

Life Across Boundaries: Design, Identity, and Gender in SL

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Introduction

SL (SL) is a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) introduced in 2002 by its creators, Linden Lab. SL provides a persistent virtual world, in which its users (also known as “residents”) take on an avatar persona for the purposes of interacting with each other and their environment. The world provides a few rules and structures, a physics engine, and a simple interface for customizing an avatar and building objects within the world. This design draws upon the legacy of online communities such as LambdaMOO, which are primarily built from user-created content. In SL this has resulted in a wildly explosive burst of creativity, from which emerges a complex and engaging multifaceted society with its own economy, value systems, and social structures.

SL stands apart from other modern MMOGs in that it lacks the goal-oriented structure found in these games. Instead of increasing their character level via the drudgery of repetitive monster killing or crafting game items (e.g. Everquest), residents are free to define success however they like. As one resident [5] told us:

A lot of people talk about SL like it's a game. I don't really see it as a game, because it doesn't really have any of the properties of a game, in the sense that there's no goal, no rank, no simulation, no progress. All of these things have to be quantified by the individual himself, subjectively . . . Much like in real life, I have to decide for myself 'What's an accomplishment? What's successful or meaningful?

If residents want more structure to their entertainment, SL's building and scripting interface lets them create and play dozens of games layered on top of the basic world, including puzzles, shoot-em-ups, and role-playing games.

The Audience

The development of faster computers and the increased presence of broadband in homes have created a spike in the popularity of games like SL. As of January 2005, SL's current membership is approximately 23,000 [9] living on 14.6 square miles of virtual land [10]. A survey performed by Linden Lab [11] indicates that residents spend an average of about 16 hours per week in the world. Our interviews indicate that especially active content creators will often log 25 to 40 hours per week.

SL's open-ended and social nature appeals to a broad range of users, from teenage action gamers to middle-aged women. This diversity is important to the character of the game: similar to Horn's Echo [12], it produces an environment more akin to a neighborhood than a clubhouse. The game also appeals to people eager for experiences that are difficult for them to find in the physical world due to illness, isolation, or inhibition. The intent of SL's open-ended design is to allow its users to, quite literally, construct a complete alternative reality with social groups, pastimes, and possessions [13]. SL's regular users are often veterans of similar MMOGs that feature open-ended gameplay, such as *There* and *The Sims Online*.

SL's relatively high technical requirements (broadband and a modern computer) exclude many individuals – in our interviews, some told us stories of being unable to play regularly until they purchased a computer upgrade. However, the game application is a

small download (20MB) and no CD is required – all content is streamed from the SL servers in real time.

SL is priced according to a 2-tiered structure. A Basic account incurs a one-time fee of \$10, and provides the user with access to the game and a small stipend of in-game currency. A Premium account incurs a monthly fee of \$10, and includes a more generous stipend along with the right to purchase land. Many former users of There mentioned to us that a major attraction of SL was the low cost compared to similar games.

Avatars

The avatar is the locus of identity in SL. When signing up for an account, new residents must choose a first name and a last name (i.e. “Morgan MacDonald”). The last name must be picked from a limited set; this permits Linden Lab to designate certain last names for special purposes. For instance Linden employees’ avatars have the last name “Linden.” Names are permanent, as are the reputations and stats associated with them. However, appearance is tremendously malleable. Residents begin with a default male or female human avatar, and are presented with several slide bar widgets that allow them to customize their appearance (see figure 1.0). Residents can tweak minute details of the face, hair and body. Advanced users often purchase skins that allow them to create a more lifelike appearance, including such features as genitalia, pubic hair, muscle definition, and other qualities missing in the standard avatar.

Clothing may also be modified, and “outfits” saved into the inventory can be switched into at will. An outfit includes not just clothing, but skin, hair, eyes, and other

aspects of bodily appearance. Some residents swap outfits frequently; others prefer to maintain a consistent look, modifying it only slightly when the occasion calls for it.



Figure 1.0 Customizing Avatar

Using the in-world building tools, combined with custom textures and animations, nearly anything can be created and attached to an avatar. Residents have constructed body jewelry, backpacks, tattoos, horns, umbrellas, and artfully poised martinis. An avatar need not even be human: it's common to see flamingos, devils, anthropomorphic animals, and giant robots. One resident has even constructed a giant wolf avatar that stands 100 meters high, and can hold other avatars in its paws [14].

Objects such as accessories and clothing are stored in the avatar's inventory. There is no limit on the size of an inventory, and it can become crowded fairly quickly. The existing tools for managing one's inventory are crude and often frustrating, necessitating a great deal of repetitive action.

Avatar customization can be an important mark of status in SL. "Newbies" are often identified [5] by their lack of customized clothing and generic appearance. Having a

distinctive, unique avatar is an expression of individuality and commitment to the game; in a place where one's outward appearance is completely malleable, such externalities can become even more significant than in the physical world. In Goffman's terms [15], the subtext of avatar appearance is that, no matter what impression one desires to give, the attention paid to customizing one's avatar gives off its own signifiers.

