THE VIRTUAL PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY SECOND LIFE

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B.A., University of California, Berkeley, 2007

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

SOCIOLOGY

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

FALL
2011
THE VIRTUAL PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY SECOND LIFE

A Thesis

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Abstract

of

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How does social interaction take place within a fully online environment, and what tactics and techniques do users employ to present and manage impressions of self? Within a fully online social interaction site called Second Life, I conducted participant observations over the span of three months for a total of nearly thirty-five hours, as well as open ended in-depth interviews with sixteen Second Life users. A dramaturgical analysis is employed to discover the tactics and techniques of the presentation of self and impression management which are utilized in the fully online environment of Second Life. I found that users heavily relied on the defensive practice of perfecting their performance, specifically through five key information carriers: their appearance, profile, displaying bodily control and technical proficiency, correcting chatting techniques, and proper usage of gestures. In addition, residents participated in two protective practices to aid other users in their performance. The first is tactful inattention, essentially turning a blind eye to performance errors, and the second is tactful attention, which is the practice of acknowledging a performance error by providing assistance on how to fix it while at the same time diffusing the gravity of the error. The results of the analysis show that
online interaction can be studied with a dramaturgical perspective to uncover the intricacies of the mechanisms of social interaction.

____________________________________. Committee Chair
Kathryn Gold Hadley, Ph.D.

____________________________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is my pleasure to thank the many people who have helped to make this thesis possible. I owe my most sincere gratitude to my mentor and chair, Dr. Kathryn Gold Hadley. Her theoretical insights and expertise in qualitative research were invaluable. She has been an exceptional resource, remaining continually supportive and infinitely patient as my research design unfolded (and changed!) over time. She always challenged me to take my work to the next level; it was her encouragement and enthusiasm at the start that helped turned an idea, which we discussed in her office in my first semester, into a thesis.

I also would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Aya Kimura Ida, who has been extremely supportive. Her kindness and willingness to give me opportunities to present my work to other students gave me confidence in my research. To our graduate coordinator, Dr. Amy Liu: I am extremely grateful for all the hard work you put in for the sake of all of the graduate students. Your concern for our success and your willingness to assist us as much as possible is much appreciated.

My deepest gratitude goes to my friends and family. Thank you to all my friends at work and who have been cheering me on. To my dear friend and partner in crime and craziness, Iza Bedolla: I cannot thank you enough for giving me the stern reminders to both finish my work and find time to hang out with friends in order to stay sane. Thank you for your friendship and encouragement. To my mother and father, Deana and David
Keck, and to my sister, Rachel Garcia: I am forever grateful. You three have always supported and encouraged me, and convinced me that I can achieve my goals.

Finally, I could not have done this without the support, encouragement, and constant cheering and rooting from my dearest friend and love of my life: my husband Ben Duncan. For all the nights that you stayed up with me as worked, just to show your support; for all the gifts and surprises you used as incentives for me to meet my deadlines (now I can finally start the book you got me!), and for always believing in me even when I did not. For these and many, many more reasons, I am forever grateful.
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FREQUENTLY USED SECOND LIFE TERMS

Avatar: Often referred to as the avi, it is the visual representation of a Second Life user, created through computer graphics. All visual aspects of an avatar are customizable through controls within Second Life.

Inventory: A user’s storage place for any items the user has acquired. The inventory is a list of all items and is with the user at all times.

In-World: Within Second Life.

Instant Message (IM): A private text based message between two users while in Second Life.

Linden Dollars (Lindens): The unit of exchange of goods or services within Second Life.

Newbie: A new resident.

Notecard: An object which can be created by a user and can include various information. Notecards can then be shared between users to share the information, and can be saved to a user’s inventory for future reference.

Prim Count: (see also “prims”) The number of basic polygon shapes used to create an object. A low prim count typically means a more basic object and a high prim count means a more complex object.

Prims: Shorthand for “primitives” and refers to the basic polygon 3D shapes that are used as the basic, or primitive, building blocks for objects in Second Life. Prims are combined together to form more complicated objects, thus making an object with a higher prim count higher quality and less primitive looking.
Profile: A snapshot of basic information about a user, including the profile name, Second Life birth date, and payment information for the account. Additional information can be added by the user at their discretion.

Resident: A Second Life user.

Rez: To create an object or make an object appear on screen. Rezzing is the process of making this happen. Often used to describe the process of loading the visual graphics of an object (for example: “My hair is still rezzing which is why you cannot see it yet”).

Screen name: The name of a Second Life user which appears on screen to other users.

Script: Computer coding which sets attributes to an object, usually making it possible for users to interact with it.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

From the printing press, to the telephone, to web-cams, technology has historically played a role in how communication and interaction unfold within societies. Continuing with this technological trend, the advent of the internet and ever-advancing communication technologies allows our social interactions to become more and more technologically-mediated. Today, members of Congress send out “tweets” via Twitter, long lost high school friends “poke” each other on Facebook, and students from all across the world can take a class together without having to leave their homes. Clearly, advancements in technology usher in changes in the ways in which we interact and communicate.

Advancements in online social networking technology provide the means for individuals to communicate and interact with each other without regard to physical distances or temporal restrictions. Despite these innovations, online interaction has been viewed in some ways as secondary to real-world interaction. This was in part because it was typically text-based and asynchronous, meaning that communication and interaction did not take place in real time. Therefore, much of the meaning that we usually glean from our interactions with others is lost (Joinson 2005). Eye contact, timing, gestures, and other forms of “embodied cues” were lost, along with the audible aspects of communication such as intonation, tone, and pacing (Hine 2000; Robinson 2007).

Recently, online interaction has transitioned into a new era of virtual three-dimensional spaces in which online personas, often termed ‘avatars,’ can interact with
each other through real-time text or voice based communication, visual cues, and
‘physical’ interaction (hugging, dancing, rolling eyes, etc.). The perceived gap between
the possible means of interaction in the real world versus the virtual world has narrowed,
or at the very least has changed drastically, due to technological advancements.

The Birth of Second Life

Second Life is one such real-time virtual world which narrows this perceived gap
between real and virtual interaction. In 1999, Philip Rosedale founded Linden Lab, a
company focused on creating computer software which would allow users to have a rich
and full experience in a virtual environment (Linden Lab 2011c). The online program
“Second Life” was born, and this user-centered virtual environment became available for
public use in 2003. In it, users, termed ‘residents’, are able to interact in real-time with
other residents through exciting activities like attending rock concerts, dancing, or going
to a theme park. Additionally, residents can simply engage in seemingly mundane
activities such as sitting and drinking coffee, going to a museum, or sitting on a beach
watching virtual waves crash against virtual rocks. Users even have the option to go
home from their real-world jobs, log in, and show up for their Second Life jobs. It is a
three dimensional, user created virtual world. There are no objectives or pre-set goals as
one would find in online games; rather, it is a rich and complex world in which users can
meet and interact with other users, engage the interactive environment, or chose to do
neither and simply spend time alone on the landscape for relaxation. Simply put, Second
Life is exactly what it sounds like: rather than an online game or networking site, it is
truly a second life.
Exploring the Virtual

My objective was to enter the world of Second Life and conduct what Christine Hine (2000) refers to as a virtual ethnography. Through participant observation and in-depth online interviews with residents, I studied Second Life just as one would study a school, workplace, or place of worship by becoming immersed in the environment. An ethnography of the internet can work to “make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives” (Hine 2000:5) specifically within the realm of virtual interaction. In addition, by employing Erving Goffman’s (1959) analysis of the self as constituted and presented through dramatic presentations and productions, I approached the field site of Second Life with a dramaturgical perspective. This allowed me to analyze how residents of Second Life negotiated, presented, and performed self to other residents through social interaction in a virtual environment, and how they in turn were able to interpret the presentation of the selves of other residents.

I extended Goffman’s (1959:15) definition of interaction as the “reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” to include immediate virtual real-time physical presence. Building upon the current body of knowledge regarding research of online communication and interaction, as well as incorporating a theoretical perspective founded on Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, allowed me to fill a gap in the current literature as well as provided a discussion of the current ability of sociological methods to be employed in spaces of virtual interaction. To put a contemporary twist on Goffman’s (1959) analysis, I essentially observed the presentation of self in everyday Second Life.
Significance

Researchers immediately appeared on the scene when the internet became available for public use in the 1990s. This extremely new and different way for individuals to interact and communicate through technology brought about a proliferation of research on online community, identity, and interaction (see: Bronmber 1996; Rheingold 1994; Tepper 1997; Wilbur 1997). Some researchers argue that virtual interaction is a pale comparison for real-world experiences and proves insufficient for meaningful communities to flourish (Beniger 1987). Others take it one step further by arguing that virtual interaction detracts from our real-world selves (Dreyfus 2001), or conversely that it is the means of freeing our minds from the physical inequality that our bodies have to endure (Haraway 2000). Alternatively, some researchers find that online communication provides a means for individuals to communicate and get to know each other in a deep and meaningful way about their real-world lives (Rutter and Smith 2005), band together to work towards a shared cause or goal in the real-world (Hine 2000), or to get to know each other in order to meet in the real-world to pursue a romantic relationship (Hardey 2002). Despite often extreme differences between these various approaches, what remains a common theme in much of the research of online interaction is a prescriptive comparison of real-world versus virtual interaction.

The gap that exists in the literature and research, then, is an in-depth qualitative study of virtual interaction in its own right, built upon the theoretical framework of Goffman’s dramaturgy, with the aim of description rather than prescription. My study fills this gap, as I learned from residents of Second Life how they determined how to
present their selves, infer meaning from the presented selves of others, interpret their interactions with others within Second Life, and determine what this interaction means to them. My aim was not to attempt to find a correlation with or discontinuity between real-world demographics and virtual world users to see how the self projected on the screen matches up with the user behind the screen. Rather, my goal was to uncover the rich details and complexities of social interaction and meaning making between Second Life residents in order to better our understanding of the new and flourishing virtual worlds in which so many individuals participate.

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2008) argues that despite criticisms, research of online interaction can take place solely within the online realms without the need of a cross-examination of the users behind the computer screen and their personas online. Often termed the “authenticity problem” (Hine 2000:118), this issue can be central to research which aims to discover the level of continuity between real world participants and their online personas. However, as Boellstorff (2008:61) argues, “to demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for ‘context’ presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts.” Although her work typically does include a combination of online and in person interaction with online users, virtual ethnographer Christine Hine (2009:22) does recognize that “if the aim is to study online settings as contexts in their own rights, the question of offline identities need not arise.”

Furthermore, a Goffmanian perspective helps to clarify the potential authenticity problem as the self is described as a continually renegotiated product of individual social
interactions within a specific setting. Therefore, as my aim was to discover the tactics of the presentation of self within a virtual environment, an investigation of the tactics one employs in the real world as compared with their virtual tactics was, while interesting, irrelevant to my research aim.

In our increasingly technological society, it is essential that we increase our understanding of new sites of culture that exist online. We cannot continue to make assumptions about what does or does not happen during social interaction in online environments, or make claims from the outside looking in. Boellstorff (2008:62) criticizes the perspective that research of online interaction “must have the ultimate goal of addressing the actual world, which is taken to be the only ‘real’ social world” because this ignores the experiences that users have which are virtually lived and yet real at the same time. A sociological study of Second Life, founded in the tradition of Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, helps to uncover the complexities of everyday virtual interaction.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to frame this study of a virtual environment like Second Life and to fully understand the context and significance of such a study, it is important to examine previous studies on online interaction and the role of the internet in our social lives. Furthermore, it is important to set a firm theoretical foundation on which my study stands. First, I will discuss empirical research on virtual interaction and communication. I will start by looking at research from the 1990s which developed in response to the emergence of the internet as a “public communications media” (Abbate 1998:181) and will follow through to more contemporary research in the field which address new avenues of interaction made possible by technological advances. Secondly, after setting the stage with the current relevant research, I will discuss in greater detail the theoretical foundations of my research to show how the theory and empirical data will work symbiotically in my study.

