COVER OURSELVES WITH A MASK TO *UNCOVER* WHO WE ARE:
THE RULES AND THE RATIONALE BEHIND AVATAR CREATION IN SECOND LIFE

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A place to be, be different, be yourself, Free yourself, free your mind, change your mind, change your look, Be Anyone.

—Promotional messages on the Second Life Website, www.SecondLife.com

INTRODUCTION: THE MASK AND PROJECT OUTLINE

'My avatar is a digital representation of my personality, as my personality evolves so does my avatar'. This is how *Nor*, a 49-year-old American man, describes the relationship between himself and his avatar. However, individuals such as *DarkWater* have said that their avatars look like 'the sexiest avatar possible', or others, such as *Calamity Konstantin*, have built their avatars as more attractive and/or younger versions of themselves. Hence, there seems to be a difference in how people build their avatars in virtual communities. This is interesting because, as Park (1950: 249-250) has posited, the first meaning of the word person is mask. Thus, everyone is always more or less consciously playing a role and it is in these roles that we know each other and that we know ourselves. Nevertheless, this conception we have formed of ourselves, this mask that we put on is our *truer self*; the self we want to be.

The aim of my project is to study these masks and to investigate the rules that bring people to wear such masks. If our *truer self* is the self we want to be, then it becomes relevant to understand how people build their *truer selves* and I will investigate this aspect in Second Life, an online virtual community. The masks that I will consider are people's avatars. Firstly, my work will introduce the reader to the world of Second Life and talk about the research methods that I have used. Secondly, my encounter in *London City* with Mr. and Mrs. *Konstantin* will be described drawing attention to how the married coupled have built their avatars. Furthermore, Goffman's theories on how people present themselves in everyday life will be applied to Second Life and ethnographic examples will support their validity. Finally, some of the data collected will be crucial to link the virtual community to Haraway's theory

(1991) suggesting that the reason of avatar's creation is very similar to the cyborgs' functions as it derives from a constant need of destroying the stereotypical concepts of binary, set boundaries and labels.

WHAT IS SL AND WHAT ARE AVATARS?

To log in Second Life (SL), one of the biggest three-dimensional virtual communities, one needs to create an avatar. An avatar is 'a virtual representation of a user on a network, typically in textual or graphical form' (Blais & Ippolito 2006: 250). Avatars have also been defined as 'a version of the self that exists "within" the interface' (White 2006:120). Or just as Liao (2008: 89) posits, avatars do not usually represent a person but a pretend persona, an alter ego.

At first, new residents are given the chance to choose from 'default avatars'. Those avatars have a rather plain appearance and *newbies* (new residents of SL) are recognisable from their non-personalised avatars. However, more experienced residents personalise their avatars and spend a considerable amount of time doing so. Here I will provide some examples of what SL represents for some SL residents because I believe that their opinion is crucial to grasp the meaning of SL.

Nor posited that 'Second Life is what you make of it. If you like to go clubbing, you can club all night long. If you like to build or create, you can do that all night long as well. Whatever you want to make of Second Life - you can probably do it. And find people to do it with'.

Zofia Verino, a 52-year-old Polish woman, sees Second life as a place in which you can do anything. 'You can fly in the air, wander the sea floor and not drown. What only man can think you can have. You can be a vampire, an animal, a robot, a man, or a woman. Change the skin color and body shape. You can dance in the club, barefoot on the beach. Have your own island, beautiful yacht and big house on a tropical island. You can make a virtual marriage, have a partner, even a baby'.
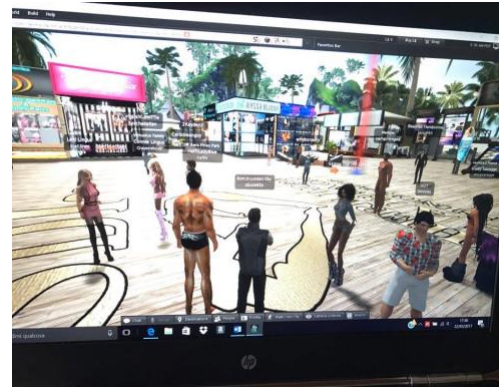
RESEARCH TECHNIQUES AND FIRST INTERACTIONS

