

## Chapter 17

# The Online Community of Second Life and the Residents of Virtual Ability Island

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter provides a detailed introduction of Second Life, a three-dimensional environment that operates over the Internet. As the community comes together, it may partake in a wide range of activities and opportunities for pedagogical purposes, as well as socialization, exploration, and creative practice. Within the introduction to this chapter, emphasis is placed on how people from diverse geographical locations join together in an effort to design a virtual environment based on the concept of user-generated content. The author uses a narrative research approach and using her avatar; she provides insight on how issues of community strength unfold and how community challenges are dealt with. Furthermore, various behaviours and actions are explored in greater detail. With this foundation, the rest of the chapter focuses on how a group of friends with disabilities came to discover Second Life. The evolution of Virtual Ability Island, which boasts over 700 community members with and without disabilities, is also examined, particularly looking at how community members contribute to growth and viability in their own personally distinct way.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### A Brief Word about Narrative Research

*Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants over time – Simply stated... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).*

Once upon a time... Aristotle noted over 2000 years ago in his writings, especially *Poetics*, that narratives are stories, tales, accounts, or descriptions. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end, which may flow in sequence or offer a journey into the realm of the unknown. They “preserve our memories, prompt our reflections, connect us with our past and present, and assist us to envision our future” (Kramp, 2004, p. 4). A part of human nature, we have been familiarized both culturally and socially to understand the narrative form (Shankar & Goulding, 2001). Narratives have afforded opportunities to allow us to explore the path of our identity, and to take a closer look at our history and our culture. In his writings, Bruner (1986) has also suggested that we have been genetically programmed to understand the narrative form: “the respect for stories and appreciation of their value has grown as we have come to understand more fully how they assist humans to make life experiences meaningful” (Kramp, 2004, p. 3).

As a qualitative research method, the use of narratives has been considered as an alternative method of inquiry. This method has increasingly gained credibility over the years (Angus, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007) as researchers in such disciplines as education, psychology, and anthropology felt that observation alone provided only a fraction of the picture. Thus, narrative inquiry provides an

enriching picture, “revealing both the uniqueness and complexities of the individuals ... [it is] a way of coming to understand by being open to the stories individuals tell and how they themselves construct their stories and therefore, themselves” (Kramp, 2004, p. 8). It is a method that may involve the gathering of stories in oral, visual, or written form and it provides an opportunity to seek out an experience or understand a phenomenon, rather than devise a scientific or logical explanation.

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate method to represent the actions of the relatively unknown, such as the ignored or oppressed groups whose agendas and meanings have often been neglected in theoretical, practical, and policy issues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Narrative inquiry has the potential to be a vehicle of empowerment for the storyteller (Goodley, 1998). It is through these stories with a setting of time and place that something is revealed of “how the persons we are studying construct themselves as the central characters and narrators of their own stories” (Kramp, 2004, p. 9). In this method, the relationship between researcher and participant remains open. Boundaries are very often broken as friendships may evolve, and this may create a “more emotional, dialogical and ethical researcher” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 744). Given that there is not one specific way to carry out this type of research, Polio, Henley, and Thompsen (1997) suggest that the conversation remain unstructured and unforced. The informality of the conversations contributes to the storytelling.

The researcher must be open to respondents and adapt her questions, tone, and interest to both respondents’ commentaries and to her own shifting understanding as she learns more about the phenomenon. Uncertainty and spontaneity must be accepted and transformed into possibility and pattern. A particular phenomenon must be developed creatively and allow for a fluidity of methods and research process (Seamon, 2000).

Contrary to many lingering beliefs, this research method is far from the simple gathering of stories. Instead the researcher considers how

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