Critical Inquiry of Virtual Interaction

Historically, many new communication technologies provoked concerns about the decline of the quality of interaction and communication. Joinson (2005) reminds us of the outcries and complaints lobbied against both the telegraph and telephone out of fear that traditional interaction was going to be defeated by new forms of fast and impersonal communication. Similarly, the value of online interaction has been contested from the start. Indeed, once the internet “emerged as a public communications medium […] there were countless commentaries on its social impacts and implications” (Abbate 1998:181).
The emergence of the internet and subsequent modes of virtual interaction incited a new wave of advanced concerns about the effect that virtual interaction, mediated by technology, will have on our perception of reality and ourselves.

Hubert Dreyfus (2001) outlines his four main ways in which increased time spent in virtual reality adversely affect users. First, he argues that “without our embodied ability to grasp meaning, relevance slips through our non-existent fingertips” and we lose our ability to recognize when something is or is not relevant (Dreyfus 2001:26). Second, without having physical interaction and guidance, Dreyfus argues that we cannot truly acquire skills. Third, the body is supremely integral in our ability to “get a grip on things” as it “provides our sense of the reality of what we are doing and are ready to do” and helps to determine what is significant or not (Dreyfus 2001:72). Therefore, when we leave our bodies behind while in the realm of cyberspace, we lose our ability to recognize what is reality and what is not. Finally, a life that is predominantly plugged in to virtual reality risks being a “life without meaning” (Dreyfus 2001:7). In short, Dreyfus (2001:102) claims that “what the net is doing for us is, in fact, making our lives worse rather than better.”

In direct contrast to the cautions of Dreyfus, Howard Rheingold (1993) explores the ways in which computer-mediated communication can positively, neutrally, and negatively impact user’s lives. Specifically, Rheingold (1993) looks at how users can utilize web technology to impact the greater (real) society. One way is through our perceptions, thoughts, and personalities which affect the way we experience the world (for example, new vocabulary has surfaced as a product of online communication).
Another is through the change from “person-to-person interaction” to “many-to-many” interaction in which individuals participate in interaction with numerous individuals and communities at once (Rheingold 1993:12). This interaction need not be assumed to have a negative impact on social interaction in the physical world or be secondary to physical interaction due to a difference in the way interaction takes place. Indeed, as Joinson (2005:22) points out, "a loss of visual cues need not be accompanied by a concurrent reduction in the ‘socialness’ of interaction."

The third way that Rheingold (1993) sees online communication possibly impacting our lives is through politics and community building. Through high speed exchanges of information, the internet allows for a move towards greater information shared among citizens without having to be first sifted through corporate mass media powers. However, Rheingold (1993:15) warns that the power of the internet is not necessarily only good for citizens – it could result in a high-tech Panopticon of surveillance and that “the potential for totalitarian abuse of that information web is significant.” His warning is both a caution and call for users to be both wary of the way technology is used (by whom, for whom) and to also claim it as one’s own and use it to better and promote democracy.

Additional research has worked to analyze the way that online communication is used from the perspective of the users in order to better understand if users can actually exert constructive control over the way that virtual interaction does or does not impact their lives as Rheingold (1993) posits. This is an important shift in focus, moving away from a critique of the technology as a force existing within a vacuum, and moving instead
towards an understanding of how individuals play a role in determining what role technology will play in their life. As Grint and Woolgar (1997) argue, it is not the technology itself or an inherent characteristic of the technology which has the potential to impact our lives. Rather, our use of the technology and our social construction of the technology both creates and shapes the social meaning of the technology. Hine (2000:4) agrees, adding that it is not the technology itself that is changing the world, but rather the “uses and understandings of the technology.” This is because the internet can be seen as a “cultural artifact” according to Hine (2000:9) which is to say that the internet “could have been otherwise, and that what it is and what it does are the product of culturally produced meanings.” Furthermore, the internet “means different things to different people, and they will see its functions, risks, and opportunities in ways that reflect their own concerns” (Hine 2005:9).

Therefore, analyses from the perspective of the users are needed. Rutter and Smith (2005) for example, worked to uncover the basic ways in which sociability is constructed through discourse in text based communication online. They built upon Goffman’s theoretical foundation of the interaction order as well as utilizing conversation analysis in order to discover how social interaction was practiced online through text based interaction. Silver (2003) also works to explore and understand how individuals use online communication and how they in turn create and understand the meaning of their social interaction. Silver looks specifically at how users are able to redefine spaces as opposed to being passive consumers of the technology. Mark Nunes (2006) furthers the analysis by criticizing the tendency in much research to create a preferred value
system which automatically dismisses social happenings online as somehow less real than interaction which happens in the physical realm. Nunes (2006:xxvi) attempts to redefine space as “an event produced by material, conceptual, and experiential processes” without giving privilege to any one of those processes.

It is here, with the assumption of “real” and “less real” interactions that I turn to Tom Boellstorff’s (2008) anthropological study of culture, life, and interaction in Second Life. He tackles the traditional assumption that virtual interaction is somehow less real than physical interaction, explaining that although some might think that social research cannot be conducted completely in the virtual realm, “studying virtual worlds 'in their own terms' is not only feasible but crucial to developing research methods that keep up with the realities of technological change. [...] The forms of social action and meaningmaking that take place do so within the virtual world, and there is a dire need for methods and theories that take this into account” (Boellstorff 2008:4-5). He argues that while virtual worlds are clearly social constructions (and are constantly reconstructed by social actors); this is not a unique phenomenon as all forms of interaction take place within socially constructed realms even if they are in the flesh. Boellstorff (2008:27) argues that "negative assumptions [about online interaction] fail to appreciate how human experience is always culturally mediated."

Furthermore, as “virtual worlds are legitimate sites of culture,” they are sites which should, and can, be studied in their own right (Boellstorff 2008:61). As much research of online interaction works to make comparisons between physical interaction and virtual interaction, Boellstorff (2008:61) urges researchers to address their own
assumptions of what constitutes a viable site of interaction and culture. He argues that “to demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for ‘context’ presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts; it renders ethnographically inaccessible the fact that most residents of virtual worlds do not meet their fellow residents offline” (Boellstorff 2008:61). Hine (2005:17) agrees, claiming that we should seek to understand the “vibrant social and cultural formations that occur online, and the depth and intimacy of the social relations that can happen in cyberspace.” Thus, it is integral that research is devoted to understanding the users and the agency that they have in using technology.

Applied Theoretical Foundations

In Erving Goffman’s analysis of the presentation of self, interaction is made intelligible through individuals giving off information about their self through signs and expressions in both explicit and subtle ways. Goffman (1959:1) explains the importance of this, stating that “information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how to best act in order to call forth a desired response from him.” This varies depending on the situation and the social actors present as each situation results in a “working consensus” where participants work together to define how the situation will proceed (Goffman 1959:9).

Goffman employs a dramaturgical approach as a way to study and observe an establishment and the interactions which take place within. This approach, using the drama of a theater as a metaphor for the ways in which individuals act out and project
their self for and with other social actors while on various performance stages, would
“lead us to describe the techniques of impression management employed in a given
establishment, the principal problems of impression management in the establishment,
and the identity and interrelationships of the several performance teams which operate in
the establishment” (Goffman 1959:240). The dramaturgical approach can be combined
with what Goffman (1959) refers to as a “cultural perspective,” in which one observes the
“moral values which influence activity in the establishment – values pertaining to
fashions, customs, and matters of taste, to politeness and decorum, to ultimate ends and
normative restrictions on means, etc.” He explains that “the cultural and dramaturgical
perspectives intersect most clearly in regard to the maintenance of moral standards”
which help to sustain an interactional environment (Goffman 1959:241).

According to Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, the self is constituted through
interaction. It is not a fixed, core characteristic of a person but rather a byproduct of
social interaction and continual reciprocal effects that individuals have upon each other
and upon their own self. Thus, “to be a given kind of person, then, is not merely to
possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and
appearance that one’s social grouping attaches thereto” (Goffman 1959:75). Therefore, a
dramaturgical perspective can effectively be employed when studying social interaction
with the goal of understanding what rules and values operate within the given
environment, and how individuals carry out the drama of social interaction by continually
presenting self. This type of analysis can be accomplished in part by working to uncover
what Goffman (1959) refers to as the defensive and protective practices that individuals
utilize in order to manage the impression they may leave on another person. Defensive practices are tactics which, when an individual utilizes them, work to help ensure that one’s own performance does not include inconsistencies which may call into question one’s right to be giving this performance. Protective practices are tactics which residents employ to in effect help bolster the validity of another individual’s performance through helping the individual get through performance difficulties (or by ignoring performance issues). Within a fully online environment such as Second Life, much can be learned by looking for defensive and protective practices and analyzing how these practices play a role in a user’s quest to present self within a fully virtual environment.

Clearly, the perspectives and opinions abound regarding how virtual interaction fits into our understanding of social interaction in general. Only recently have researchers grappled with the assumptions of both physical and virtual interaction and how that shapes and limits our understanding of how interaction takes place and what it means to social actors. Incorporating a dramaturgical perspective while completing in-depth qualitative research to discover the ways in which individuals take part in, define, and redefine virtual interaction is both a next step to further the body of knowledge on this subject and a step towards enriching and expanding conventional sociological research methods.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my research was to analyze how social interaction and the presentation of self occur within online environments. Using Second Life as a case study, I worked to expand current theories, conceptions, and understandings of social interaction and the presentation of self within the realm of virtual interaction. The primary research method I utilized was participant observation, which allowed for a rich exploration of the virtual world of Second Life as well as the residents which inhabit it. Participant observations allowed me to become informed about the social landscape of Second Life, which in turn allowed me to foster relationships with residents and eventually interview them individually on a more in-depth basis. Pairing in-depth interviews with my participant observations helped to give voice to individual residents, and allowed me to hear and understand how they present their self and interact with others in Second Life. Participant observations and in-depth interviews work symbiotically together: my time spent as a participant observer helped to guide my interviews, and each interview helped to inform and guide my participant observation with newly gained insights.

The Virtual Setting

Within Second Life, users were able to create online personas, called “avatars.” The avatars were 3-D characters which could walk around the virtual environment and interact with other avatars who were all referred to as “residents” of Second Life. Second Life users controlled all movement and interaction of their avatar through the use of a mouse and keyboard controls. Residents were able to alter their physical appearance
including race, gender, age, or even species as often as they liked and with as much creativity and imagination as they could muster. They were able to don different clothes, different faces, change size, shape, and color, yet still remain in essence the same resident. This was made possible, in part, through the avatar screen name and profile.

The screen name was an identifier which was unique to each resident, consisting of any chosen first name and a last name which was selected from a list at the time of creating the Second Life account. The screen name appeared in a bubble above an avatar’s head as they walked around, which allowed other residents to call a person by name when communicating. Additionally, it allowed residents to keep track of who their friends were despite the possibility of their visual appearance changing over time. The screen name automatically appeared for other residents to view while in visual range, and similarly the profile was viewable by any other resident nearby with a simple click of a button. In the profile, the resident could outline any personal information they wished to share with others such as their favorite spots to visit in Second Life, their hobbies, or perhaps their reasons for being in Second Life. If desired, they could list real life contact information to invite residents to contact them outside of Second Life.

Communication was primarily text based, although voice chatting was an option. Voice chat was rarely used by most residents, and therefore I did not utilize this form of communication in my research. Resident perspectives of voice chat will be addressed in chapter four. There were two forms of chat: group chat and private instant message. Group chat was public to all residents within a local area – once you moved too far away from a resident chatting in the group chat, their messages no longer showed up in your
group chat log. If a resident was utilizing voice chat, which again was a rare occurrence, the volume of their voice was the signifier of how close you were to the resident speaking. If they were far away, their voice was barely audible, and as you moved your avatar closer to the speaker, the volume increased. In this way, group chat in both text and voice form was much like a group conversation in the real world. Once you approached the group, you could hear what was being said and when you moved away from the group, you became out of range and could no longer hear them.