In addition to their avatar, SL residents also have a profile. The profile contains photos, status, ratings given by other users, biographical information, group affiliations, interests, skills, and information about the resident's life in the physical world.

Approaches to profiles vary widely; some residents include little to no information, while others post pictures of their physical selves as well as their avatars. When meeting someone for the first time, a resident will often check his or her profile to find out about their interests and their first life – the particular sections one focuses on vary from resident to resident [5] [7] [2].

Building

SL is fundamentally a constructionist environment, where the users build identity and community through creation of their world. [16]. Simple in-world tools allow residents to create, shape, and link 3D primitives (called "prims") into complex objects. Custom textures and animations can be created in 3rd party tools (such as Poser or Photoshop), uploaded for \$10 of in-game money, and attached to primitives. Users can even map streaming video onto prims, creating movie screens and video spheres, or attach audio streams to locations. An embedded scripting language called LSL allows builders to add complex behaviors to objects, such as answering machines, spaceships

with doors that open and close, walking robots, bursts of sparkling light, vending machines, and guns that throw avatars across the map. The scripting language even allows in-game objects to form two-way connections to web services on the public Internet, using XML-RPC to enable such activities as reading email in-world or allowing a website to show your current online status and location.

Much of the mentoring in SL involves learning building and scripting techniques, including regular courses and animated tutorials. One may develop a reputation as a builder simply by disseminating work; a user may bring up the properties of any object to find out who created it as well as who owns it.

Any object created in SL has permissions set for three actions: copying the object, modifying the object, and transferring the object. These permissions may be set to “allow” or “deny” for either specific groups or all residents. This design of the permissions system enables the SL economy – it allows builders to sell the objects they create without diminishing their value.

Communication

SL provides a number of mechanisms for communication and coordination. Users may chat if they are physically proximate in the game world, or IM if they are not. Two users may “trade cards” in order to be notified of each other’s online status and appear in the IM list. SL also offers an optional IM-to-email gateway: an IM sent to an offline user will be forwarded as email to that user’s designated address. The user may respond to the email (which includes a random identifier in the address), which will be turned into an IM in the game world. Finally, some users maintain “answering machines” where one may leave messages in the game world. By bridging communication between the game

world and the physical world, SL enables players to communicate more effectively and thus form closer and more lasting associations.

Gestures are a common means of communication in SL. An avatar may play any animation during a conversation, from subtle facial expressions to catching on fire and running around waving its arms. Some residents [6] make a point of alt-clicking on other avatars during a conversation: alt-clicking focuses the camera on that avatar. This has three important effects: first, the resident is better able to see gestures produced by that avatar. Second, the camera will track the avatar as it moves, which is important for especially enthusiastic gestures. Finally, the resident's own avatar will visibly focus on the other avatar, look in its eyes, and track that avatar around the area. This is an important indicator of attention, showing that the resident is engaged in the conversation. These kinds of "communicative subtleties" have been a key design element since the early days of avatar-based chat [17] – they provide a crucial backchannel of communication that most take for granted in the physical world.

Land and Gathering Places

Land is the cornerstone of the SL economy. When a new area (called a "sim") is created, it is owned by Linden Lab. Plots of different sizes are then sold to residents for Lindens. Residents must have a premium account in order to own land, and pay additional monthly fees in \$USD based on the amount of land they own. For hefty fees, Linden Lab will even construct private islands to the specification of the owners. One of the most active markets in the SL economy is land, and there is very little "public" land in SL. Despite this, only %15 of SL users own land [11].

A builder must either own a plot of land, or have specific permission from a landowner to create objects on his or her plot. There are limits to the complexity of objects that are permitted on a given plot of land – every plot has a “prim limit”, encouraging users to purchase more land in order to enjoy more complex homes and artifacts. Some builders who are working on intricate objects will temporarily raze their house in order to have room to work. One important feature of previous constructionist environments is the existence of “contributory objects” [16] – objects that multiple users can add to and enhance over time. These, with a few notable exceptions such as the AIDS quilt [18], are largely absent from SL. This may be due to the prim limits placed upon plots of land – a contributory object would have to be “reset” periodically in order to make room for new content, or be located on a massive parcel.

As one might imagine, gathering places in SL exhibit a staggering variety of character and scope, from small corner bars on 512m² plots to massive amusement parks on private islands. They are all created and maintained by the residents, who have a variety of incentives for doing so. Many proprietors put gambling and vending machines in their bar or nightclub, and take percentages from the proceeds. Running a popular gathering place is also a good way to earn high ratings from other users, and can provide a convenient casual hangout for any groups to which the proprietor belongs. Finally, Linden Lab monitors the popularity of different locations, and pays out a nightly cash bonus to the proprietors of the most active gathering places.

