research. According to Gajjala (2006), cyberethnography follows similar principles through the study of online interactions. The dynamics in face-to-face ethnography and online ethnography are different but related, as Gajjala (2006) notes that cyberethnography is an internet technologically mediated and enabled hyper-textual/inter-textual performance. For this paper, I participated in the creation of a Second Life avatar and experienced residency (life) in Second Life to examine the emergence of identities in a cyber-location. I also interviewed three participants about their experiences creating Second Life avatars. These interviews help me explore further, beyond my own journeys, how the Second Life environment impacted identity choices made by individuals.

The concepts of knowledge and power are deeply embedded in cyberspace and the creation of identities and determine many of the choices individuals make about their avatars. Foucault (1984) referred to concepts of knowledge and power as *technologies* and argued that technologies are the joining of power and knowledge resulting in "the objectification of the body" (Rabinow, 1984, p.17). In the creation of avatars for virtual worlds, the body is already a consciously created 'object' from the beginning, and thus not subject to 'natural' influences, but only to the influence of the technologies of knowledge and power. Technologies of cyber identities are expressed in the conscious and unconscious decisions about identity creation in a society within cyberspace. Foucault's suggestions about the examination of issues based upon their context, power, and space within societies provides a critical lens for the observation of communications between the creators of cyber identities and the cyber world in which the identities exist. Such an examination of how power and knowledge play out in the creation of

virtual identities offers valuable insights into perceptions of online gender, ethnic, racial, etc. identities by virtual world residents.

3. Introduction to Second Life

Second Life is a 3D online virtual world created by the U.S. company Linden Lab. To become a part of the community users have to be over sixteen years of age to register. On Linden Lab's Second Life website, there is an introduction to Second Life video that describes it as "a place to connect, a place to shop, a place to love, to explore, a place to be, to be different, a place to be yourself, free yourself, free your mind, change your mind, change your look, love your look, love your life" (Linden Lab, n.d.). Second Life is a 3D online community in which users have to become members in order to become Second Life residents.

Second Life is free to join and in order to register for an account one must first choose a basic avatar from a selection of system-provided avatars. The next step is to create a username and once the system approves the availability, the registration process is followed by answering a few questions (email, date of birth, and a security question). Once a registered user enters Second Life for the first time, his/her avatar starts out on Welcome Island, where he or she will have the opportunity to learn the basics such as learning how to walk, zoom their camera, chat, stand and sit, fly, and how to teleport from one place to another (Linden Lab, n.d.). Second Life also offers premium accounts with additional benefits for a subscription fee and supports an economy based on its own currency (Linden dollars) for which an exchange rate to 'real' currencies is quoted, but the basic use of Second Life remains free.

Residents are members of Second Life who visit Second Life for a variety of reasons and engage in numerous, different activities. Similar to the offline world, Second Life is divided into many different spaces, called 'parcels' and 'islands', which are 'owned' by individual residents who rent them from Linden Lab. Residents can shape or style their parcels as they wish, and grant or withhold access to other avatars. Buildings and other designed objects on the parcels are created by residents. Second Life attracts millions of users from all over the world who have created very diverse virtual environment, e.g. Bowling Green State University (BGSU) owns an island that was designed and created by BGSU faculty.

Entering Second Life for the first time is similar to visiting a foreign country. Upon arrival in another country, we have to learn its customs, languages, rules and values, and through the observation of its inhabitants we learn how to act and behave in specific situations. We also learn how to dress ourselves so we can fit in and not stand out. Entering the virtual world of Second Life feels very comparable. Visiting new areas within the virtual world and learning how to communicate in Second Life 'lingo' is comparable to learning the slang or language of a country we are visiting. Learning what not to wear and what to wear, or even how to shape an avatar's body is almost always learned through shopping and observation of other residents who have been in Second Life for some time.

In my research, I explored the experiences of several new users including my own getting started in Second Life, designing, equipping, and accessorizing their avatars, with the aim of arriving at a better understanding of the processes involved in choosing one's identity. While the scope of the research is too narrow to allow for generalizations, I hope to provide the reader with some useful insights into experiences four 'real' people have had with Second Life.