Communicating via instant message did not require residents to be near each other. Instant messages were private chats between individual residents and were not viewable to other residents. In fact, other residents had no knowledge that a private conversation was even occurring. If two residents added each other as friends, they were able to IM each other even if they were not near each other, thus able to stay in touch even when in different locations. Teleportation, which was the option of instantly moving your avatar from its current location to a newly selected location, was incorporated into IM communication. Residents engaged in an IM conversation had the option of sending a teleport link via IM in order to bring the other resident to their current location. In this way, IM helped to foster relationships between residents despite the abundance of locations within Second Life.

The world was built much like a video game in that graphics were created through manipulating basic shapes to create objects and subsequently animate them. The difference is that once in Second Life, a resident could access the tools to create these shapes and manipulate them into new objects. Computer scripting was what makes this
possible, and thanks to user friendly interfaces, users could learn how to utilize computer scripting or “scripts” to manipulate the environment around them. While there were restrictions in place, such as not being able to transform the landscape of land which you did not own, users could go to designated areas, termed “sand boxes” to toy around with scripts and try their hand at creating objects. Once an object was created, the creator could keep it and do what they wanted with it. Highly skilled residents could create elaborate objects, like a swing set or a dragon, and could even put them up for sale in Second Life.

Monetary exchange was an important topic in Second Life. The in-world currency was Linden Dollars, commonly referred to as Lindens, and they carried an exchange rate to real world currencies. This exchange rate varied depending on who was selling their Lindens. At the time of writing, one US dollar was on average equivalent to approximately $262 Lindens (Linden Lab 2011b). Residents could exchange their US dollars for Lindens in order to use them to purchase items in Second Life such as the user created swing set or dragon. In exchange, residents earned Lindens off of their in-world sales. If they had nothing to sell and did not want to spend their real world currency in exchange for Lindens, residents could seek employment in Second Life to earn money. Users did also have the option of then exchanging their Lindens for real world currency such as the US dollar, again based upon current exchange rates. Therefore, real world money could be made off of in-world sales.

It is important to note, however, that a resident did not have to have Lindens in order to participate in Second Life. For example, a resident could spend time in public
spaces which did not require a fee for entrance. Additionally, many residents offer what were termed “freebies” – items which any user could take at no cost. This included clothing, accessories, and appearance upgrades such as new hair or skin. New items could then be saved in a resident’s “inventory” which was essentially a storage site in their profile. Whether or not a resident had payment information on record, meaning they participated in the exchange of Linden Dollars in Second Life, was public information and noted in the resident’s profile. This was simply noted as “payment info on file” or “no payment info on file.” This proved to be an important aspect of a resident’s persona, as I will discuss in chapter four.

Scripts clearly played an important role in monetary exchange in Second Life, but because they could also create motion and animate objects or people, they also played an instrumental role in making everyday interaction such a rich experience in Second Life. To continue with the previous examples, the creator of the aforementioned swing set or dragon could animate these objects so that the swing swung when someone sat on it, and so the dragon flapped its wings and reared its head. These scripts also allowed for richer communication within Second Life as compared to other online social networking venues. Because they were controllable and customizable, residents were able to make physical gestures and engage with other residents and objects physically through the animation of their avatar. Like other online communication sites, residents could chat with each other in real time through text based communication. But residents were also able to visually communicate with others as well through the use of gestures and movements which were visually recognized in real time as well. The simple act of
hugging someone when there is nothing to be said can speak volumes in real life and has left an awkward gap in text based online communication where users have to type out a statement about hugging. In Second Life, however, these forms of bodily cues, gestures, and physical/visual communication were possible.

While I have simply scratched the surface in describing the functions, tools, and options which were available to residents within Second Life, these are the essential basics. Because Second Life is comprised of user-generated content, the landscape is constantly evolves and changes. Therefore, it is important to focus on the basic functions in order to gain an understanding of communication and interaction between residents in Second Life.

The Researcher

Given that Second Life is such a unique and complex world and that as an active resident of Second Life I was enmeshed in the culture and interaction which took place, I recognized the need for an introspective observation of my role as a researcher and resident of Second Life. My role as a researcher was not to stand on the sidelines observing the world of Second Life with objective scrutiny. Rather, I continually observed myself and my continual attempts to create, present, and maintain a virtual self. I looked to standpoint theory in order to help frame my approach to the research.

Standpoint theory posits that all knowledge, including science and research which aims to be objective, is socially, culturally, and historically situated (see Harding 2004; McCorkel and Myers 2003). Standpoint theory calls on researchers to recognize “how her own use of master narratives give form and substance to not just her experiences in
the field, but her sense of her own identity as well as the identities and ‘differences’ of others.” (McCorkel and Myers 2003:205). Therefore, I as the researcher practiced reflexivity in observing my own self and position within the research. Throughout my analysis, I speak about the experiences of other Second Life residents and also reflect upon my identity, experiences, and position within Second Life and how this impacted the interactions which I observed and took part in. In effect, I am another research subject which can be observed and analyzed as I worked to understand social interaction and self in Second Life.

Like Boellstorff (2008), I feel that the participatory aspect of “participant observation” requires much attention. Going through the process of creating a self (or avatar) and attempting to connect with other residents in the environment of Second Life allowed me to experience and learn about the presentation of self in this context more so than relying solely on my ability to interpret and understand second hand information or through the attempt of making objective observations. In chapter four, I will describe in greater detail my experiences and insights gained from the process I went through to create my self; however, I would like to first touch upon a few key strategies I utilized in my methodological approach to studying Second Life.

Before I was able to interact with residents or even enter the world of Second Life, much preparatory work was done to literally create the self which I would present. I made strategic decisions about how my virtual self would be presented in Second Life, keeping in mind how I believed my audience would view me. As mentioned, residents in Second Life interacted with each other through their avatars and could advertise personal
information through a profile. Therefore, I took much care in designing my avatar and profile based upon how I would like other residents to view me. This experience alone taught me much about the presentation of self in Second Life, and the conscious strategies that residents employed in their virtual interactions within Second Life.

While Second Life is a place where you can become who and whatever you’d like to be, my role as a researcher required transparency and overt continuity between my real life and Second Life identities in order to maintain honest and ethical relationships with research participants. Therefore, both my avatar and profile were designed based solely off of my real life appearance, personality, and research intentions. Visually, I appeared as a fair skinned adult human female. My physical features mimicked those of my real life body, such as hair and eye color as well as weight and height, and my avatar wore clothing which could easily be found in my real life closet. I will discuss in greater detail in chapter four the process of getting my avatar to appear the way I intended to, and the implications of such a process. My first name was “AnnaVictoria” as it is in real life, and while the last names were somewhat predetermined (as one had to select a last name from a drop down list of available last names), I attempted to select one which has similar ethnic connotations of “Keck” - that is, one which seems of European decent. I also attempted to find a last name which had a similar harsh “k” sound to it to ensure it had the same feel of my real life last name. The result is that in Second Life, my name was AnnaVictoria Kruyschek.

My profile included a brief introduction of my reasons for being in Second Life as well as my focus as a researcher studying social interactions in Second Life. I included a
description of my scholastic background and current status as a graduate student in the sociology department at California State University, Sacramento. My intentions for being in Second Life were clear and explicit to all who read my profile. Although I did not interview or interact with research participants outside of Second Life, I did list real life contact information in my profile in order to establish trust through a verifiable real life identity.

*Research Site*

Upon first entering Second Life, I started out in a site specifically designed for new residents, which I call the Tutor Zone. Tutor Zone featured informational booths which taught new residents how to move their avatar, how to alter the avatar appearance, the basics about monetary exchange, as well as providing a wealth of other helpful information for new residents. Within Tutor Zone, I was able to get the basics down, set up my profile, and alter my appearance to meet the operational needs of my research.

After creating an avatar and profile, I entered the mainstream areas of Second Life as both an observer and a participating resident. Just as with any new site that one enters, I worked to learn the social norms of interaction and communication among residents. While I maintained a constant avatar and profile, I found myself continually creating self anew as I struggled to present and re-present my self to other residents in new situations. This firsthand experience allowed me to better understand how residents of Second Life negotiate, present, and perform self in a virtual environment.

I remained in public places in Second Life, rather than private locations (such as private property, clubs, offices, or locations requiring an entrance fee) as I worked to
absorb the ways of Second Life. For example, there were locations in Second Life which were similar to public spaces in the real world, where individuals may congregate and interact out in the open, sit on park benches, or walk down a street and do some window shopping. In an attempt to remain in the spirit of Goffman (1959), I observed public interactions in public spaces primarily in a location I call City Park.

City Park was a popular hang-out site among new and old residents alike, and was one particular area of a small city in Second Life. Within this city, there were Freebie stores where residents can obtain free clothing, avatar accessories and items. For residents with Lindens to spend, there were more shops with a variety of items for sale (at arguably higher quality). In addition to the shops, there were also a variety of clubs, bars, restaurants, and residential areas, some which were public and some which were only accessible to certain residents (i.e.: apartment tenants, shop owners, etc.). While these less publically accessible sites contributed to the wider setting and social aspects of the city which houses City Park, they were not part of my primary and regular observations beyond noting the landscape of City Park.

City Park was one of the most popular sites within the city. It was a central courtyard park area, complete with grassy lawns dotted with wildflowers, standard picnic tables, and even bean-bag styled seating styled after a sprinkled donut. This was also the primary teleportation destination for residents who were teleporting to City Park from other locations in-world, thus making this a very high traffic area. In addition, City Park was surrounded on one side by an ocean of water, and in the other directions were pathways leading out to the rest of the city, again adding to the fact that City Park was
one of the central hubs of the city. Near the central teleportation site was a Freebie shop and a Freebie coffee cart where residents could obtain various beverages for free. These high demand free items were an added draw to residents looking for a place to hang out, and also created an interesting blend of new and old residents.

Two additional attributes helped to make City Park a vibrant public location. For one, music was constantly pumping through large speakers overlooking the courtyard and was a draw to nearby residents. Secondly, the courtyard included popular “dance balls.” Dance balls, which were common in Second Life, were essentially stationary objects which animated the avatar of a resident who touched it. The animation caused the resident to dance along with the music. While seemingly insignificant as minor background objects, the dance balls and accompanying music helped to transform City Park from a quiet park where residents kept to themselves into an energetic and active location equipped to help residents interact with each other.

It is here, looking out over the ocean and listening to the music in the courtyard that I observed and participated in rich social interaction. I often danced to the music among other residents, sat at a picnic table in a more relaxed conversation, or sprawled out on a donut shaped bean bag chair with a hot chocolate in hand.

Participants

The first two months of my time as a resident of Second Life were spent solely as a participant observer. This proved to be essential as I spent much of that time learning the ropes of what it meant to be a resident of Second Life. The individuals I observed in City Park varied from day to day with a small core of residents who were regulars. At
times, there would only be a group of two or three residents in the area to observe. At other times, there would be as much as fifteen to twenty residents congregating in City Park. As I proved to be a City Park regular, I was able to gain entrée through the other City Park regular’s acceptance of me. In this way, they could verify my legitimacy as a Second Life resident and felt comfortable introducing me to other residents.

My participant observations thus allowed me to establish rapport with residents in order to obtain permission to interview them. Interviewees were selected using convenience sampling and snowball sampling, building upon my reputation as an established Second Life resident. It is important to note that as all users of Second Life had to verify that they were 18 years of age or older in order to set up an account, all interviewees and other participants observed in this study were 18 or older. The insights gained through my participant observation helped to determine not only who to interview, but what questions and topics to focus on. By spending time in the field as a participant, I was able to learn which questions are both appropriate and meaningful to ask of residents.