Plot owners can restrict access to his or her land, banning individual users or only permitting certain groups to enter. An uninvited user runs into a translucent wall, and cannot hear conversation going on within the plot. This exclusivity is somewhat rare,

although some residents prefer to employ it in order to ensure that their gathering place maintains a low profile.

A resident can find gathering places using the in-game map (Figure 2.0). The map shows the entire SL world, with green dots to represent active players. This allows the resident to quickly find large gatherings. The “Find” tool allows users to search for places of interest, such as stores or dance clubs. A user may easily teleport to any place on the map with a click, and can create landmarks for future reference. Landmarks may be traded between users like any other object. SL also registers `secondlife://` as a browser protocol on the user’s PC; when the user clicks on a `secondlife://` link in their web browser, the game is started and the user is teleported to that location.

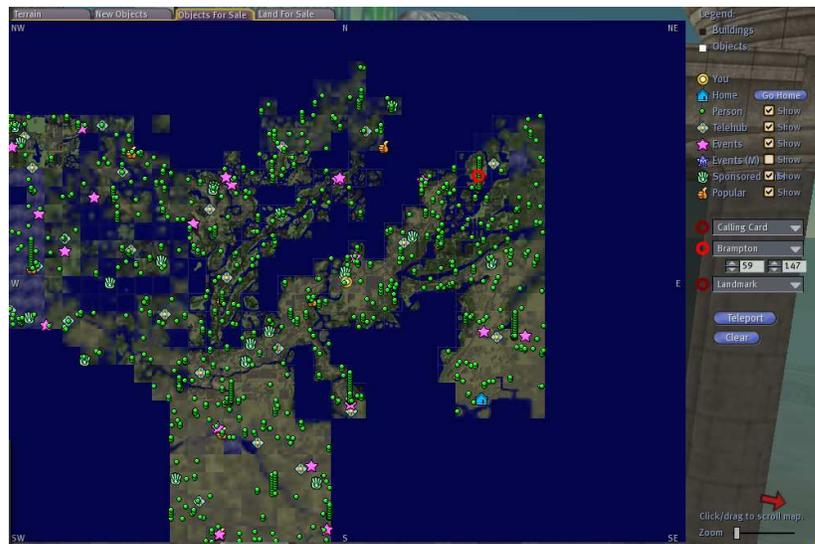


Figure 2.0 SL Map

SL itself functions as a “third place” for many of its users [19]; one may further classify gathering places within SL as *venues* or *third places*. Many gathering places are event-oriented venues, and one seldom finds residents there outside the context of an event. Some places however, such as The Forest, function as a third place in a loose sense

of Oldenburg's definition – they are inclusive, neutral places where one may often find regulars gathered for conversation or casual play.

The SL forums are another popular gathering place, outside the game world. They are useful for communicating with a wider audience, and as a higher-latency medium they are more suitable for engaged discussion of complex issues. Interestingly, forum discussion tends to be much more heated and vituperative than conversations in SL [7]. Linden provides announcements and information in the forums, and also posts items of interest such as monthly Dwell reports and the leaderboard for high-ranking users.

Events

In-game events may be organized by individuals or groups, sometimes in dedicated spaces and sometimes in a place rented for the purpose. SL has its own time zone, equivalent to PST, in order to eliminate confusion with regard to scheduling events. Events may be advertised in the Find tool or on the forums, and can be found using keyword searches.

Games and dance nights are by far the most common gatherings; however one may also find classes, happy hours, grand opening parties, and other such events. Contests are another popular type of event, falling broadly into the categories of social contests and design contests. Social contests may involve games, avatar modeling, or dance competitions. Design contests pit builders' skills against each other in particular areas, such as cars, fashion or game design. Linden Lab occasionally sponsors design competitions to encourage residents to build innovative objects in-world. While they

sponsor few events, their events are often grand in scope; past activities include a grand winter carnival and a SL version of Burning Man.

Groups

Groups, like events and places, can also be advertised in the Find tool. Any user can create a group, set permissions for joining the group, and (if he or she is an officer) designate officers for the group. Groups in SL are important for controlling access to objects and land. Groups may also share resources, such as money and land. Other users can pay money to a group, and the money will be evenly distributed among the group members. A group may hold a land parcel in common, and its members share the costs for upkeep of the land. Groups often set up and promote events in a place owned by the group.

Economy

The SL economy is a vital part of the game experience. It is through the game economy that users become motivated to acquire resources and create game content through the exchange of SL's in game currency, also known as "Lindens." Linden Lab manages SL's economy very carefully, in order to avoid the runaway inflation and black markets found in other online games.