For my project, I have decided to use as many different ethnographic techniques as possible. I have asked participants to fill out a questionnaire about their experience with Second Life, avatar creation and the relationships they built on SL. I asked them other questions, I took pictures and I have mostly tried to be a part of the community of Second Life. I have observed residents' behaviours and I have made myself one of them by creating an avatar called xSora95x and becoming a *resi* (resident) *of* the virtual community. This has allowed me to have a close perspective of how people create their avatars by *being one of them myself*. I have met a considerable number of people. Some of them came to trust me to the point of sharing their personal stories and contact information with me, others were reluctant and not willing to share their experience. Some residents were more open about drawing a connection between their avatar and themselves, others preferred to hide it.

I was accused of being a *griefer* (a resident that harasses other residents) or one of the *creators* who was trying to gather feedback from SL residents about their needs. An episode that I found significant is when I asked *DarkStone* to answer a couple of questions and he replied by saying that "there are no monkeys to study in SL so just do research in RL (Real-Life)". Regardless of this, I

collected valuable data and widened my understanding on how SL's residents create their avatars and why they do so.

BAERIC AND CALAMITY KONSTANTIN IN LONDON CITY

I spent one of my first days in SL in *London City*. The *sim* (simulation) of the English capital is usually visited by a thousand people per day. I spent a considerable amount of time there and I acquired some *campies (*objects given from the sim to visitors). *London-City* is a well-organised *sim* which offers multiple activities and attractions to its visitors. When I visited it, it was spring and there were green trees, open shops and people *enjoying* the nice weather and chatting in the main square. I spoke with several people but I was particularly interested in interacting with *Baeric* and *Calamity Konstantin*, two people who have met in SL and have married in RL.
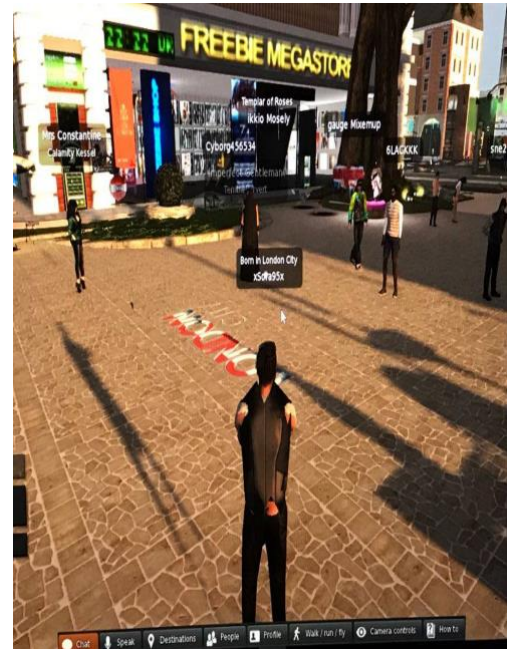
My first interaction with them was rather negative. I accidently managed to walk too close to *Baeric* as I was trying to message him and he called me 'rude'. I could not understand why and then I realised that our avatars were too close and I was invading his personal space, making him feel uncomfortable. From this first encounter, I understood the importance that Mr. *Konstantin* gave to his avatar and I wanted to find out more about it. After apologising multiple times and speaking to his wife, I managed to interview the two of them and to get valuable data.

Baeric Konstantin is a 45-55-year-old English man who has been a resident of Second Life for 8 years and 10 months. He spends about 2 hours per day in SL and he spends most of this time with his Real-Life (RL) wife, whom he met in SL. *Baeric* is one of the few people who decided to create his avatar resembling himself, showing a depreciation for whomever decides to build their avatar following other criteria. *Baeric* said that his avatar 'is me, I do not want to deceive others… and believe too many deceive people, especially the ones they claim to love'. Moreover, he posited 'I have made me represent me in the physical realm as much as possible'. In this case, the resident of SL has tried his hardest to represent his RL self. Despite that, he admitted that it took him 8 years to build his avatar and that he is 'still tweaking' its appearance.