*Research Design*

I logged into Second Life two to three times a week as an overt participant observer for approximately one hour per session. I continued my observations over the span of approximately three months for a total of nearly 35 hours. At least one session per week took place on a weekday evening, and at least one was in the afternoon on a weekend. I was not attempting to draw any conclusions on who accessed Second Life at
what times; rather, I hoped to see a variation of residents who might access Second Life at different times and days in order to observe a diverse collection of residents.

All interaction and communication with Second Life residents, including both the participant observations and in-depth interviews, took place entirely within Second Life through text based communication. This served several purposes. Most importantly, it allowed residents to maintain real life anonymity, as I did not require residents to disclose real life identities or interact with me in the real world. Additionally, this tactic highlighted the fact that I focused completely on the interaction and presentations of self that exist online without a need for verification of real life “authenticity.” Subjects’ real life identities remained anonymous throughout all Second Life interaction as well as throughout the interview process. Therefore, real-life identities remained unknown.

As a participant observer, I continually observed the interactions in Second Life while keeping log of potential interview questions or themes I would like to pursue in greater detail with individual residents. In order to validate some of my personal observations from the field, and to also add the words and perspectives of individual residents into the research analysis, I felt that personal interviews would be extremely helpful. Therefore, after the first two months of participant observation in Second Life, I began seeking out residents to participate in in-depth interviews in which I could tackle the specific questions that developed as a result of my participant observation. Sixteen residents were interviewed qualitatively with 10 guiding questions used to help moderate and lead the conversation (see Appendix C). However, as I will discuss later on in this
paper, the participant observation experiences proved to be more fruitful than the in-depth interviews and therefore are relied upon more heavily in the analysis of the data.

I followed Boellstorff’s (2008) method of obtaining consent from participants by creating an electronic informed consent “notecard.” Notecards in Second Life were essentially documents which could be shared with other residents if they chose to accept the notecard. Residents could also save notecards to their inventory in order to reference the material at any time in the future. Many locations utilized notecards to provide visitors with information about the location with the ease of sending one document as opposed to a long chat message. I created my informed consent notecard (see Appendix B) and saved it in my inventory, thus allowing me to share the same notecard with potential interview participants. Potential interviewees were then able to read through the informed consent notecard and keep it for future reference.

This is an important aspect of utilizing notecards to obtain informed consent as opposed to sending information via an instant message. It often took more time and effort to pull up and find a past message from an IM log as opposed to simply pulling up an item in one’s inventory. Therefore, this tactic allowed for greater ease for a resident to review and access information about the research project. After reading through the informed consent notecard, participants “signed” the document using their avatar’s screen name by sending an electronic message which explicitly stated that they agreed to participate in my study. This documentation was then stored electronically under password protection. This method of receiving informed consent from potential research
participants was essential in order to ensure anonymity and to remain in line with the overall research focus – two topics I will now discuss in greater detail.

Boellstorff (2008) notes the importance of confidentiality of Second Life identities. Because many residents placed great importance on their Second Life identities and reputations, I as a researcher must respect this. Just as researchers utilize pseudonyms when referring to their real world research subjects, I too utilize pseudonyms for the residents I refer to in my participant observations and interviews. The pseudonyms are used in place of the true screen names in order to ensure privacy and anonymity of Second Life identities.

In addition to taking care of using pseudonyms, I had to take care in how I used the statements of residents. Because private chats only show up in the chat logs of the two parties involved, myself and the resident, I use direct quotes in my analysis. However, when referencing statements from residents during a group chat conversation, I paraphrase statements instead of using direct quotes. The primary reason for this is that group chat conversations were public, and any resident in the vicinity would have the conversation in their Second Life chat log just as I did. Therefore, regardless of however unlikely this would be, it would be rather simple for a resident to take statements from my analysis and perform a search in their chat logs in order to discover the true Second Life identity of the quoted resident. With this knowledge of the true identity behind the pseudonym, the reader could then view any material I quote from private chats with this resident which would be a severe breach of confidentiality. Therefore, group chat quotes are paraphrased in my analysis.
Residents may spend years building up their lives in Second Life and because screen names cannot simply be changed, if their screen name identity is compromised they would literally have to start from scratch with a new Second Life account in order to rebuild their reputation and life in Second Life. Therefore, great care must be taken to ensure confidentiality of Second Life identities in the same way that researchers in the real world must ensure confidentially of their subjects’ real world identities.

Before I could begin participant observations or interviews, I was required to submit my research proposal to the Human Subjects Committee of the Department of Sociology at California State University, Sacramento for review. My research protocol was approved and deemed “exempt” and was not required to move on to the University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Data Collection

All communications during each session were automatically electronically stored in my group chat log or separate logs for each private chat. These logs were associated with my Second Life account and were saved automatically to my program files where I could later access them. These logs also kept track of my avatar’s actions such as becoming friends with another resident, acquiring items, or teleporting to a new location. Therefore, all communications, either group chats or private IMs, were already typed out for me and did not require transcription.

While observing and participating in Second Life, I recorded detailed verbal field notes. Using a hands-free recorder allowed me to use my hands for typing as well as maneuvering my avatar with my computer mouse and keyboard. In these verbal field
notes, I was able to note details such as how many residents were in the area at the time, where they stood at the moment, what they were wearing, movements, and so forth. Second Life records detailed records including most gestures and all text; however, the verbal field notes allowed me to capture the extra details about a situation.

After each session in the field, I transcribed my field notes and stored them electronically in a password protected document on my personal home computer. The method of utilizing a recorder during my sessions allowed me to note my observations at the very instant, rather than waiting to write up observations after the session and risk forgetting the minute details about a resident, situation, or interaction.

A final step after each session included memo writing, or what I came to refer to as my journal debriefing (see Rubin and Rubin 2005). While in the field I focused much of my attention on absorbing and noting as much detail as possible without having much time to ponder and contemplate deeper meanings, sociological implications, or my personal reactions. After reviewing the chat logs to ensure the material was successfully saved and downloaded, and after transcribing my field notes, I then typed out my journal entry as a form of personal debriefing from the recent session in the field. Seidman (2006:129) suggests that in practicing this form of journal writing, “the properties and import of the category may become clear.” Indeed, reviewing the chats and my field notes after I was out of the field helped me to focus more clearly on each session and tie in my observations with the information in the chat logs. I also was able to uncover my reactions and gained insights by writing a journal style entry. Bailey (2009:134) also
points out that “memos are data for subsequent analysis” and therefore I did refer back to
my memo journal entries as part of the data analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Upon completion of the interviews and participant observation, all transcripts and
field notes were complied into an electronic, password protected database on my personal
home computer. As previously outlined, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts. I
carefully reviewed the data in order to uncover any reoccurring themes and topics which
seemed to form a bigger picture of interaction and self within Second Life. I specifically
looked for broad trends which focused on the theoretical foundation of the research
including the tactics of the presentation of self. I utilized a grounded theory approach to
my data analysis (Charmaz 2006; Kvale 1996; Rubin and Rubin 2005). A grounded
framework recognizes that “there is a continual coding and recoding of the observations,
as the researcher’s insight grows during an investigation, working toward an empirically
grounded theory” (Kvale 1996:207). I used an inductive method to allow theory and
themes to emerge from the data.

Once I was able to categorize these main themes, the transcripts of interviews,
detailed field notes, group chat logs, and journal debriefing entries were then coded based
upon these themes. I employed a Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective while reviewing
the data in order to discover key tactics that Second Life residents utilized to present their
self, maintain the image they hoped to display to other residents, and to also view and
interpret the self of other residents.
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS

Within the world of Second Life, a resident could interact with a multitude of other residents. At the time of writing, Linden Lab claims to have upwards of 750,000 unique users of Second Life, and estimates that “Second Life’s virtual land mass in the real world would be roughly twice the size of Hong Kong” (Linden Lab 2011a). In such a large virtual environment with so many different residents to potentially interact with, it was extremely common to come across residents one has not met yet on a very regular basis. Therefore, Second Life residents employed a variety of tactics and techniques in order to successfully and continually present their self, and to also interpret the presented selves of other residents. These tactics can be broken down into what Goffman (1959:212) calls defensive and protective practices, which are key tactics utilized by individuals for the purpose of impression management and “in order to prevent the occurrence of incidents and the embarrassment consequent of them.” Defensive practices focus on an individual’s personal performance and the continual effort to ensure that the performance matches up seamlessly with the fostered impression the individual is working to cultivate. Protective practices are similar in that they, too, work to help keep a performance in line with the fostered impression. However, protective practices are enacted by an individual with the aim to assist another individual’s performance.

Defensive and protective practices can come in different forms. I will first describe the key defensive practice in Second Life: perfecting the performance, or what Goffman (1959:216) calls “dramaturgical discipline.” This includes perfecting the first
impression information carriers within Second Life: avatar appearance, profile, and bodily control. Additionally, this includes perfecting the performance of interaction and communication, specifically including chatting and gestures. The second half of my analysis will cover two key protective practices. First, I will go over what Goffman (1959) calls “tactful inattention” specifically relating to mistakes made by residents. Second, I will cover a phenomenon I have discovered in Second Life which I call “tactful attention” which is what many veteran residents practice in order to assist new residents and help them not make mistakes, while at the same displaying one’s veteran status as one who can provide assistance to newcomers.

**Defensive Practice: Perfecting the Performance**

A key defensive tactic that Goffman (1959:216) speaks of is “dramaturgical discipline” which is essentially the effort to make one’s performance seamless, therefore leaving no room for an onlooker to question the validity of the impression you are attempting to promote to others about your self. Within Second Life, there were key information carriers which were utilized by residents in order to both convey information about themselves, and to also glean information about others. During first impressions, dramaturgical discipline started with the mastery of presenting self through three key information carriers: the avatar appearance, profile, and bodily control. After the initial impression, chatting and gestures were two final key information carriers.

**Avatar Appearance**

The basic appearance of the avatar continually proved to be the first item that residents looked to in order to gain an understanding about another resident. When a user
first created an account, there were a few premade avatar appearances from which they could chose. The “starting look” included a predetermined body and outfit. After entering Second Life, residents could alter their appearance by either manipulating the appearance controls or by purchasing new appearance altering items such as hair, eyes, clothing, even skin and body structure.

Therefore, upon first entering Second Life, a new user looked undeniably “new” as they had not yet had a chance to alter their starting look. For example, when I arrived in Second Life for the first time on a starter island I called Tutor Zone, a place to start out new residents so they could learn the basics about controlling the avatar and interacting with Second Life, I found myself surrounded by a crowd of other residents who looked just like me. We were essentially still the basic models, wearing stock outfits atop cookie-cutter bodily structures. Upon looking at all the other newly “born” residents around me who looked just like me, I became painfully aware that my current appearance was like a beacon, advertising that I was not yet an established resident. Because my goal was to be accepted as a true participant, a true resident, I felt the need to try and fit in as quickly as possible.

I promptly learned two things. First of all, I was not alone in this urgent need to distance myself from the appearance of a newly born resident. While still in the Tutor Zone, I quickly set to work to change my appearance using the fine tuned controls to alter the shape of my nose, color of my eyes, length of my arms, and so on (see Figure 1). While a resident altered their appearance, a text notice appeared above the avatar’s head stating that the resident was altering their appearance and was therefore busy at the
Figure 1. Controls for altering the avatar appearance. Screenshot taken of the detailed controls to alter each detail of my avatar appearance, including bodily structure and clothing.
moment. This was basically a way of communicating to others that this resident would not be participating in physical actions, group chats, voice chats, or privates IMs because they were busy with handling the appearance alteration controls. Essentially, this can be thought of as a busy signal, or a sign to others to preemptively explain why the resident was not participating in the interaction as would normally be expected (for example, participating in the group chat). Residents were able to alter their appearance at any time and in any location. The avatar remained visible, although not moving or interacting with other residents; however, nearby residents could see the text notice and thus recognize that the resident was busy at the moment altering their appearance (see figure 2). Nearby residents could not see the alterations as they unfolded; therefore, residents who were working to alter their appearance could do so without allowing nearby residents to view the process. It is important to take a moment to discuss what Goffman (1959) refers to as front and back regions. Front regions are described as “where a particular performance is or may be in progress” whereas back regions are “where action occurs that is related to the performance but inconsistent with the appearance fostered by the performance” (Goffman 1959:134). In this sense, residents were able to pause their performance in the usual front region of Second Life and step into the back region while in the appearance alteration mode.