The SL Terms of Service state that all content remains the intellectual property of the users that build it. Most objects for sale are set to "no copy", but users also have the option of preventing their customers from selling or giving the object to someone else. Unlike other online services, Linden Labs encourages the sale of game assets in the physical world evidenced by the active trading in Lindens found on

GamingOpenMarkets.com (www.gamingopenmarket.com). Currently \$1 US is equal to approximately 245 Lindens. Additionally, the buying and selling of land is abundant on online auction site including Ebay.com. This allows some users to make significant amounts of real-world money from their game play, and attracts players with an entrepreneurial spirit.

Currency flows into the world through stipends and incentives, while it flows out of the world through land sales and minor fees. Linden Lab manages the amount of in-game currency, ensuring that the ratio of currency to players is kept constant. They will periodically tweak the inflows or outflows to ensure this.

Mentoring

SL is an astonishingly friendly, altruistic, and open environment for the new player. Current residents receive substantial cash bonuses when referred visitors sign up for paid accounts, and often become mentors for these users. SL includes a number of other mechanisms that encourage experienced residents to share their expertise.

There are three formal Linden programs for mentoring, and a fourth is currently in the process of being designed. A resident must apply in order to participate; approval is based on their experience and past conduct. There are in-game financial incentives, as well as the benefits of being rated highly by one's pupil. *Mentors* are official tutors, whose role is to hang out in newbie areas and provide guidance to newly-minted and confused citizens. Mentors may soon be replaced by a new role called *Greeters*. During registration, a newbie will receive contact information for an official greeter on-duty in the world, and may choose to teleport directly to his or her location after arrival.

Instructors teach classes, and may apply to receive financial support from Linden for each class. Finally, *Live Help* volunteers provide technical support via IM.

There are also in-world, automated tutorials to help residents learn the ropes. “Newbies” arrive on “Orientation Island,” which teaches them how to customize their appearance and move in the world. One resident has built an elaborate tutorial on building and scripting, in a vast building called the Ivory Tower, that provides in-depth guidance and hands-on tutorials for all levels of expertise.

Technical support in SL is multi-level, and is provided as a first-class operation in the interface. Basic help is available from the menu, as is Live Help via IM 24/7. The SL website itself provides how-tos and guides for more advanced users via a wiki and its forums.

Roles and Social Status

Because there are no hard and fast rules or universally agreed-upon metrics of achievement, social status in SL is determined in several ways. Instead of the linear progression from novice to elder suggested by Amy Jo Kim [20], residents of SL may gain power or reputation through multiple means. In our analysis, we found four axes of social status, along which residents may occupy different positions: *citizenship*, *wealth*, *reputation*, and *building*. These axes are somewhat correlated – e.g. a successful designer is usually a landowner, although he or she may be relatively new to the game. The roles described below are approximate – some users may straddle two roles. Linden encourages the pursuit of status through the leader board and financial programs like Dwell and mentoring.

Citizenship is the ability to mentor and assist other users, as well as police conduct, based on experience in the game. A user with a high citizenship may enjoy material benefits from Linden Lab, as well as the social benefits of high ratings. A *visitor* has no in-game experience, while a *newbie* is often in the process of learning from more experienced residents. A normal user is a *resident*, and may offer advice from time to time to those in need as well as assistance in ejecting problem users if needed. A *mentor* is a volunteer, who may teach a class or offer live help. Mentors may also assist in enforcing good conduct; some join together to form “police departments”. A mentor may be recognizable by group affiliation or title. Finally, a *Linden* is an employee of the game company, and as a holder of absolute power has the authority to resolve disputes and terminate / suspend accounts. Lindens are recognizable by their last name: “Linden”, which appears over their avatar’s head.

Wealth is based on a player’s level of economic participation and in-game wealth, and is usually tied to land in some manner. Land ownership is also based on the amount of real-world currency paid to Linden Labs. Wealthy residents often reap substantial real-life economic benefits. *Basic* account holders receive a low weekly stipend of in-game dollars. *Premiums* receive a comfortable stipend and are allowed to purchase 512m of land. A common ritual for newly minted premiums is to purchase First Land, a small parcel sold directly by Linden for a low price. A *landowner* owns a more sizeable plot, and must pay more to Linden per month on a graduated scale depending on the number of square meters he or she owns. A landowner may eventually become a *merchant*, deriving profit from land by running a store, shopping mall or nightclub that generates revenue directly or indirectly (via Dwell and vending fees). A *broker* generally owns a huge tract

of land, such as a sim or private island, and may rent out portions of it or invest in other properties. *Land barons* are fearsome economic powerhouses, owning multiple sims and having the ability to shape the economic and political evolution of the world. “Land Baron” has become a somewhat pejorative term among some SL residents; however the most powerful land barons combine economic might with a high reputation for fairness and professionalism.

Reputation relates to group membership and ratings in SL. Social status as a *group member* is usually determined by parameters specific to a group – a designers’ group may prize technical skills, while a Christian group would reward someone for spiritual leadership. *Group officers* take on leadership roles within the group, and can allow or deny group membership. *Organizers* are officers that take responsibility for organizing group events and rituals. Being part of a group is a good path to becoming highly rated. Ratings are an important indicator of social status when meeting new people.

