

# Chapter 13

## Friendship, Closeness and Disclosure in Second Life

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### ABSTRACT

*3-D virtual realms offer places for people to go interact, play games, and even do business. As these realms themselves become more sophisticated, the number of participants grows and the level and type of social interactions change. Meanwhile, scholars race to try to keep up. There is a growing, but still developing literature about interaction in virtual world. This paper explores communication and social intimacy in one such world, Second Life. In this paper, results of a four year ethnography in Second Life reveal findings that refute earlier research on computer-mediated communications, and support others while offering new findings to contribute to the growing body of knowledge.*

### SECOND LIFE AND STUDIES INTO OTHER VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

*“Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly.” William Shakespeare, As You Like It*

*Second Life* (SL) is a sophisticated offshoot of early text-based MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and MOOs (MUD, object oriented) that allows multiple players to connect and interact in online

environment. As of 2008, around 90,000 active subscribers use *Second Life* regularly (Woodcock, 2008). Unlike many of the more popular MMOGs (massively-multiplayer online games), like *World of Warcraft*, SL it is more of a virtual world [a “synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (M. W. Bell, 2008)] than a videogame per-se, as there are no formal rules or goals for interactions within the environment, nor are there NPCs (non-player characters) with whom a player must interact to solve puzzles or

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achieve goals within the environment. Instead, *Second Life* encourages user participation through content creation (Herman, Coombe, & Kaye, 2006), and the “goal” for most players is both the exploration of this vast environment and social interaction with others.

Early discussions of text-based virtual environments/online games often tried to counter the popular media’s construction of these spaces as somehow “not real” or without real-world consequences (Dibbell, 1998; Turkle, 1995). And yet, work by many of these scholars tended to fall into same trap of claiming that “in virtual reality, you are whatever you say you are” (McRae, 1996, p. 245) – an argument that has since been problematized by others who note that “real world” issues of race, gender, and power still mark the interactions that happen online (Gonzalez, 2000; Kolko, 2000; Nakamura, 2000, 2002; Silver, 2000).

While *Second Life* is not traditionally considered a game, much of the work within the game studies field offers important insights into understanding the interactions that occur in virtual environments. The variety of topics covered recently within the field of game studies underscores Aarseth’s (2006) suggestion that games deserve broad examination in-and-of themselves: in-game economics (Castronova, 2003, December 2001); the media’s framing of virtual environments (Squire, 2002); how games can be read as cultural artifacts (Greenfield, 1994) and from a textual studies perspective (Jones, 2008); what we learn when playing (DiSalvo, Crowley, & Norwood, 2008; Gee, 2003; Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008); how sexuality and race and gender are inscribed in popular games (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Consalvo, February 2003); the discourse around gaming addiction (Golub & Lingley, 2008); and fan-based modifications (mods) of games (Postigo, 2007). These studies seek to understand games and virtual environments as important cultural artifacts – ones that both reflect and challenge commonly held beliefs about what goes on during our face-to-face (FTF) interactions with others.

## CMC AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Early scholarship on computer-mediated communication (CMC) argued that the lack of nonverbal cues would not foster relationships as deeply as face-to-face communication would (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004), despite anecdotal evidence that it was possible to create deep community ties and forge strong bonds with others online (Baym, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). Models such as social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) emphasized that the lack of paralinguistic cues in CMC would necessarily lead to much less effective and less efficient communication. Much of the early press coverage reinscribed this discourse, emphasizing the inherent superiority of offline communication and suggesting that online behavior little impact on individuals in the “real world” (Bell, 2001).

These theoretical models were later rejected as reductionist oversimplifications in favor of offering more nuanced perspectives regarding online interpersonal communication. These perspectives included the social information processing model, which suggests that both CMC and FTF interaction are equally driven by the same “relational motivators” (Walther, 1992). Some of these motivators, such as our desire to be liked by our conversational partners, mean that over time CMC can facilitate the development of deep emotional bonds between individuals. Walther (1996) terms this kind of communication “hyperpersonal,” and suggests that it is likely to occur “when users experience commonality and are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited-cues channel that allows them to selectively self-present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations of their partners and relations without the influence of environmental reality” (p. 33).

As Nancy Baym (2006) argues, the idea that CMC offers fewer social cues than FTF interactions is still important to current online inter-

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