In this back region, residents were literally constructing and revising the projected self which would be part of their subsequent performances; however, if this process was on display as it happened it would call attention to each change and revision that a resident completed. Thus, this would call into question the validity of each new item
Figure 2. Visual appearance of avatar while editing appearance. Screenshot taken of the visual appearance of a resident while in the appearance editing mode, including the text notice alerting nearby residents that the user is currently busy.
featured in the subsequent performance, especially if the process to enact each change was not particularly smooth. For example, when I constructed my new appearance, there was much trial and error on my part. I had to learn how to manipulate the controls to get the desired outcome and perhaps more importantly, I had to figure out what exactly the desired outcome was in the first place. This calls attention to the fact that although the visual signifiers (such as the text notice that the appearance was being edited) did indeed point out to the audience that the resident was altering their performance and would soon appear different, it was key that the perhaps crude process of altering the appearance remained in the back region and not part of the regular front region.

The decision to alter one’s appearance was, however, an act that could be construed as part of the front region performance. It was a choice to alter the avatar appearance, and in seeing another resident alter their avatar’s appearance there was information to be gained about the resident. Therefore, this provided a unique stage for residents to be both actively doing behind the scenes work on their performance in the back region while at the same time still on display and therefore still enacting a form of their performance in the front region. For example, while working on my own appearance in the Tutor Zone, I quickly noticed that most nearby residents were doing the same thing. I assumed that most new residents wanted to quickly change their appearance as to not appear like a “newbie” – or new resident. My reaction was often validated by speaking with other residents later on during my research in City Park. One resident, Susina Dutton, noticed a new resident walking around in what was Susina’s old starter appearance.
Susina: ugh that old outfit, so bad. I think I still have it in my inventory tho
Susina: I learned how to change my appearance b4 I learned how to walk lol
Anna: what outfit?
Susina: oh that newbie over there, musta just been born today
Susina: musta been born just 2 mins ago, still lookin like that.

Susina could tell right away that the resident near us was new, and assumed that the resident had to be extremely new since she was still wearing the starter look and had not yet changed it. In contrast to the new resident, Susina’s appearance included fancy hair, fashionable and detailed clothing complete with many accessories such as bows, ribbons, and ruffles, and also had extremely detailed skin. She later explained that she had to purchase the hair, clothes, and skin which had more details and looked more realistic than the starter looks. Perhaps not surprisingly, very soon after Susina made this observation, we noticed the new resident proceed to alter her appearance.

The second item I immediately learned about the quest to fit in, at least visually, as a Second Life resident was that the process of fitting in and becoming accepted as a true resident was not as easy a task as I perhaps understood going in. As I mentioned, I quickly began altering my avatar appearance and literally spent hours painstakingly going over the details of my nose, jaw line, height, and so on. I created new clothing for my avatar which mimicked the current outfit I had on, and felt I accomplished the task of making my avatar look like a legitimate resident. However, as soon as I left the safety of the Tutor Zone and ventured out into public areas of Second Life, I had a wakeup call. The first resident I spoke with, Jason, quickly informed me that I was not yet achieving my goal of presenting a self congruent with established and legitimate residents. Jason simply told me, “you look new.” Jason’s immediate reaction was to pick up on the fact
that I looked new. After admitting that I was indeed new, I asked him how he could tell so quickly. Jason explained to me, “your avi is just the basic. people judge here by looking at your avi.” Jason admitted that he was fairly new as well, only a couple of months old, but that he had learned how to pass as a more established resident in part through upgrading his appearance. Jason’s avatar was decorated with detailed tattoos, and slicked back hair which gave the appearance of being gelled into spikes. He wore rugged jeans complete with a worn, yet stylish, finish to the denim. His shirt was a simple white “muscle tee” yet still detailed enough to show a woven fabric, as well as hemlines and textures. This was in stark contrast to my non-textured, solid colored shapes which were my clothing, and my hair which, for lack of a better description, looked more like clumps of play-dough rolled into large tentacles of hair.

I quickly learned that in order to take the first step towards looking like a legitimate resident, I needed to obtain higher quality clothing, hair, and accessories. Jason explained to me that I definitely needed “high prim hair and clothes” – hair and clothes for my avatar with a higher prim count. Prim count is a way to describe how complex an object is in Second Life by counting how many basic shapes were used to generate the object. Although I had manipulated my avatar’s appearance to try and differentiate myself from the starter look I began with, I still had a basic avatar with a low prim count. This meant that to other residents, I clearly stood out as a new and not yet legitimate resident. I quickly rectified this and obtained new clothing and hair, which had a higher prim count. In hindsight, the difference is extremely obvious that I stood out as a new resident with my old appearance. In Figure 3, we can see a side by side view of
Figure 3. Standard avatar appearance compared to upgraded appearance. The left image displays an early version of my avatar with low prim count hair and clothing, whereas the right image displays my upgraded avatar appearance with high prim (i.e. more detailed) hair and clothing.
my avatar’s appearance I attempted to create on my own as a new resident (left) compared to my upgraded avatar’s appearance (right). This visual also helps to clarify how noticeable prim count differences are, especially with hair as you can almost count how many shapes form the hair of the avatar on the left whereas an attempt to count the individual pieces of hair in the avatar on the right would be frustrating at best.

Clearly, the appearance plays a key role in the initial impression a resident leaves with another resident. Altering the appearance to align with the appearance and presentation of self that a resident is aiming for is one primary tactic. Like the appearance, the avatar profile features some customizable characteristics and was used by residents to both present their desired image of self, and to also assess the presentation of self of other residents as well.

**Avatar Profile**

After assessing a resident’s appearance, many residents often looked to the avatar profile for more information about a resident. Within the profile, residents could opt to list a variety of information including the Second Life bio, a Real Life bio, pictures, favorite places in Second Life, and so on. The three key pieces of information, however, which were a part of every resident’s profile which provided the viewer with a better understanding of the resident they were dealing with were the Second Life birthdate, the status of payment information, and profile text.

The Second Life birthdate refers to the day a user created their Second Life account. This can be given in terms of days if the resident is quite young, or in years if
the resident has been a part of Second Life for much longer. A resident who is five years old or older is quite old in Second Life terms. Often times a resident appeared in City Park and gave the appearance of being an established resident or would even claim to be established; however, upon examination of the profile other residents could verify if this was true or not.

A telling example is of a resident who was new to City Park, Justine, who approached a City Park regular, Victor, for help in getting a job while claiming to not be new to Second Life. Victor successfully pulled off the visual appearance of being an established resident of Second Life. He was very tall, loomed over the other residents, and completed his somewhat intimidating appearance by keeping his arms crossed across his chest. He wore dark sunglasses, closely cropped hair, and business casual clothes. While he looked daunting, he balanced this out by tapping his foot to the music and always greeting newcomers to City Park. Perhaps because of his helpfulness combined with his “I mean business” look, many new residents approached Victor for assistance, just as Justine did:

Justine: Help, I need a job  
Victor: Not till you’re at least 30 days old  
Justine: I’m not new here, just need a job  
Victor: Your profile says you’re new  
Justine: OK  
Justine: How do I make money then  
Victor: Dunno  
Victor: There are ways like money trees  
Justine: Where is a money tree  
Victor: All over SL, go look  
[Justine leaves]  
Victor: irritating little twat
Victor’s frustration is quite clear. Often, I observed Victor helping new residents out by giving them advice and direction for getting started. However, after Justine attempted to claim that she was in fact not new, Victor seemed to be reluctant to assist Justine as can be seen with his “dunno” response which was perhaps only grudgingly followed with the information which would help Justine.

Upon speaking with Victor in a private instant message interview later, I asked him what had frustrated him about this situation:

Victor: It’s just so irritating when people waltz in here and think we are all here just to help them get money, get laid, or just here to have them watch us. If they want to be a part of this, then that’s totally cool.
Victor: But, they’ll probably just last one day or two and then leave. They’re not worth the work.
Anna: I’ve seen you help out new residents before, what was the difference this time?
Victor: Well...
Victor: If you’re new, that’s cool and just ask for help. Just don’t pretend to be something you’re not.

Indeed, it was the realization that a resident was attempting to present a self that the resident was not truly permitted to present which frustrated Victor. As Goffman (1959:13) states, “when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.” Justine attempted to make a claim to be an established resident in order to ask for the assistance of another resident, and when Victor realized that she attempted to make this claim on false pretenses he admittedly became frustrated. This was because she tried to pretend to be something she was not. Justine’s profile betrayed her attempt to pass as an established resident, and
additionally her ignorance to the fact that a profile displays one’s Second Life age added to the impression that she was new. Because she attempted to pass as something which her presented self could not support, she lost the trust of Victor.

An interesting feature of Second Life was that the idea that a new resident had to first establish him/herself as a legitimate resident before really being integrated into the social landscape seemed to be quite pervasive. Victor mentioned that Justine could not get a job until she was at least 30 days old, and this in fact proved to be generally true with most employers within Second Life. This stems from the requirement that residents prove their commitment to being a legitimate Second Life resident and not simply a passerby stopping in briefly to check out the scene. This aspect of Second Life culture is telling, in that many residents displayed similar feelings towards new residents who were only a day or two old, as can be seen in Victor’s feeling that often, new residents were not worth the effort to assist to invest in because they might not be serious about it, and may stop coming to Second Life after a few days.

In addition, a resident’s profile noted whether or not they had payment information on file. This basically meant that a user had added their credit card information to their Second Life account for the purpose of getting premium access (like the ability to own property, or in order to exchange real currency for Linden Dollars). If a resident did in fact have payment information on file, this displayed a financial commitment (in real world currency) for their online existence in Second Life. While this was not a necessity, as was in the case of many older residents (6 months old and up) who did not have payment information listed but who had also established their
reputation as a legitimate resident, it was extremely helpful. Had Justine used payment information, she might have been able to pass as a more legitimate resident that Vince should assist. In overhearing residents talk about payment information in group chats in City Park, it is clear that it was not a requirement for residents to have payment information on file. However, it was yet another layer which formed the overall impression of a resident. This can be seen in a conversation between two City Park regulars who were commenting on a new resident, Gwen, who just left City Park to go look for a job:

Tina: she’s nice, but probably won’t find a job
Peter: at least she’s got payment info
Peter: maybe someone will see she’s serious, give her a chance

In my own experience with payment information and the profile, I decided early on that I needed to set up payment information for my resident to show commitment to Second Life. I found this to be especially true as I decided to post my research intentions in my profile text, thus making it clear to all residents why I was in Second Life. By setting this up, I hoped to get other residents to buy into my presence there as a researcher as opposed to writing me off as another passerby. On one occasion, however, I was explicitly made aware of the fact that my choice to list my researcher identity in my profile text did cause a resident to have an adverse reaction to my being around. Michael, a resident of Second Life for over two years, showed up in City Park and I attempted to greet him and welcome him into the current group of residents that had gathered around by the music:

Anna: Hi Michael, how’s it goin?
Michael: Don’t talk to me, you've already done research on me
Anna: I’m sorry, I don’t understand?
Michael: You already asked me some questions recently
Anna: I’m sorry, I don’t think I’ve talked with you before, are you sure it was me?
Michael: Why would you remember me?
Michael: I’ve done research before like you, asking strangers random survey questions and then not know them if I saw them the next day.

Michael clearly viewed my profile text in advance of interacting with me, and although I had truly never spoken to him before, he developed an impression of who I was based almost entirely off of my profile text.