Building is the design and construction of objects in SL. Generally, to work on a project a resident must have access to land. Sandboxes are public areas where objects will dissolve in a few hours, and are often used by *tinkerers*. The next step up taken by most residents is to *customize* objects to wear or place on a private plot of land, such as clothing or a residential home. Some residents move on to *designing* objects from scratch, for others or for themselves. Skilled builders soon start selling their work as *merchant designers*, either themselves or through merchants and vendors. They may also do custom work for well-heeled clients. *Elder designers* are widely respected and well-known for quality work. They are often part of a design group, such as Bedazzled, and

are well-known for particular objects like motorcycles, clothing or skins. Becoming an elder designer is a path to modest economic power in SL. Merchant and elder designers may also serve as “artistic instigators” [21], setting a positive example with their own work and providing additional tools (such as script libraries and starter kits) to help beginners.

Conduct

Because SL relies so heavily on its users to design and build their world, tolerance, experimentation and diversity are core values that must be maintained. The golden rule of conduct in SL is “Live and let live”. In contrast to many other online communities, where even neo-Nazis have been allowed to express themselves in the spirit of the First Amendment [12], hateful or negative speech in SL is quickly suppressed. Linden Lab makes available both a Terms of Service (heavy with legalese) [22] and a more accessible Community Standards document [23] to its users. The standards proscribe intolerance, harassment, assault, region-inappropriate behavior, and disturbing the peace. Some examples of code enforcement include an incident where the administrators dismantled an alleged model of a Nazi concentration camp [24], and the almost daily suspension of “griefers” for abusive behavior. Reporting abusive behavior is a readily available button in the interface; residents are even prompted to report abuse when certain conditions occur (such as being bumped into several times in a short period). Linden maintains a police blotter [25] so that users have visibility into the enforcement of standards.

There is much local policing of behavior by the residents, in some isolated instances exploding into violent disputes [26]. While few areas permit the avatars to take damage and “die” (returning to their home location), there are other ways to force users to comply with local standards. One of the residents whom we interviewed related a story of being harassed in a bar, in which the other patrons ejected the offender with bump-guns and other nonviolent (but effective) weapons.

Beyond violations of the basic code, the Lindens are careful to permit SL society to develop its own codes and mores. There is often disagreement about what constitutes appropriate conduct. For example, some of the residents we spoke to expressed disapproval of and even revulsion towards residents who deliberately concealed their physical sex behind the opposite avatar gender. Others believed that passing as the opposite gender was an important part of their online relationships. Sexual mores is another point of disagreement – some residents are often offended by the more extreme mature content in SL.

If one looks hard enough, the values of a resident or region may be found in the “code” of their self-constructed environment [27]. Some regions in SL are designated by Linden as “PG”, wherein residents must avoid sexual content and bad language; violating this rule results in suspension or termination of the account. Many of the regions where avatars can take damage and “die” are populated by reclusive, violent, and anti-authoritarian groups of users – SL’s own militias – who have gleefully set up a firing range featuring Linden targets [28].

These variations in local standards of conduct have lead to a controversial new movement in SL. Some large landowners have proposed the creation of “planned

communities”, where one user holds land in trust for everyone in the community. A set of local standards is created, and the land owner has final authority to enforce these standards. For example, one large landholder is in the process of creating French- and German-speaking communities [29]. Many have proposed “suburban” communities that enforce building codes to prevent giant nightclubs and casinos from cropping up. Many users find the notion of more restrictive local governments to be threatening [30], fearing that SL will turn into a world of repressive small towns.

Real Life

Real Life rarely intrudes onto SL. Most residents prefer to keep their two lives separate; few include 1st Life information in their profiles. Trading real life pictures or talking on the phone signifies a great amount of intimacy for most residents. Most enjoy the anonymity and opportunity to recreate his or her self in SL.

I'm a not really all that interested in first life, because it's a game to me like I don't, I don't know that I would necessarily want to meet somebody our of the game.

Oftentimes friends are geographically separated by long distances. SL is a diverse community, such that simply residing in the same physical area as another user is no guarantee that the two will have shared interests. However, this diversity also implies that oftentimes events with a connection to the real world are a powerful means of bringing the community together. Historical events like the commemoration of the 9/11 memorial (Figure 3.0), and seasonal events like a winter carnival during the holidays, can be some of the biggest draws in the game.



Figure 3.0 SL 9/11 Memorial

SL and There.com

SL is not the first persistent virtual world that allows users to take on an avatar persona for the purposes of interacting with each other and their environment. It is, rather, part of the most recent generation of online social environments with roots in the original text-based chat rooms and MUDs. SL has, however, been steadily gaining popularity when compared to its closest rival There.com, and has even been drawing many users away from There and The Sims Online (TSO). Among the former “Thereians” and TSO users whom we interviewed, SL’s feature set, inexpensive cost, and liberal policies were major factors in switching.