4. Method

For the purposes of this study, I employed cyber-ethnographic methods in studying Second Life and the meaning-making practices in this virtual world. Through participating and producing my own Second Life avatar, I learned through doing what other users have to go through in order to obtain an online avatar. Relying only on basic Second Life skills like shopping, chatting, and hanging out in Second Life, I interacted with other residents and created my online identity in the same way as other users, so as to better understand the Second Life avatar creation process. Cyberethnography emphasizes hanging out online and immersing oneself in a virtual world. Cyberethnography aims at the examination of interactions of individuals within a virtual environment (Grbich, 2007). I use the works of Boellstorff (2008) and Nakamura (2002, 2008) on cyber culture and Second Life to explain my perspective as a researcher. Boellstorff argues that "virtual worlds are legitimate sites of culture" (2008, p. 61) that can be studied without reference to the offline identities of the users controlling the avatars.

When conducting an ethnographic study, the researcher should focus on the culture being studied and everything that surrounds it. By observing, interacting, reflecting, interviewing Second Life residents, and analyzing their texts and images, it is possible to conduct effective ethnography. Through observation, the researcher can hear and see what occurs when a person first registers – when they first get their avatar, and so forth. By transcribing, coding (organizing the data), and extracting themes, researchers can arrive at valid conclusions about the behavior of Second Life residents, as well as the culture and meaning-making in Second Life.

I chose to additionally collect data through interviews so as to hear the actual voices of Second Life residents, which allowed me to construct an inter-weaved narrative based on my observations, reflections, and interviews. Additionally, this form of triangulation strengthened the validity of my research data by providing instant cross-checks of my observations with the comments of other participants, etc. I interviewed three people: one face-to-face and two via email, all university students who agreed to participate in the interviews after I observed them for several class periods. The two females and one male were given confidentiality and anonymity by changing their names in excerpts and quotes. Two out of three participants are international graduate students from Eastern Europe and Ghana. The third participant is a female from the U.S. All three interviewees used Second Life for at least a few months.

To simplify the research and to limit its scope for the purposes of this paper, I limited myself to an exploration of the impact an individual's offline identity had on the creation, design, etc. of a resident's avatar. The research question at the root of this paper can therefore be stated as:

RQ: How does a person's offline identity influence their Second Life identity?

The question is based on the idea that when building an avatar certain actions have to be taken and choices have to be made as to who we want to 'be' or 'represent' online. In what follows, my research question will be divided up into two inter-related issues: Registering for Second Life, and looking at an Avatar as a person's visual representation of specific Gender and Race identities.

In order to obtain the results and data presented here, I observed my participants for around an hour, interviewed them for several hours, and produced my narrative over the course of a few years, all of which has been condensed into this paper. I have spent several years in Second Life and my observations and notes helped immensely in guiding me in my choice of methodology for a valid research project. Next, I discuss the process of getting started in Second Life, including images and the participants' reflections on their initial registrations for this virtual world.

5. Registering for Second Life

In order to become a member of the Second Life community, one has to register by picking or creating any first name, and then one last name from a list of names provided by the system. One possible explanation for this is to avoid duplicate names in Second Life. Offline, when opening a bank account we are similarly assigned a certain account number in order to avoid duplicate accounts with the same names. Once a new member has chosen a name the next step is picking a basic avatar – a visual representation of that person online through a body.

