Chapter 13
A Second Life Within Second Life:
Are Virtual World Users Creating New Selves and New Lives?

Kevin Linares
California State University at Los Angeles, USA

Kaveri Subrahmanyam
California State University at Los Angeles, USA

Roy Cheng
California State University at Los Angeles, USA

Shu-Sha Angie Guan
University of California at Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL) are online computer-based world-like spaces, where users assume virtual selves or avatars to interact with others, create objects, and engage in a variety of transactions. This paper examines SL residents' avatars, activities, and the relation between residents' offline characteristics and online avatars and activities. The authors examined whether there was a relationship between residents' identity style and online beliefs and activities, specifically those related to self-presentation and identity exploration via avatars and relationship formation as they are related to one's sense of self. An online survey of 378 SL residents was conducted, who ranged in age from 18 to 69 years. Respondents were asked to complete an SL survey (containing questions about their avatars, use, and activities within SL) and the Identity style inventory sixth grade reading level (ISI-6G). Results suggested that SL avatars were mostly human, and were of the same gender as the residents' offline self; SL activities were similar to every day offline ones. The study suggests SL residents may not be creating second lives within this virtual world, but are instead bringing elements of their first or offline lives into this online context.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become an important tool for information seeking, education, interaction and communication as well as entertainment. Among adults, some popular interactive digital contexts include social networking sites (e.g., *Facebook* and *MySpace*), online games (e.g., *World of Warcraft*), and virtual worlds (e.g., *Second Life*, *HiPiHi*) which are the focus of this paper. Virtual worlds are online computer-based environments or world-like spaces, within which users assume new virtual selves or avatars to interact with others, create objects, and engage in a variety of financial transactions (Messinger, Stroulia, & Lyons, 2008).

In the early days of the Internet, scholars and writers speculated that because online contexts make it possible to leave bodies behind (Kendall, 2003; Stallabrass, 1995; Wakeford, 1999), users could create online selves that were very different from their offline ones (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Turkle, 1997). Quiet, introverted people could become extroverts, the young could act older, and physically less attractive people could assume a physically attractive online persona. The *New Yorker* immortalized these possibilities in a 1993 cartoon that depicted two dogs in front of a computer with the caption "On the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog" (Steiner, 1993). In this paper, we explore the issue of alternative selves within the virtual world, Second Life (SL) - specifically, we document users' activities within SL and then examine the relation between SL residents' offline and online characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors. The results of the study will enhance our understanding of the relation between SL users' offline and online personas and will help to understand the role of virtual worlds in identity formulation.

Second Life

SL was created by San Francisco based Linden Labs in 2003 – like a Massively Multiplayer Online game (commonly called MMOs), it is a three-dimensional virtual world, with grass, tree, skies, and oceans. Unlike other MMOs, SL does not come with designer created content or a story line (Jennings & Collins, 2008) with specific tasks and goals. Instead, users, or residents as they are called, can utilize the tools provided by the developers to create digital objects, places, and other user-generated content such as hair, dress, accessories, and even weapons, as well as interact and communicate with other residents to form a virtual community. Key to virtual worlds are the online selves or avatars that residents adopt. Avatars are three-dimensional, adjustable, motion-enabled graphical representations, which can be in the form of a human, animal, or mythical creature/character. Once an avatar is selected, an SL resident can further modify his/her avatars by purchasing or making features such as a "skin," which is the skin color and tone of the avatar, hair color, and even the "shape" of their avatar, which includes the height, weight, muscularity, or even bodily deformities. Using pre-determined key strokes, SL residents can make their avatars walk, run, fly, teleport, swim, chat, engage in sexual activities, purchase or lease islands, barter, buy, or sell goods using offline currency or the SL Linden Dollar. The reader can get a good sense of the kind of avatars and interactions that are possible within SL by turning to Figure 1, which presents the picture of a wedding reception that took place after two SL residents, or their avatars, decided to get married in-world while their closest SL friends attended the virtual party.

In 2011, SL was in its 8th year of operation, and was reportedly one of the largest user-generated virtual economies in the world (US $700-million-dollars) (Linden, 2010; Rosedale, 2010). It appears that some 13 million people have visited Second Life at least once (Dell, 2008) and a quarterly report published by Linden Labs indicated that at the time the data for the report were collected, there were 795,000 repeat logins and residents spent a total of 105 million hours

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