Our own experiences with There bore out these observations. We found SL’s stunning imagery and motley crew of avatars to be more engaging than There’s “cartoony” landscape and homogenous AV’s (Figure 4.0). Furthermore, finding activities and people in SL is effortless. One may log on anytime, click on the map and find densely populated areas. The few times we logged onto There, other users were difficult

to find, and we found the “speech bubble” modes of chat to be distracting and hard to follow.



Figure 4.0 There.com

Research Methods

As an initial step in our research, we created avatars and conducted a “virtual ethnography” [31, 32] within Second Life. Recognizing that our methods and design recommendations should be grounded in a larger theoretical understanding of gender and identity, we began our readings with Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen*, and Goffmans’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Both researchers logged onto SL regularly over the course of a month, logging approximately 30-40 hours each. This provided us with a rich set of observational data, framing our understanding of the game and helping us to develop further questions.

During our initial visits we crafted avatars that looked like researchers. Wanting to conform to the stereotypical notion of a scientist, we wore lab coats, “geek chic”

glasses and carried clipboards. Kris Spaight was dressed in a Georgia Tech t-shirt, to emphasize that she was a student while Morgan donned a suit and tie (Figure 5.0). Our profiles identified us as researchers and included information about the study and our first lives. We also created a note card with a detailed description of our research and gave it to interested residents (see Appendix A,B,C). Goffman describes these symbols as “fronts” and like in real life they all added to our legitimacy as researchers and helped to counter skepticism we initially met when recruiting participants.



**Figure 5.0 Researchers “Kris Spaight” (Susan Wyche) and
“Morgan McDonald” (Matt McKeon)**

We relied on personal judgment to select appropriate people to interview. We were most interested in finding long time residents, as well as those with unconventional avatars. Interestingly, the female avatar Kris had little trouble finding participants while Morgan encountered a great deal of difficulty.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted to learn about users’ SL experience with specific questions focusing on avatar customization and attitudes toward

gender online (see Appendix D). Participants lived in urban and rural areas in the United States and Canada. Ages ranged from 22 to 42 with the average being 33 years old. All had been SL subscribers for four months or more.

Findings

In terms of the activities, building items, and avatar identity, our participants varied widely; however, universal among them was their commitment to the game. Almost without exception, questions about the amount of time spent online were answered with laughter and the phrase “Way too much!” Most participants spent more than 20 hours a week online -- the equivalent of a part-time job. One participant described failing out of school because of time spent on SL, while others explained how they had to wean themselves from the game so it would not interfere with their first life.

Another theme that emerged among our participants was the belief that Second Life enabled them to express themselves in ways that were unavailable to them in real life. Whether it was being more outspoken, better looking, or wealthier, SL provides an opportunity for users to live the life or be the person they want to be offline. Excerpts from interviews that support our initial findings are included.

Appearance

Wandering through SL is similar to flipping through the pages of *GQ*, *Vogue*, or *Playboy*. Tall, thin, muscular, and flawless avatars abound, and one can not help but wonder how similar the avatar appearance is to the person controlling it. When participants were asked about how similar or different their avatar was from their real life

appearance, we found that most made themselves more *attractive*. For females this meant being skinnier while for men it meant being more muscular (Figure 7.0).

He has blonde hair, he's like your stereotypical gay guy, like the whole six-pack abs and stuff, he's basically what everybody wants to look like in our community. He wears mainly dark clothing, he's outspoken, however he knows when he needs to shut up. I designed him this way because, in a way, its what I hoped to look like in first life.

Most guys just like wearing jeans and a t-shirt, something that shows off their muscle bodies, because they don't have those in real life but they got them in here.

She looks likes she is in her twenties, but 90% of the women I know are in their 40's but all of our avvies look so young, so nice.

Jodi O'Brien [36] interprets this process of “hyper gendering” as an attempts to reduce the uncertainty of online interaction by making sex overly apparent. Arguably, gender is one of the most important qualities one looks for during initial interactions whether on or offline. SL does not differ from similar online environments in that avatars tend to replicate typical stereotypes of gender and desirability.



Figure 6.0 Typical SL Avatars

Behavior

For many, SL is a way to adopt behaviors that they feel are unavailable to them in their first life. SL's gesture options allow people to be more expressive with their behavior than if they were limited to communicate solely through text. Many of our participants felt empowered to be more outgoing, more flirtatious or to perform sexual acts they felt inhibited to do offline.

In real life if you see a guy with pink hair you are going to stare at him, not because he has pink hair but because you have never seen that before but in the game everybody has pink hair, it not different.