Often, residents utilized the profile to include text about their reason for being in Second Life and what they hoped to get out of the interaction here. I found time and time again that most established residents who had been around for some time included some information about not looking for romantic relationships. While I did not delve into this topic in greater detail, I did notice that the majority of established residents were not interested in the dating scene in City Park. Many listed comments in their profiles such as “not looking to date,” “no sex requests please,” or “already with my Mr. Right - please don’t ask if I’m single.” One city park regular who included this information in her profile was Tina. Tina constantly changed her appearance including her skin color, hair styles, and clothing. She often wore extremely revealing clothing, and while we spoke she wore a bikini, exceptionally high heels, and long curly black hair. I asked Tina about her reasons behind listing her “no sex requests please” notice in her profile she replied by stating:

Tina: It just gets old, the newbies come in and think that everyone here is looking for an in-world lover.
Anna: So you post that in your profile to get them to leave you alone?
Tina: Well, ya but it doesn’t really work...
Tina: The newbies don’t really take time to look at that, they usually just ask anyone and everyone
Anna: So it doesn’t stop them from asking you?
Tina: No...but it at least gives me something to yell at them about lol...if you're gonna hit me up for a date you better look at my bio first
Tina: I like playing around with my appearance but it’s not because I want a new lover, but I know that gives lotsa guys the wrong idea so I added that line in

Residents like Tina clearly developed interesting strategies for dealing with what Carol Gardner (1989:48) terms “street remarks” which she defines as “free and evaluative commentary that one individual offers to an unacquainted other in public places.” What is particularly interesting is that in the case of Tina, she took a preemptive and proactive approach to try and ward off potential street remarks and hopefully prevent them from even happening.

This strategy was not utilized solely by female residents. In two cases, I made note of male residents who had similar notices listed in their profile text. Both male and female residents displayed evidence of having the fear of unwanted street remarks from strangers. However, in employing this type of preemptive strategy, these residents effectively took the power of using street remarks out of the hands of the stranger, and took over the position of power by distributing their own form of street remarks: the profile text warding off new residents from sending them unsolicited romantic requests.

Indeed, Gardner (1989:55) points out that “public places are arenas for the enactment and display of power and privilege” and in Second Life these displays of power and privilege were performed in unique ways. Again, a key attribute comes back to the level of expertise and legitimacy of a resident; a new resident may not have known to post the preemptive street remark in their profile whereas an established resident may have
obtained this information and therefore privilege and power to better handle potential street remarks.

Tina’s profile text also highlights an important aspect about interaction within Second Life, in that residents were expected to at least make an effort to assess as many pieces of information that a resident was attempting to explicitly present. In Tina’s case, she made an effort to present a claim to be a certain type of person, and expected others to treat her accordingly. She also recognized that her appearance might give off a different impression of why she was here in Second Life, yet tried to combat this by including more information in her profile text. Residents clearly used many features of Second Life interaction in order to present their multilayered self to other residents.

* Bodily Control and Technical Proficiency

Another primary information carrier during the initial impression phase was one’s level of expertise in controlling the avatar’s body, as well as one’s technical expertise in utilizing the technical controls related to the avatar. This represents in many ways the resident’s skill level and familiarity with Second Life; in other words, whether a resident was experienced and therefore legitimate. As has been demonstrated thus far, there was a real learning curve with the various controls and tools available to residents. An upgraded appearance or profile displaying an older Second Life age and/or payment info on file was not enough to prove that one was a legitimate resident to be taken seriously. These factors could be purchased or could simply come with time, whereas the demonstration of expertise control of one’s avatar came only with time spent within Second Life.
While usually more subtle than observing one’s appearance or viewing one’s profile, the observation of avatar control skill level could speak volumes. While perusing the Freebie Mart in City Park, I observed another resident, Twyla, shopping for new hair. Twyla looked particularly new, and although she was not still in a “starter” look as previously mentioned, she had extremely basic clothing and hair. Upon purchasing her new hair, she received a box – much like receiving a package in the mail in the real world. With many purchases in Second Life, you had to unpack your purchase from the box so that the individual items were moved into your inventory, which would then be accessible for you to wear. Twyla, perhaps in having no experience with this technical aspect of purchases in Second Life, simply selected the box and chose the option to wear it. Peter, a City Park regular, and I happened to be nearby to help her:

Peter: having trouble with that?
Twyla: ugh, I thought I bought hair but I got gypped, it’s just a box
Anna: the hair should be in the box, you have to unpack and save the contents
Twyla: lol...thanks, I thought it just didn’t rez yet
Peter: I did that once when I was new too, I had a box on my arm for a while :)

Peter and I attempted to assist Twyla, and Peter added in the fact that he recognized that she made the mistake of a new person who has not yet mastered the technical aspect of bodily control within Second Life.

Another telling example comes from the popular activity of dancing to the music in City Park. Many residents gathered around and began dancing by allowing an object, called a dance ball, to animate their avatars. One resident, Joe Fringe, was helping out another resident, Rover Thins, who was new to City Park. Joe was a regular, and was often found dancing enthusiastically to the music. He had long hair in dreadlocks, and
wore bright clothing that have a Caribbean feel. Rover’s profile showed that he was a few months old, which by Second Life standards should mean that he was a practiced resident by now – at least in the basics. Rover was attempting to alter his avatar and asked Joe for help as he was having trouble.

Joe: Rover, you can do that but you are still dancing  
Rover: I don’t know how to stop  
Joe: there is a "me" button on your screen, Rover, click that  
Joe: then scroll down to the "movement" option  
Rover: can’t find it  
Joe: at the top of your screen, or did you start dancing from the pink ball  
Joe: cus if ya did, just have to click it again to stop :)  
Rover: oh  
Joe: did ya say you were new to City Park...or SL in general bud? :)

Despite the detailed instructions from Joe, Rover was unable to control the movement of his avatar, and was unable to stop his avatar from continuing to animate the dance moves to the music. After unsuccessfully trying to help Rover navigate the controls to manage avatar movement, Joe made the realization that Rover was not just new to City Park, but was simply not an experienced resident of Second Life despite the fact that he was not new in terms of his Second Life age. Rover’s inability to successfully control the bodily movement of his avatar betrayed his status as a new resident. It is here that we can redefine what residents come to call being, acting, or looking “new.”

Joe’s realization that Rover is “new” even though his Second Life age showed that he is old, shows us that being “new” could come in different forms in Second Life. Indeed, being new did not need to technically mean that one had only recently set up a Second Life account, but could be thought of as an assessment of one’s ability to get other residents to accept the self that one was trying to present. The final two key
information carriers, chatting and usage of gestures, added greater depth to this aspect of
the presentation of self and the interpretation of these presentations by other residents in
order to assess the legitimacy, or in contrast, the “newness” of a resident.

Chatting

In City Park, chatting with other residents was the primary form of social
interaction. Most residents participated in a group chat, which was public to any
residents in the near vicinity. It is important to note that during my observations, I only
saw two residents, on separate occasions, in City Park who used voice chat, and these two
residents only passed briefly through City Park and did not engage with the other
residents. Voice chat was looked down upon by most residents for a variety of reasons.
Victor somewhat randomly made the observation about the regular group’s habit of only
using text based chatting, and elicits input from Peter, Tina, and Savanna who are also
regulars of City Park:

Victor: What I don’t get is there’s voice enabled here but everybody types
Peter: It’s same everywhere Victor
Tina: I hate voice
Peter: I hate it too
Tina: Everyone’s at different sound levels and quality
Peter: And some talk way more than others
Savanna: and there's always some numpty going about some manifesto of his
Anna: a Numpty?
Savanna: lol...just an irritating person
Tina: Ya, it’s like going somewhere and just shouting whatever you think at the
moment. Rude.

Tina brought up an important point, and that is chatting etiquette when in a group setting.

With so many residents adding to one main conversation, it can become difficult
to manage. I have observed various rules and practices that residents follow when
participating in the group chat. For example, when a resident entered the area, a general yet unspoken rule of group interaction was to greet the new resident and thus invite them into the large group conversation. Typically, this was accomplished by one or more residents stopping to pause their current conversation and type a greeting including the screen name of the new resident so they were aware that the greeting was directed at them. For example, if I entered the group, one or more residents would type “Hi Anna” in the group chat log. Not everyone in the group sent out the greeting but in almost all cases there was at least one member of the current group who stopped to greet the resident. In turn, the new resident was expected to either acknowledge the greeting and then join into the conversation, perhaps a symbol of entering into the group interaction as a whole, or ignore the greeting and continue walking to the desired destination.

Spatial relationships played a large role in this dance of determining who was joining the group interaction and who was not. Residents were able to walk away from the group and do other tasks, such as shopping, while at the same time staying in range of seeing the group chat text and being able to respond to new text dialogue. However, walking away from the group usually signaled that the resident is departing from the group interaction. In the same way, if a resident stood around near the site of the group interaction, this resident was somewhat expected to be actively involved in the group interaction unless otherwise noted. This is often accomplished through avatar status notices such as the notice previously discussed that was posted by a resident who was currently altering their avatar’s appearance. Sometimes, a resident would post a text notice that simply said “busy” or “away.” These were posted for a number of reasons
which are usually not discussed in the group chats. I utilized the “away” notice on a few occasions if I had to step away from my computer to use the restroom, answer a door, or take care of similar urgent activities in the real world. These notices helped to signal and explain why a resident was no longer participating in the group interactions and allowed residents to avoid performance mishaps or misunderstandings such as ignoring a greeting, or standing in an odd spot in relation to the group interaction should the group move to a new physical location. Combining these two potential performance errors could result in a resident leaving a negative impression on others. For example, a resident who stood around the outskirts of a group chat location, but who did not participate in the conversation, was often referred to as a “lurker.”

Lurkers were residents who were not following the general practice of social interaction in Second Life. The commonly used term for this type of resident effectively conveys the negative connotation that this type of behavior carries in Second Life. In talking with residents about the lurker persona, I found that what was at the root of residents’ discomfort with the lurker was that this type of behavior seemed to attempt to halt the two way drama between the presenter of self and audience member, of which we play both roles simultaneously, and instead create a one way drama where one resident was only the audience member and the others were constantly the performers. This made residents uneasy and upset, perhaps because the lurker was attempting to break the rules of interaction by not playing her/his part. When I first entered Second Life as a participant observer, there were many times that I simply sat on a park bench in City Park and watched as the drama of social interaction unfolded. While only on one occasion did
another resident approach me to ask why I was just sitting there watching everyone, in hindsight I realized that many residents could have viewed me as a lurker during my more observation-heavy sessions. What is interesting in the end is that the lurker was in fact still playing a role in the drama of interaction, and was presenting a self perhaps more clearly than the non-lurker resident. Because there are a multitude of activities and performance attributes that a resident can utilize which add into the overall impression of that resident not being a lurker, this also means that there were a multitude of potential impressions that this resident can foster and selves that can be presented. The audience can see that this resident was not attempting to present their self as a lurker but the audience might not yet see what impression (other than “non-lurker) this resident was trying to foster. In contrast, there are only a few key characteristics that a resident need carry out to perform a “lurker-self” clearly and successfully.