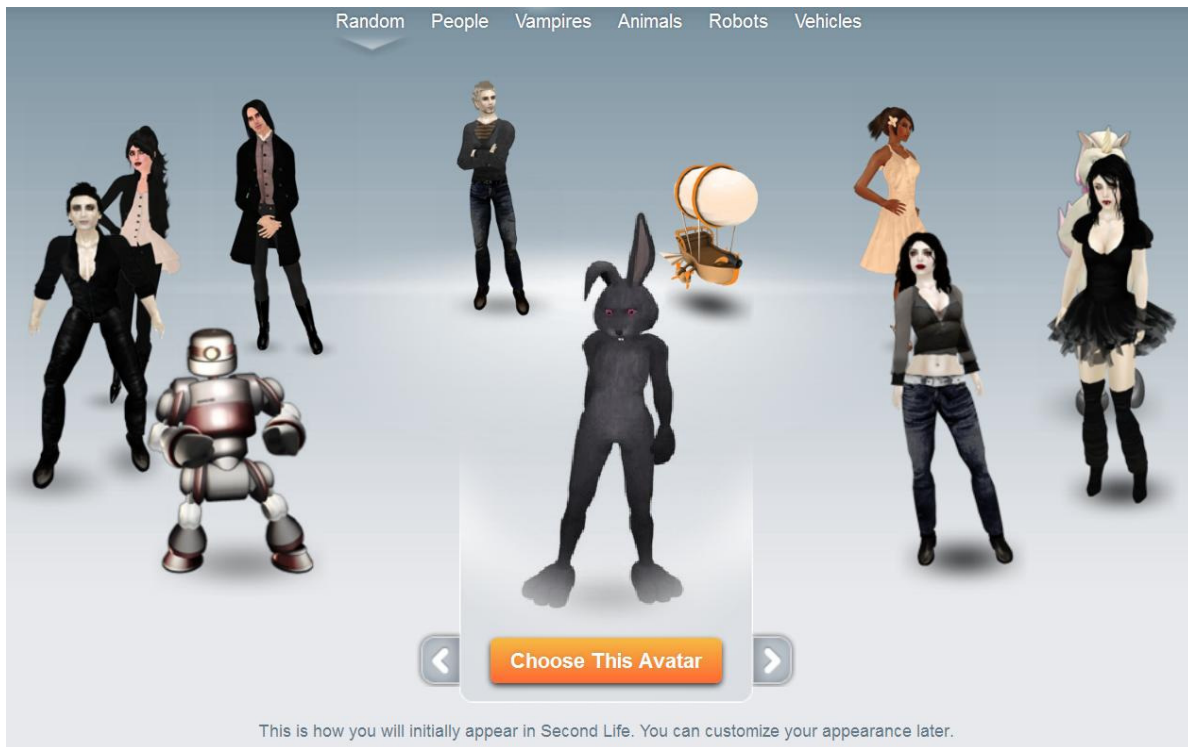


Figure 1: Choosing a basic avatar

As the image above shows, Second Life has a number of diverse avatars to pick from. Once a person finishes the registration process and has acquired an avatar and screen name he or she is then taken to the "Welcome Island" where various resources are provided to help new comers with their initial steps in the virtual world. "Welcome Island" is very similar to a manual: rules and functions of Second Life are explained, e.g. how to manipulate the keyboard, how to fly an avatar vs. the walking or running, editing one's appearance and so forth (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Welcome Island

Boellstorff (2008) argues that a new person's status as a "newbie" is usually discovered right away by the way a new avatar is wearing his or her accessories, e.g. shirts. Some social norms of Second Life culture vary from region to region, though, in particular dress codes. This can be compared to the offline life of an avatar where rules and norms differ when one enters a different location (e. g. country, state, etc.). Once new residents have spent some time in Second Life and learned how to get around and how to customize their avatar, their "newbie" status becomes less visible and they are seen as 'true' residents of this virtual community. During the initial stage users have to learn how to move between different areas, connect to other residents, shop and do various activities in Second Life using the tools provided by the virtual world software viewer.

Embodiment in Second Life is "highly elastic" as residents are allowed to choose and to change their appearance any time they want (Boellstorff, 2008), e.g. a user obtains and equips an animal avatar one day and a robot shaped "body" the next day. Boellstorff (2008) compares this embodiment to the way people wear shoes and shirts in an everyday offline life, but as it is possible to transform an avatar shape entirely, the choices users have are far wider than those available to people offline. Avatars become visual representations of residents in Second Life, and embody the offline user's chosen identity in the virtual world.

I made the choice of being Samarita Ibanez, because I could be anyone I wanted.

After I registered I picked an avatar to represent me in Second Life as my face and body. I went with the fox shape. I did not identify with any of the basic avatars, which were Asian, White, and African-American avatars. A fox seemed like a neutral choice, because I thought I would avoid of the framing and stereotyping on Second Life. Once I got to know the islands and the rules on Second Life a bit more I started checking out clothes, different avatars, and places. (Note: Although users have to choose an initial avatar before ever entering Second Life, they can change this image later on.)

My experience showed my decision-making process and the negotiation I entered into while finding an avatar identity based upon my own values and my awareness of what race means to me. When I could not identify with any of the choices presented to me I chose a neutral identity to avoid being stereotyped by others. I figured I could always change my identity after learning more about how

to use Second Life. Although I could have chosen any name in the world, I chose to be "Samarita", an extension of my offline name. I decided that even though my avatar did not look like the offline me or not necessarily represented me, I at least wanted to keep my first name, and with it the markers that define my identity – my heritage, culture, ethnicity, and the ties to my family.