I love going to the casinos, I am a poker fanatic! I have been told to get out of them out and called a shark. That's not how I am in my first life, I never go to the casino.

I never in my life until SL, ever had sat down and watched a porno film. Well in some of the clubs they got this TV, and you know you click and it shows porno films.

You can live out your fantasy here and be more aggressive around men if you want to be.

Lifestyle

SL provides a way for users to live a lifestyle they strive for in their first lives. The abundance of "McMansions," vacations homes, hot tubs, and Rolls-Royce's led us to believe that for some SL is a way for them to craft their luxurious version of "American Dream," which seemed financially implausible for many participants.

I own all kinds of furniture, more furniture that I'd ever put in the house. I own a Sim's worth of land. I could build alotta houses, just haven't gotten

around to it yet. I own three houses at the moment. And I have enough furniture for them plus more and I have textures, and I have clothes, and I have Dom Perignon, and china, and silverware. I have everything. And I have two top-of-the-line automobiles, one I bought the other was given to me as a gift for Valentine's Day.

A lot of the men are kind of power hungry because they can be here, tend to be set back and be an underling in a corporation here. They can make their own corporation here and be their own person.

I own a huge amount of land and I don't own nothing here, so, there I don't have to work for a living, here that's not the case.

Gender and SL: *Scratching the Surface*

During our interviews, we focused on gender identity in SL. How does a user's real-life gender manifest in their avatar? Why do people alternate between male and female characters? Does having the ability to play an opposite gender impact one's offline life? Gender is a multi-layered and complex issue to explore. Within the scope of this project, we were only able to demonstrate that participant's gender identity plays a real and meaningful role in their SL experience; we cannot engage in larger debates on the relationship between participants' avatar "self" and their sexed bodies. We offer anecdotal accounts to support two themes found in previous research examining gender and online communities. First, participants use their SL avatars to express gender atypical traits that are difficult to express in real life. Second, reactions to online gender-bending are polarized.

Three of the eight people interviewed built avatars that represented how they wanted to appear in their first life. Their gender identity differed from their biological sex and, as Turkle [33] describes, gender swapping is an opportunity to explore conflicts

raised by one's biological sex and to explore aspects of it they feel restricted to do offline.

I haven't been able to spend as much time getting my appearance to be more what I want which would be more androgynous or possible confuseable with a female. Basically what I feel like I would be on the inside if I had my choice would be female but possibly confuseable with male occasionally- more towards the androgynous female side of the spectrum. SL was really important to me because it gave me the chance to actually try out what I would want to look like if I had a chance to sort of express the transgendered feeling as my actual appearance and you know to be able to look like.

In my first life, if this were a perfect world I'd try and represent more of my personality in the real world. If I did do this it would meet with a lot of criticism, its easier to pass himself off as a generic guy rather than a girl. In a virtual world, I find myself acting more feminine, I can't represent much of his personality in the real world

I live in the rural south, and even though I love it here, people are too closed-minded. On SL I can look like RuPaul and nobody cares. I can be, be more like myself.

Two people we talked to were troubled by people being deceptive about their sex. Paradoxically, a woman condemned creating an avatar that does not represent your true sex, yet she enjoyed watching her husband wearing women's clothes in SL. Because he remained a male avatar this was "okay." Another participant enjoyed SL's "open minded" environment and lauded the freedom it gave people to be themselves. When asked if she had met someone whose real life gender was not what she suspected, she recounted an incident that "disgusted" her:

She's like a whore a trollop and dresses that way! She's a he! It's disgusting! Frankly, you know I talk with him and I'm friends with him, that way, in SL and all, but I don't find it urgent to say hello when he talks and I'm busy doing something. And I don't hang with him like, out in the clubs and all, because he's trashy. And I think, in my personal life, and me personally way down inside of me, I find that disgusting.

I know secret transgendered people are with you and hanging out with you, going out to clubs with you and it makes me angry they are basically lying to you.

In the “Strange Case of the Electronic Lover,” Lindsey Van Gelder [34] describes the wide ranging emotions that members of an electronic bulletin board felt when they discovered that a popular community member was lying about her gender. The ability to create an appearance in SL is far richer than what was available a decade ago; despite this, we found that online gender deception remains a polarizing issue in online community.

Conclusion

Our initial findings suggest that despite the unparalleled ability to alter avatar appearance in SL, it may not provide opportunities for learning new things about gender and online communities. What we found simply reflects findings from the ample research previously done in this area. However, future research opportunities may lie in SL’s unique economic system. Our interview questions did not address this but through our secondary research, fieldwork, and interviews we discovered that users are creating *real* world income in this *virtual* world. Virtual land is actively being bought and sold on Ebay, people with no formal design training are becoming famous fashion designers, and incomes are being subsidized by building everything ranging from virtual weapons to genitals.