Lurkers aside, most residents who traveled through City Park were actively engaged in group chatting. While participating in a group chat, most residents displayed this visually by standing near the other residents, usually facing in towards the group. Each resident seemed to make a practice of giving each other a small bubble of personal space, and avoided standing extremely close to another resident unless they were dancing together. Part of this was a product of mastering the control of the avatar. Residents learned to position the avatar to the correct location in the group, facing the correct way, and standing with enough space away from other residents in order to leave personal space but not too much as to appear to be a lurker. Many new residents who traveled through City Park were not able to effectively control the avatars. One example includes
Toby, a one day old resident who was still in his starter-look, who rezzed into City Park near Tina. He almost walked right into Tina and began asking her for help. I observed Tina repeatedly step back away from Toby to regain her personal space. Once she assisted Toby, he teleported out of City Park. Once he left, Tina commented about the interaction:

Tina: Wow that guy was all up on me
Anna: What do you mean?
Tina: Didn’t you see him? I kept trying to back up, and he kept standing right in my face. He’s new though so I guess he hasn’t learned yet that our avatars are like...us...we’re people
Tina: So, we need some space to breathe

Once the spatial relationships were sorted out, there was then the actual conversation to manage. With so many people coming and going and entering the conversation, residents had to learn to effectively manage the different conversations and follow certain norms of group chatting. One of the primary responsibilities of a resident engaged in a group chat was to keep up with the conversation. If a resident could not keep track of the different threads in the group chat, other residents often got frustrated and pointed out the incompetency of another resident. Usually this did not carry much weight nor did it cause too much of a conflict; most residents chided another resident in a casual way by simply calling out to them to keep up, or to stay with it. On one occasion, I became sidetracked and mentally checked out of the current topic in the group conversation. Tina was speaking with a new resident, Jt767, who was typing in another language, and called out to me for assistance. When I did not respond within a few seconds (which was the normal expectation in group chat) Tina called attention to my error in not keeping up with the group chat:
Jt767: tudo bem
Jt767: ?
Tina: Jt I don’t know what you’re saying
Jt767: I’m from Brazil
Tina: Anna got any ideas?
[21 seconds pass]
Tina: Anna...hellooo...
Anna: sorry Tina I don’t know what that means but I’ll try and look it up online

A far worse crime was to becoming overbearing in the conversation by sending out extremely long statements or multiple statements at once. As can be seen in the examples of chatting that I have included in the text thus far, most residents only added one or two lines to the conversation at once. On a few occasions, residents who were not City Park regulars would suddenly join the group chat only to overload the group chat with multiple statements which were each particularly long. Each time that this occurred, the other residents in City Park immediately became irate and yelled for this behavior to cease at once or to leave City Park. One resident appeared near our group and proceeded to methodically and swiftly enter 37 lines of what appeared to be random selections of bizarre nursery rhyme text into the group chat log. Below are the residents’ reactions during and after this overbearing text was posted:

[after the line 24th line]
Peter: WTF
[after all lines were posted]
Tina: omg
Susina: I'm scared
Tina: lol
Tina: my screen was full
Peter: I freaking HATE that

This type of resident, sometimes referred to as a “spammer,” can perhaps be seen as the lurker’s alter ego. The spammer takes over the entire interaction and leaves no
room for other residents to participate. In order to be accepted as a legitimate resident of Second Life, it was important to avoid either of these extremes and instead to master effective communication in group chats. One other layer of group chat which had to be mastered is usage of gestures.

_Gestures_

Gestures played a large role in social interaction and communication within Second Life. With past internet communications technologies such as AOL Instant Messenger, when individuals wanted to convey a feeling, emotion, or reaction, they simply typed out their feelings or used popular internet shorthand acronyms (ex: LOL for laugh out loud). In Second Life, residents were able to actually enact their emotions or reactions visually and sometimes audibly by using gesture animations. Second Life residents who were a few days old or younger did not use gestures in City Park; they stuck to text based communication. Residents who were regulars of City Park and who were more than a few days old utilized gestures at least on a basic level of adding a smile now and then. Simple gestures were a common sight among City Park regulars, however more proficient Second Life users often utilized more complex gestures in their communication.

Gestures could be simple, such as a smile or shrug, or could be more complex including full body animation and sound. For example, one of Peter's favorite gestures was to roll on the ground while laughing hysterically when something funny happens. This particular gesture is modeled after one of the popular internet shortcut phrases ROFL which stands for Rolling On (the) Floor Laughing. An audible sound clip of
laughter was simultaneous played for other residents to hear. Often, Peter was laughing about something that his good friend Tina said or did, sometimes at her expense although it always seems to be in fun. Tina's usual response was to put her hands on her hips, cock her head to one side, stick her tongue and blow a raspberry at him. Tina usually followed this with a smile or more laughter to show she is not truly angry. These types of gesture based interactions helped to gel friends together through a deeper level of interaction beyond text based communication, and also helped to avoid miscommunications. One example of this friendly teasing between Peter and Tina helps to highlight the importance of gestures:

Tina: These clothes are ugly, I need to go shopping
Peter: It's not the clothes that's the problem!
[Peter rolls on the ground laughing audibly]
Tina: oh shut up, you're not funny
[Tina: sticks her tongue out and then throws her head back in laughter]

When reading through this conversation without the notes about physical movements and gestures, the interaction can be read in a very different manner and appears to be quite tense. Therefore, when a resident utilized visual and physical gestures they were able to successfully present key aspects of the their self, in this case having a sarcastic yet fun-loving sense of humor, which would otherwise not have been possible without having the technical proficiency of utilizing these features of Second Life. In this sense, gestures played a double role in the presentation of self as they displayed one’s technical proficiency and expertise of tools in Second Life (and therefore one’s legitimacy as a resident) and at the same time allowed a resident to present multiple layers of their self and manage these impressions. Without the use of gestures, residents would be faced
with a more difficult task of fostering an impression of being for example a fun-loving yet humorously sarcastic person.

Another perhaps less obvious role that gestures played in interaction within Second Life was the demonstration of proficiency as a resident. I learned that gestures did not come as naturally as they can often feel in the real world. Within Second Life, I had to essentially learn how to gesture from scratch. There are commands, hot keys, and animations that a user must learn how to operate and then successfully deploy at the right moment during a social interaction in-world. Just as typing on a computer keyboard becomes easier, smoother, and faster with practice, so does the management of gestures in Second Life. In the previously mentioned case of Tina and Peter using gestures combined with their text-based chatting, it is important to understand that both Tina and Peter were able to successfully deployed appropriate gestures at the correct moment.

In addition, their usage of gestures also helped to support the performance that the other was attempting to present. Peter’s laugh signaled that he was only joking and was not seriously insulting Tina, and in turn Tina’s laugh signaled that she was supporting Peter’s attempt to present himself as a funny individual who can crack a joke without being considered inconsiderate. Their actions worked together to both support their own performance as well as each other’s. In this sense, they were also utilizing protective practices to support each other.

Protective Practices

Goffman (1959:229) describes protective practices as the complement of defensive practices, in that the “audience and outsiders [. . .] act in a protective way in
order to help the performers save their own show.” In Second Life, residents utilize two main types of protective practices in order to assist other residents in their performance. The first protective practice is what Goffman (1959) calls tactful inattention, and the second is what I have come to refer to as tactful attention.

*Tactful Inattention*

Many residents practiced tactful inattention in Second Life, which is essentially the practice of turning a blind eye to another resident’s performance slip-ups. Goffman (1959:231) describes tactful inattention in the following way: “When a performer makes a slip of some kind, clearly exhibiting a discrepancy between the fostered impression and a disclosed reality, the audience may tactfully ‘not see’ the slip or readily accept the excuse that is offered for it.”

One example of tactful inattention involved a clothing error by Tina. Tina, who loved to constantly change her appearance and outfit, would often switch out one outfit for another in City Park while interacting with other residents. This was a fairly common practice and was not a revealing or inappropriate as it would be in the real world as clothing items can be swapped out automatically. During one instance of Tina changing outfits, she appeared with a one portion of a skirt on while the other portion was missing. This turned out to be a two piece clothing item, and required the resident to select to wear both pieces in order to wear the entire item. When Tina appeared in this skirt which was clearly worn incorrectly, no one in the current group mentioned anything to her. She quickly realized her error, however, and corrected it stating:

Tina: Wow sorry guys, I messed up on my skirt there
Victor: No problem, we knew you’d fix it
Peter: Ya, with all the outfits you have, we knew you knew what you were doing.

Tina had clearly established herself as an expert Second Life resident, and therefore her counterparts, Victor and Peter, elected to “not see the slip up” as Goffman (1959:231) would say.

Tactful inattention was not used this explicitly very often; however it is clear in talking with other residents that this tactic was used on a more basic level more often by residents who just refrain from pointing out the flaws in another seemingly established resident’s performance. In talking briefly with an eight month old resident, Jeffrey Holmes, I learned about this pervasive blind eye in Second Life:

Jeffrey: Well, most of us are just ignoring the...shortcomings.
Anna: Shortcomings? Can you elaborate?
Jeffrey: Just....like my skin, I know it’s not great I’m just too lazy to get fancier skin. But most people see me and see, ya he’s legit, he’s older, and everything else seems to check out so sure he’s for real here
Jeffrey: and in others is the hair, the clothes, or not being able to use prims and make stuff
Jeffrey: no one’s able to pull off a perfect resident but if you’re trying I think we all get it and say ok that’s good enough

Jeffrey touched on an important point here, and that is that although most residents had not mastered every possible tool or feature of Second Life, it was enough that they have displayed that they are getting fairly close through a good effort. It was here where residents often look the other way when slip-ups occur, such as a clothing error as with Tina, or are noted such as with the low quality skin of Jeffrey. In this way, many residents extended tactful inattention to each other in order to help preserve the intended performance. This practice of inattention, however, was typically reserved for long term residents whereas tactful attention was aimed at newcomers.
Tactful Attention

Often, veteran residents actively worked to help new residents learn the ropes of Second Life. These residents proactively provided tactful attention to gently assist the new resident in mastering their performance of self. This tactic was often used because it was particularly easy to determine if someone was truly a beginner, by looking at the Second Life birthdate or through gauging a resident’s appearance. Therefore, there was little risk in offending a resident by mistaking a veteran resident for a “newbie” because of these key traits. As Goffman (1959:232) explains, “when the performer is known to be a beginner, and more subject than otherwise to embarrassing mistakes, the audience frequently shows extra consideration.” Thinking back to the example of Twyla, who purchased new hair but instead ended up putting the box on her head instead of the hair itself, we can see that veteran residents quickly provided assistance to new residents when their attempted performance of a legitimate resident started to fall apart. In that case, I provided information to her to assist her in fixing her performance error and Peter empathized with Twyla by saying, “I did that once when I was new too, I had a box on my arm for a while :).” This tactful attention helped save Twyla’s performance by casually dismissing the error as a common understandable mistake that even a veteran resident like Peter had committed when he was new.

Many new residents (a few days old or younger) traveled through City Park on a regular basis. A general practice of most of the City Park regulars was to greet them and offer assistance. This assistance was primarily focused on upgrading the avatar appearance and obtaining new clothing. I often observed the established residents of City
Park gently nudge new residents towards the freebie stores to get them to select new items for their appearance; these were subtle hints to tell new residents that they looked new and needed to work on crafting the appearance of an established resident of Second Life if they were going to be taken more seriously. However, as Goffman (1959:234) points out, “the performer must be sensitive to hints and ready to take them, for it is through hints that the audience can warn the performer that his show is unacceptable and that he had better modify it quickly if the situation is to be saved.” One situation arose in City Park involving a City Park regular, Victor, and a two day old resident, Tasha. Tasha appeared in City Park and was still in a starter appearance, which Victor was attempting to help her upgrade:

Victor: Hi Tasha, there’s a freebie mart right over there [points at shop nearby]  
Victor: You might find some new clothes and hair and stuff that you like, and it’s all free for the taking  
Tasha: Oh thanks I’m ok  
Victor: It’s pretty easy to get a new look, I can help you if you want  
Tasha: No I’m ok I like this dress  
Victor: It’s just your starter dress, everyone sees that and knows it’s a starter

Once Tasha left City Park, Victor remarked to us:

Victor: I tried, you can’t say I didn’t try  
Tina: Yeah, someone had to tell her she stands out like a sore thumb

Clearly, Tasha did not pick up on (or perhaps simply did not care about) Victor’s hints that she needed to fix her attempted performance as a Second Life resident by correcting her appearance. This not only added to the impression that Tasha was new, but also took away from Victor’s attempted performance of being an expert resident of Second Life. Once Tasha left the scene, Victor tried to make explicit what his intended performance
was, which was to attempt to assist a new resident by sharing his expert knowledge. Tina did validate Victor’s performance by agreeing that he was in fact an expert resident working to assist a new resident. In this way, Tina also carried out the protective practice of supporting and validating Victor’s attempted performance as an expert and helpful resident.