Butler (2004) recognized the Hegelian tradition in the links between desire and recognition, and the influential role this plays in our humanness and identity acceptance. Gender identities and the way they are conceived performatively relate to the constructions of social existence, which affect communities of people. Gender has the power to define marriage, family, kinship, relationships, and interactions. Butler (2004) explains how variations in genders "have been in existence for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms that govern reality" (p. 31). Gender in relation to justice is described by Butler as "consequential decision about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for 'personhood' to become allocated" (p. 58). The recognition and desire of "personhood" or the qualities that make a person count as a human are at stake in one's gender performance (p. 58). The justice that applies to gender has the power to shape an individual's access to freedom and happiness in life.

Second Life forces the user consciously to choose and 'perform' a gender, a race, an ethnicity, acknowledged family ties, etc. thus making the online resident aware of the often implicit, but just as determining facets of the user's offline identity. This allows the user to reflect critically on the meanings of his or her identities and the performance of each identity.

6. Skin as a Representation of an Avatar's Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Cyberspace

Second Life is a virtual space where racial, ethnic, and gender performance can take place. Nakamura (2008) claims the field of communication studies has much to gain from visual culture approaches to different expressions of identities. In addition, she argues that there needs to be more discussion on power relations based on race, ethnicity, and gender. In a 3D world, the digital identities an avatar's appearance represents become an important aspect of interactions and power exchanges. Appearances are so important online that one must be careful of how he or she represents him/herself. Boellstorff (2008) states that spaces like Second Life can be seen "as more *real* than the actual world" (148), as the conscious creation of an avatar allows us to project our 'true self' into the virtual world that we usually hide and do not reveal in the offline world. One of the female participants talked about choosing the appearance of her avatar in this way:

My avatar's name is Teresa. I was nervous about entering a digital world for the first time, so I chose a male avatar to avoid being sexually harassed, to borrow a bit of male privilege.

I chose a deliberately androgynous first name as I anticipated being able to change from male to female, and other various genders and creatures and I wanted my identity and my Real Life gender to remain elusive to other Second Lifers.

His first skin was white. He had black bushy hair, a beard, shorts, sandals and a long-sleeve white t-shirt with a short-sleeve yellow t-shirt over the top. I was immediately interested in getting new skins, clothing, shapes, etc. for my avatar, but there seemed to be much more freebie clothing for women than for men. As a result, I changed from male to female rather quickly.

Freddy/Joseph's talked about his avatar's meaning to him in a very different context:

Joseph for now is in so many ways an extension of my real life self. This is because "Freddy" [his name offline] plays a pivotal role in all the decisions that Joseph makes and sometimes I see this as interference but it is inevitable. So in essence Freddy defines who Joseph is...

Whoever we choose to be online, it seems that we tend not to stray far away from our identities offline. Boellstorff (2008) refers to this virtual embodiment as more *authentic* than our actual world identities, because of the flexibility of our representation of an online identity which allows us to embody any skin color or gender that we desire at the time. However, as both of these quotes demonstrate, there exist strong links between a user's offline identity and the choices they make for their avatars.

Although Teresa starts out talking about her avatar, later she merges the two identities into one – the avatar by the name of Teresa becomes "I". She was nervous about entering the digital space due to the possibility of sexual harassment. Our offline consciousness makes decisions for our digital identity and it is fascinating to see how we merge or do not merge our two identities into one. Freddy also expressed his perception that his offline self was making decisions for his online avatar in the virtual world, and termed this 'inevitable', although he would prefer for his avatar to 'break' the connection to his offline self.

In Second Life, the concept of "skins" is essential (Boellstorff, 2008). Some residents design their own skins and sell them in skin stores, where people can purchase a specific type of skin which usually includes obtaining an entire avatar with different features. The tones and shades of a skin can be very detailed and each carries its own meanings. Offline, I feel I am often stereotyped into a specific race and my character and behavior is assumed based on the stereotypes. Online, I have the ability to choose an identity and appearance and to be whoever I want to be. While wandering around looking for different types of skins, I stumbled across an island where skin was for sale just like anything else at a grocery store. Images of various skin colors were presented via avatar models, and each skin design had a different name. The skin comes with a description of the skin and a name.

