Chapter 9

The Not So Level Playing Field:
Disability Identity and Gender Representation in Second Life

Abbe E. Forman
Temple University, USA

Paul M. A. Baker
Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

Jessica Pater
Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

Kel Smith
Anikto LLC, USA

ABSTRACT

The study reported in this chapter examined gender and disability identity representation in the virtual environment, Second Life. In Second Life, identity representation is the choice of the user and is a matter of convenience, style or whim, rather than a fixed characteristic. A survey of groups that identify as disabled or having a disability, especially focusing on gender, was conducted in Second Life. The distinct categories analyzed in this study included: groups associated with disability/being disabled, race/ethnicity, gender, aging, and sexuality. In the virtual world, the visual cues that exist in the "real world" are removed. However, in the "real world", those visual cues serve to activate schemas that may help explain the stigmas and ensuing isolation often felt by people with disabilities. Interestingly, in Second Life even when the visual cues are removed, users with disabilities still associate with others who identify as having disabilities. The study specifically explored groups (i.e. "communities") found in Second Life that jointly identify by gender and a disability identities. Regardless of binary gender framework, the differences between the groups that are externally classified as having some degree of disability, and those who choose to self identify or affiliate with disability related groups, have rich import for the sociology of online communities as well as for the design and characteristics of games.

INTRODUCTION

The famous caption of a cartoon by Peter Steiner published by *The New Yorker*, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog", speaks to the fact that a degree of anonymity and choice in self-representation exists for users of the Internet. The mutability of identity (gender, race, and portrayal of physical identity) especially in the virtual milieu is considered by many a liberating condition. A great deal has been written on the "inflation of desirability" in the world of online interactions, especially in synthetic, simulated environments such as Second Life where the actual identity of an individual (or if indeed, it is actually a "real" individual, rather than a software simulation) is not intuitively apparent. Other online environments such as Facebook, while not comparable simulated environments, present similar opportunities to shape or manage the representation of actual identity albeit in less detailed dimensions (that is two dimensional rather than virtual 3D) than those afforded to participants in Second Life.

Any discussion of identity and portrayal, online or otherwise, presupposes that there is an "other" – the audience, community, or observer who perceives the individual. While physical communities have typically been geographically constructed, online communities are generally communities of self selection rather than ones in which membership is automatically attributed by virtue of locale (Baker & Ward, 2002). This paper examined the nature of disability, gender and identity portrayal in virtual environments, in which representation is a matter of convenience, style or whim. To explore this idea, a survey was conducted of self-identified groups (i.e. communities), in the virtual space, Second Life. The Second Life platform was chosen because it offers unique opportunities for self expression and identity development within an immersive environment. In Second Life environments personal and group identity are related mainly, but not solely, to the 'avatar', embodiment with interactive and immersive characteristics (Bortoluzzi and Trevisan, 2009). For this study, immersivity is crucial because "digital environments allow us to transform our self-representations dramatically, easily, and in ways that are not possible in the physical world," which is of even greater significance because "Collaborative Virtual Environments allow [for] geographically-separated individuals to interact via networking technology, oftentimes with graphical avatars" (Yee, 2007).

The importance of this work is both theoretical, as well as practical. First, the development of Disability Schema Theory, an extension of Schema Theory, will provide researchers a potential framework for continuing the discussion regarding disability in both the virtual and real world. This continuation could lead to what we refer to as the "level playing field" in the real world, similar to that which exists in the virtual world. Secondly, any movement toward understanding what causes stigmatization for people with disabilities including gendered stigmatization, can be used to help reduce that stigma therefore creating a world where people with disabilities are no longer marginalized and will be considered equal members of the society in which they live. Additionally, while this shifting kaleidoscope of identity is itself of interest, a more interesting phenomenon is one of individuals who choose to make apparent and explicit, visible manifestations of their disability. This study explored these alternative expressions of gender and disability that occur in virtual environments.

IDENTITY, DISABILITY, AND GENDER IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

"Cyberspace has been cast as a post gender, post-human world, where the 'lived' body or 'meat' is be [sic] left behind in the real social world. It has been suggested that there is an absence of

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