Tactful attention is also a tactic which tied back into the various defensive practices that residents utilized. This is because when a resident provided the helpful hints, suggestions, and attention to residents in need, this helpful resident now stood out as one who knew the correct methods of pulling off a correct performance and was therefore able to pull this off themselves. In Second Life, the ability to help new residents was very much a marker of an established and legitimate resident. In order to provide this assistance, one must first be an expert. In this way, I found myself working to provide this protective practice of giving tactful attention to new residents. This helped me to foster my intended impression of being a proficient resident. I found that I became more and more willing to assist new residents in finding new clothing at the freebie market, give basic technical support about gestures, chatting, and moving the avatar, or even just basic learned information such as what jobs are available in Second Life and what characteristics are usually sought after by employers. Instances such as helping Twyla with the box on her head became more common. I would often walk new residents over to the City Park freebie market and show them how to obtain new clothing, or help troubleshoot if they were having trouble manipulating the controls for moving the avatar. On one occasion I simply helped a resident obtain and drink a coffee beverage
from the coffee stand in City Park, and the resident responded with “wow you’re a pro.” Indeed, once I made the transition from a new resident in need of tactful attention to an established resident able to give tactful attention to others, I felt that I finally was able to successfully present my self (surely with the help of tactful inattention from my fellow residents) as a legitimate Second Life resident.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Much research exists which aims to compare real life interaction with interaction in a fully online or virtual environment. This is quite often in an attempt to determine which is a better site for social interaction, or to determine the potential positive or negative impacts that online interaction can have upon interaction in real life and vice versa. However, there is little research which aims to simply study how interaction actually takes place within an online environment in order to fully understand this mode of interaction. Therefore, I focused upon uncovering the tactics and methods of presenting self that were employed within one fully online social environment, Second Life.

Analysis uncovered that residents in Second Life utilized both defensive and protective practices in order to create, present, and foster their self. The primary defensive practice was to perfect their performance, and this was accomplished through crafting flawless information carriers such as the appearance and profile, and by mastering the technical aspects of bodily control, chatting, and gesture usage. The two primary protective practices were tactful inattention and tactful attention. Tactful inattention in Second Life was the practice of looking the other way when a performance exhibited flaws, whereas tactful attention was the practice of providing hints and assistance when a performance clearly needed help. In uncovering these tactics, one unifying theme became clear, and that was the attempt to show that one was a legitimate resident of Second Life.
Throughout this analysis, I have touched upon the goal for which the defensive and protective practices were being utilized, and that was acceptance as a legitimate resident of the world of Second Life. We can see that age, appearance, or actions did not singlehandedly determine if a resident was accepted and acknowledged by other residents as a legitimate resident. Indeed, there were many cases in which residents who seemed to exhibit one or two of these attributes could not pull off a successful performance that was accepted by the residents in City Park. Only when a resident could truly display “dramaturgical discipline” by making few mistakes in all aspects of the performance would other residents start to accept them as legitimate (Goffman 1959:216).

I discovered this first hand as I worked to become a true participant during my observations, and found that this task was much more complex than it seemed at first glance. I and other Second Life residents had to go through the process of learning that, as Goffman (1959:75) says, “to be a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one’s social grouping attaches thereto.” The primary and basic goal within the public space of City Park in Second Life was to simply be accepted as what we all were attempted to pose as: a resident of Second Life. In deeper levels there may be other motives to be accepted as a certain subset of resident, such as a business professional or desirable romantic partner. However, the constant theme throughout all the interactions in City Park was the ongoing quest to be accepted as a true resident and not shrugged off as a temporary guest in Second Life who was fleetingly passing through the social landscape. I have uncovered the primary tactics and practices utilized by Second Life
residents, including myself, in order to foster this impression of being a legitimate resident, and effectively present their Second Life self. However, this study is not without its limitations and there are various avenues which future research can pursue in order to gain an even deeper understanding of social interaction and the presentation of self in online environments.

Once I entered the field and began my participant observations, I decided I wanted to dig deeper on a more one on one basis with residents. I hoped to obtain a more specific localized understanding on topics such as how a resident views others, what features of a resident form the first impression, and what strategies users intentionally employed in order to present self. To accomplish this, I decided to interview residents qualitatively. I took a conversational approach to the interview process and worked to lead the conversation with my guiding questions for in-depth interviews (Appendix C). As I interviewed the residents, however, I realized that the participant observations formed a much stronger and essential foundation for my research. This was due in part to a few minor drawbacks to the online interview process and due to the theoretical focus of the study.

One of the drawbacks to the interview process in Second Life was that I was not always able to address all of my key topics or guiding questions. Often, residents would move the conversation back to a topic that they felt passionate about, such as romantic relationships in Second Life. At other times, residents would not open up to me in detail and took my interview more as a survey to which they should answer with “yes” or “no” or other extremely brief response. Perhaps because it was all text based, some residents
were resistant to the amount of typing and time required. After asking a few questions, one resident interrupted and pointed out that my interview “sounds really long [...] so you mind askin’ me tomorrow maybe?” Due to the nature of the environment, residents were also able to log off at any time and never log back into that particular location again. In the case of the resident who wanted me to finish asking questions tomorrow, I never saw him again and therefore could not ask the rest of the questions. While all of these interview details proved to be extremely interesting despite not being able to address all the topics or questions I had intended, this goes to show that the questions or topics themselves were not necessarily the most important aspect but rather the observation of the interactions that took place during the interview process.

This brings up the second reason why participant observations proved to be more integral than the in-depth interviews, and this is due to the theoretical approach to and focus of the research. My objective was to uncover the tactics that residents used during social interactions (which clearly can occur during an interview) in order to present self and interpret the present selves of others. Thus, during group interactions I observed more rich details than I learned in speaking with residents one on one. While the interviews proved helpful for discussing a particular group interaction that had occurred, I found that I spent more time and effort than was perhaps necessary on in-depth interviews as opposed to participant observations. Therefore, one limitation of my research was in a slightly unbalanced methodological approach which limited the time spent in the more fruitful participant observations.
Additionally, because I use a convenience sample of users within just one venue of online interaction and communication, the results are not representative of a wider population nor can they speak for all forms of online interaction. Future research should aim to explore other realms of online virtual interaction in order to expand the sociological methods which can be applied to these kinds of sites, as well as our collective understanding of the presentation of self through virtual interaction. Second Life itself can also be studied in greater detail by focusing on other aspects of its social environment which I did not study. Romantic relationships, employment, and the economy within Second Life are a few of the main topics which arose through my observations but which were not studied in greater detail. These and other venues of social interaction should be examined in greater detail in order to gain a deeper understanding of social interaction and the presentation of self within a virtual world. Other realms of virtual interaction besides Second Life should also be explored in order to gain a broader understanding of social interaction in virtual settings.

Despite these limitations, the dramaturgical research I completed in the online world of Second Life proved to be extremely fruitful in uncovering the ways in which the drama of social interaction was performed in a fully online setting. As noted in chapter two, many researchers have taken a prescriptive approach to studying online interaction; that is, with the goal of contrasting and comparing real world interaction with online interaction in order to define the positives and negatives of each. I worked to focus not on a comparison to real world interaction but rather on the details which explain how interaction online can be enacted and carried out. However, an interesting outcome of
my research has been to show that online interaction is perhaps not quite as drastically
different from real world interaction as some may assume. The tools available are clearly
different such as the ability to use one’s vocal chords to laugh in the real world or the
ability to manually alter one’s appearance at any time in Second Life. However, the
basic tactics are similar: residents paid great attention to their appearance, their speech,
and the control of their bodies. While the methods and tools employed by online users or
real world individuals are different, these are arguable the same focal points of social
interaction in the real world.

In addition, the ways in which online interaction proved to be different from in
person interaction could arguably be considered positive features. For example, looking
back to Gardner’s (1989) concept of street remarks in the context of power and privilege
within public spaces, online interaction provides perhaps more resources and strategies
for users to counteract unwanted street remarks. Furthermore, these resources allow
potential recipients of street remarks to transform from the one on which power displays
(in this case, street remarks) are performed into the one who can display power by
preemptively taking measures to block street remarks.

Another interesting difference is the often proactive approach that residents take
to employ protective practices in order to help save the performance of another. This
may in part be because of the dual nature of many protective practices (in that a resident
may also be protecting the performance of another while at the same time defending their
own performance as an expert resident) but it would be an interesting study to compare
helpfulness in online interaction with real world interaction. Perhaps users in online
environments are more readily willing to participate in protective practices and help another individual’s performance than they are in the real world. It is interesting here to also note that Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach to analyzing social interaction and the presentation of self can be successfully applied to a fully online environment.

Clearly much can be learned from an in-depth qualitative analysis of social interaction within an online environment. As future technologies arise and new sites of social interaction form, it is important to continue to work to study the rich details of how social interaction occurs within these new sites with the aim of uncovering the tactics and techniques of the presentation of self.
APPENDIX A

Profile Text

My First Life name is Anna Keck, and I am a graduate student studying sociology at California State University, Sacramento. As part of my master’s thesis, I am conducting research in Second Life to learn about the ways that SL residents create and present their “self” in the virtual world. My research consists of observing social interaction within public places, such as cafes and parks, in Second Life. Any observations of individual residents in Second Life will remain confidential and pseudonyms (false names in place of screen names) will be used in any cases where an individual resident is noted in my research. I also am seeking out residents to participate in in-depth interviews, which again will not address any private information about your real world identity and will also keep your Second Life confidential through the use of false names in place of Second Life screen names.

If you have any questions about my research project, please contact me at ak823@saclink.csus.edu or (916) 217-1602, or you can send me a SL message.
APPENDIX B

Second Life Notecard: Consent to Participate in Research: “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Second Life”

Researcher information: Anna Keck (AnnaVictoria Kruyschek), graduate student in the Department of Sociology at California State University, Sacramento. Phone: (916) 217-1602, email: ak823@saclink.csus.edu.

You are being asked to participate in a research study about social interaction in Second Life. The research procedure includes an in-world interview, using text chat, which will last approximately 30-45 minutes. With your permission, the text of our conversation will be copied and pasted from the chat history log into a password protected database. Our conversation will address your experiences and views regarding in-world social interaction.

The only foreseeable discomfort associated with the research procedure is uneasiness during the interview if a topic is brought up with is too personal or private. There are no direct benefits to you for your participation. However, this research may help uncover the ways in which social interaction takes place in a virtual environment like Second Life.

Participation in the interview is completely voluntary. You may decline to participate, or terminate your participation at any time without any negative consequences. During an
interview, you may decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer, and you can request that I don’t include certain sections of your responses in my records. I will not be asking for your real life name or personal information, and I will not use your Second Life screen name in any publications resulting from this research. Therefore, your real life identity will remain anonymous and your Second Life identity will remain confidential.

Please save this “notecard” for reference in the future. If you would like to participate as a research subject, please type a message to AnnaVictoria Kruyschek stating, “I agree to participate in your study.” By doing so, you are stating that you have read this information sheet and understand its contents, and have decided to consent to participate in the research.
APPENDIX C

Guiding Questions for In-depth Interviews

1. What was your experience in creating your avatar’s screen name, appearance, and profile?

2. What were some of the things you considered or thought about when designing your avatar’s current appearance and profile?

3. Do you regularly alter your appearance and/or profile, or do you generally keep them consistent over time? Why?

4. What do you think is the first thing other residents notice about you?

5. What do you think is the first impression other residents have when they first see or meet you?

6. Is there a certain image you’d like to convey to other residents about yourself, and if so, how do you try and communicate this?

7. What are some of the first things you notice about a resident you see or meet?

8. How do you decide who you’d like to talk to or get to know? Are there any key characteristics that you look for?

9. Are the any situations or places where you think you might act differently or look differently because of the context or other residents who are there? How do you determine how to act or look in these situations or places?

10. How do you begin a conversation with a new resident?
REFERENCES


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