I chose my skin without even reading the note card attached to it, because I was drawn to the model displayed in the shop. However, each item for sale came with a note card describing what it is and what it does and so forth. I chose a slightly tan, non-specific looking skin. To me this skin represented an enigma, as my avatar could be from anywhere and everywhere in the world. My offline self belonged to several cultures and I represent so many cultures in me that it felt right to go with this 'inclusive' skin design. I did not pick a skin design that would clearly represent Asian, African-American, or White skin tones. I picked something that seemed ambiguous and in-between to me, something that was neutral and yet very international. Figure 3 shows an image of Samarita Ibanez in front of the skin shop and is followed by an excerpt from the note card accompanying the skin I purchased (a note card in Second Life is equivalent to a manual or description of the product purchased).



Figure 3: Samarita Ibanez in front of the purchased avatar skin.

Adriana's skin description:

Adriana is my Brazilian beauty. I have done my very best to bring you a skin with authentic skin tone. Her coloring also allows me to create her makeup using a variety of different colors so I have really let my imagination run wild for this one.

Demos of all skins are available. Please click on the Demo vendors on each side of (above) the display to purchase these. I have grouped the Demo skins to save you costs so you can get an entire set of twelve skins to try for L\$1.

Adriana comes in 24 makeup options. There are 6 skins available in each of the following categories:

Day, Evening, Creamy, Dramatic

Your final purchase will contain the suggested body and eyebrow shapes which you may use if you wish. In order to wear a shape, just double click it or right click and select "wear". I find including the shape is helpful to newcomers as in just a few clicks; they can leave the store looking exactly like the model. Of course, those that wish to modify the shape may do so, as all my shapes are also fully modifiable.

This skin or avatar designer is a skilled graphic designer and obviously put time and effort into designing Adriana's skin texture. Behind the avatar (Figure 3) various demos can be seen of how that skin looks, and the center of the image shows how I chose my avatar's hair color and the skin (day makeup) after initially purchasing the skin.

I picked 'Adriana' as offline I feel I am often stereotyped into a certain race and people make assumptions about my character and my behavior based on that, e.g. recently, over lunch, at a Greek restaurant our waiter asked whether I was Japanese or Chinese. After responding to her that I am neither and explaining to her my background, she asked whether I was sure about that. Online, I have the ability

to choose my identity and appearance and to control whoever I want to be. I chose this skin without even reading the note card attached to it. I chose a slightly tan, non-specific looking skin.

The choice of one's skin color is a conscious choice in Second Life whether it is made while registering for an account or later on once a user has learned more about the rules governing the virtual world. All of the participants stated that they had consciously chosen the skin of their avatar. Here the reflections of Freddy/Joseph:

Joseph has black skin, I do not know if I will classify him as African American. Well initially I described him as such but now I am looking for skins for this avatar and skins are so expensive...Eventually Joseph will have an African skin just like I do. Unlike Freddy in real life this avatar is very muscular and was bald before. Now Joseph has hair and looks different now, the muscularity has still been maintained. Joseph is male and is likely to be male throughout his life span...

In this context, we notice that the participant mentions the importance of appearance in relation to his offline race and how this will be affirmed online at a later stage. Second Life lets us change our appearance at any time for free. The gender and sex of an avatar become important to mention as conscious expressions of gender and race identity choices, as performances of gender and race. As Freddy/Joseph expressed it, his choices showed who he is now and it was important to him to express that he will most likely remain male.

Besides skin textures and avatar embodiment, race is also a factor in looking at Second Life controlled last names (Boellstorff, 2008). These last names like "Ibanez" or "Chung" have connotations attached to them. Race, ethnicity, and gender of an avatar can encourage other residents who have not had prior experiences with certain races, genders, or people of various sexual orientations to communicate and have interactions online that simulate offline relationships. Different from the male participant in this study, Polina, a female participant, decided to experience an identity different from her offline identity, as illustrated in her initial thoughts.

I chose an African-American woman with long hair and she had tattoos and she was really funky dressed. I thought she just looked really cool and I thought it would be really interesting to see...

I know it's not gonna be real from real life, but to see how... what it would be like an African-American woman, and you know, she looks kind of liberating to me with all these tattoos and funky hair, the way she dressed she just, you know she had something, she had this something that would attract other people to her. I thought it was really cool and I chose it.