APPENDIX A



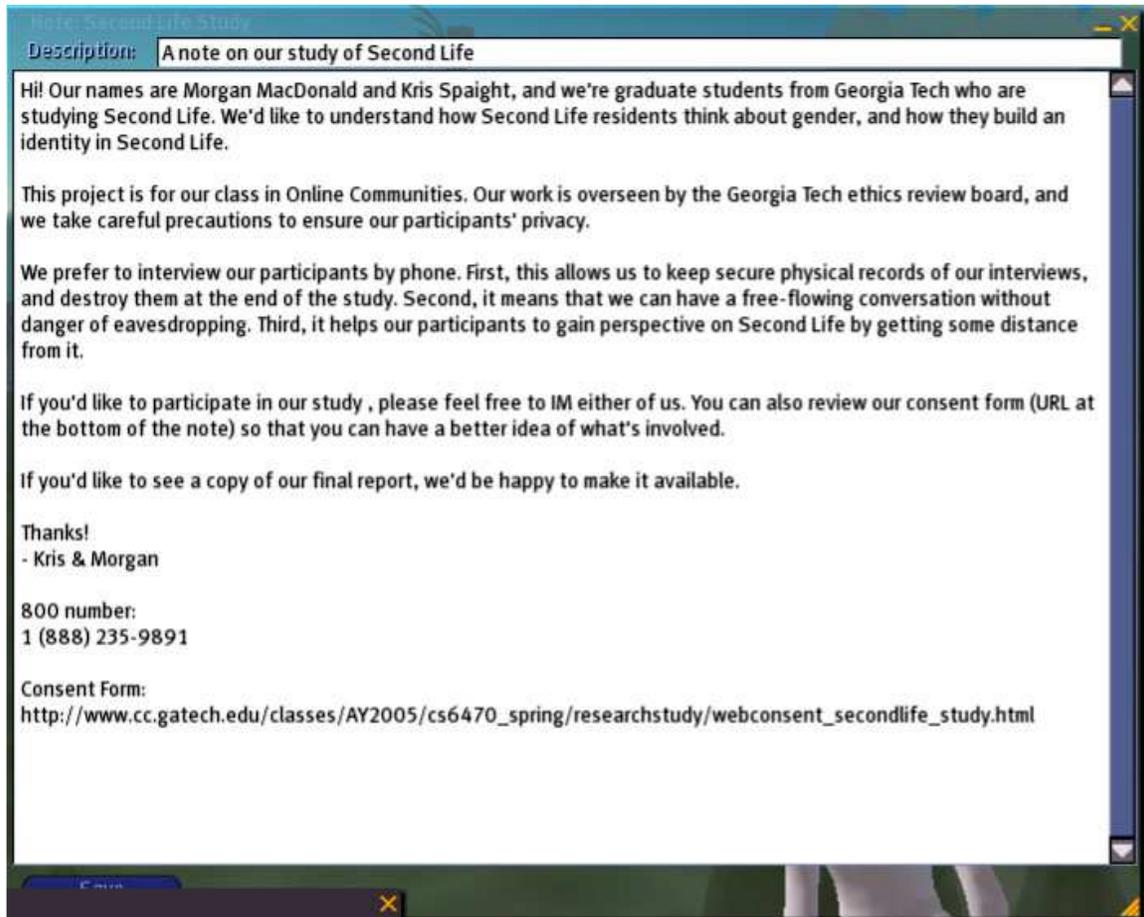
“Kris Spaight’s” SL Profile

APPENDIX B



“Morgan MacDonald’s” SL Profile

APPENDIX C



Note card given to SL residents interested in the study.

APPENDIX D

SL Interview Script

How does your gender identity on SL impact your real life activities, perceptions, and experiences?

Demographic Information:

- 1) Where do you live?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) What is your occupation?
- 4) Are you male or female?
- 5) How many years of computer education do you have?

SL:

- 6) How long have you subscribed to SL? Why did you initially subscribe?
- 7) During a typical week how many hour do you spend logged onto SL?
- 8) Are you active in other online communities? If so, is SL different? How?
- 9) Why do you subscribe to SL?
- 10) Briefly, reconstruct your time on SL, from the time you initially joined to now.
- 11) Tell me about the last time you logged onto SL? What did you do? Where did you go?

Avatar and SL:

- 10) Tell me about your avatar(s)? What do you typically wear? What do you look like?
- 11) What is your avatar's name and why did you select it?
- 12) Do you ever alter your avatar? What prompts you to change? How do your online relationships change when you change your avatar?
- 13) Tell me about your online profile.
- 14) Describe your relationship with your avatar. Does it represent your offline self? How?
- 15) Tell me about your online relationships? Do you play with friends? Have you made online friends?

Stuff to keep in mind

- Gestures
- How do you communicate with others
- Most memorable event in SL?
- Met SL person offline?

Finally

- Would you like to be contacted when the results of our study of the survey are posted online?

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* Names have been changed to protect participants.

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