Such instances are referred to by Nakamura (2002) as "passing", where users pick a different race from their own to experience something different. This can give the user a sense of power and safety in terms of gender and race, e.g. females might pick males to avoid sexual harassment as in the case of Teresa, or like Polina they might want to perform a different race to experience reactions from other residents. Polina wanted to "pass" as a person of a different race; she wanted to experience the power of embodying a different race.

Second Life can also provide its users the satisfaction of experimenting with different body shapes, by choosing a different body from their offline body. This allows for the exploration of different identities and provides answers to questions such as: What would it feel like to be tall, or short, or fat, or thin? Online spaces are often gratifying to individuals because they allow us to be whoever we want to be. Virtual worlds allow us to embody any appearance and to perform any identity we choose. Hence, by

entering Second Life users can satisfy their desires to be anyone they want to be. In the reflections of Polina, a White female offline, about her African American avatar it emerges that she was interested to see what it feels like to be someone of a different race from her own.

Communication between avatars of different races and genders may help Second Life residents not only to understand and learn more about race and gender identities in a virtual world, but it may also help them transition this attitude into their offline lives. Race, gender, and sexuality become a performance and a type of making meaning online (Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2008). This might also provide us with more insight and knowledge about gender and race issues not just online but offline as well.

7. Conclusion

When I came to the U.S. for the first time over ten years ago, I was immediately categorized as being a woman of Asian descent, and stereotypes and assumptions were part of all conversation processes. However, when I acquired a Second Life account, I was able to choose any name, race, gender – all of which were represented by my avatar. I believe that as a woman of a certain ethnicity and race, my offline exterior is assumed to carry numerous connotations. However, when I get online, I am able to choose how I want to represent myself and perform my gender the way I want to perform it. My identity online portrays what my offline self decides to perform. Through my Second Life identity construction, I learned more about my own identity offline and asked myself questions about my actions online. Virtual worlds comprising 3D images, text, and video have helped me re-evaluate who I am online and offline. These virtual worlds have also helped me better to understand myself as the 'Other' in a foreign country, in relation to my home country, Kyrgyzstan. I built my identity online through my conscious decisions offline.

Second Life encourages us to look beyond our offline identities. Although avatars may start out with an identity similar to their user's offline identity, we are able to experiment with characteristics of a different ethnicity, race, and gender in a cyber-location. In cyberspace, we have the option to create identities that are taller, shorter, fitter, darker, lighter, or more fashionable. It does not necessarily mean everyone in Second Life chooses to be someone different, but we have choices of how we want to perform and to experience an identity, possibly with characteristics unlike our offline ones. The act and performance of being a different gender or body shape can provide us with new knowledge of people's identities both online and offline. The creator of an avatar has a sense of control over his or her avatar's looks, even if cyberspace is still like any other ethnographic location, in which negotiations, performances, and interactions take place and shape an individual's perception of his or her identity.

This study is only the first step in exploring Second Life avatar identity and future studies can expand on the findings. It will be interesting to see further studies looking at different aspects of avatar identity, e.g. by deconstructing such concepts as 'True Self' or 'Self-Deception' in designing an avatar. There are many other avatar creation drivers that can be examined in future studies. My study merely gives a glimpse into this area based on four different avatar creations and future studies could look at interviewing even more avatars of various ages and backgrounds.

In this paper, I have examined the process of becoming a resident in Second Life starting with the initial avatar selection. I have looked at the notion of avatar creation as a representation of one's identity in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity. As we saw in some narratives, at times, how we see ourselves offline is how we choose to represent ourselves in Second Life. I see myself as Samarita, a female who chooses to be un-raced in the digital space, because too much of that happens in the offline world. In my

interviews, I discovered that one's gender, race, and ethnicity play a big role in who we choose to be online. Our avatars can be considered as more authentic expressions of our identity than our offline selves; we might see ourselves differently from who we appear to be to other people offline and want to illustrate that in Second Life. Our choices online could also be revealing who we want to be, or whose identities we would like to experience as we gratify our fantasies, whether to embody a male body if we are females, or whether to avoid sexual harassment and choose a body that cannot be threatened in the online space.

Our online decisions are made based on our experiences and identities offline. We can attempt to reveal what we see as our true selves through our online identity choices, or perform a self that we want to be. While a lot of research has to be done on Second Life, we should continue to explore multiple sides of our identities, be they true, or fantasy. As this paper demonstrates, though, who we choose to be online is determined by the decisions of our offline selves.

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