This links well with Book's (2004: 8) ideas. The author believes that there is a general expectation that avatars should remain, at least partially, faithful to their owner's offline appearances. This is because Book argues that some people, such as *Baeric*, intend to initiate relationships with others which could be eventually extended to the offline world. Because of this expectation, Book identified a constant tension between the desire of meeting standards of attractiveness versus accuracy in representing offline bodies. Whenever one creates a too idealised avatar, it runs the risk of being perceived as fake. This is to say that there is a confusion between those who use avatars as vehicles of role play and those who presume the avatars as extensions of their real offline selves (*ibid.*).

I also met *Calamity* who helped me convince her husband to forgive me for invading his personal space. Her perspective of avatar creation was particularly interesting. *Calamity* is a 45-year-old English woman who has lived in Second Life for 9 years and spends about 6 hours per day in SL. What I found interesting was that the criteria she used to create her avatar were quite different from the ones used by her husband. She said that her 'face is not enough like me but [the] whole avatar is based on slimmer, 20something me'. Overall, she made her avatar to 'look like I could have looked in my 20s in

RL'. In this case, we clearly see that RL *Calamity* did not create a reliable avatar of her current self. In fact, SL Mrs. *Konstantin* is a slimmer and younger self of RL Mrs. *Konstantin.*

GOFFMAN'S THEORIES AND THEIR APPLICATION TO SECOND LIFE'S AVATARS

Goffman (1990) believes the information about an individual provides one with a way to know in advance what to expect from them. Observers can glean clues from one's appearance and apply their previous experience with individuals generally alike with the one before them. They can also apply untested stereotypes of the person they are trying to identify (1990: 13). From the point of view of the one who is presenting themselves, they are trying to create a harmonious situation by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate. The individual can achieve that by expressing themselves in such a way to give the kind of impression to others that could evoke from them in a precise response they are trying to obtain. Thus, when an individual is in presence of others, they will tend to mobilise their activity to convey an impression to others which is in the individual's interest to convey (*ibid.*: 15-17). This basically means that the ways in which someone would build their avatar is in accordance to which impression and interaction they want to have with others. This has been clearly stated by *Baeric*, who when asked if the way other avatars look mattered, responded that 'How an avatar looks can be a clear indication of the operator's intentions, and so yes, the presentation of an avatar can be important'. The same concept has also been remarked by another individual I met online, *Charlee*, who said that 'The look is intended to allow others to see me and interact with me in the way I prefer...'.

Moreover, Goffman (1990) calls 'performance' all the individual's activity occurring during a phase marked by their continuous presence which has an influence on a specific set of observers. The author also labels 'front' as the part of the performance which regularly functions in a way to define the situation for the observers. Therefore, 'front' is the expressive equipment unwittingly or intentionally employed by the individual during their performance (*ibid.*: 32). This has also been tested by myself in different situations. The ways in which people looked and decided to behave in certain situations have been a well-defined indicator of their performance's objective. Additionally, avatars' fronts were a clear message of their intentions and a fundamental tool to define the situations in which myself and the residents were.

For instance, when I found myself in *Tropicana Beach,* I was approached by a female avatar called *Erika78*. She was wearing a tight black dress, had large visible breasts and was dancing in a provocative way. After giving me a rose which she was holding, she started asking me questions about my relationship and sexual life.

This did not feel

particularly inappropriate to me as her front had created a situation in which it was fitting to speak about those topics. On the other hand, residents such as *Curei,* a 27-year-old Californian woman who built her own virtual museum, approached me in a completely different way which reflected the way she presented

herself. *Curei* had a classy hat, was wearing an elegant dress and was standing in a professional way. Her museum was interesting; she had travelled Europe for two years and took pictures of the main attractions of some of the European capitals. Our main conversation topic was our favourite monuments and museums. This clearly differed with the interaction I had with *Erika78* and it links with Goffman's theory that we build ourselves to evoke certain reactions in others. *Erika78*'s and *Curei*'s fronts have been used to create an adequate situation to talk about romantic and creative topics respectively.

Another important point made by Goffman is the one of idealisation. The author believes that performers tend to offer an idealised impression to observers in several different ways. Thus, whenever an individual presents themselves before others, their performance and behaviour will tend to incorporate the accredited values of the society. Goffman regards to this as a ceremony and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community referring to Durkheim's and

Radcliffe-Brown's accounts (Goffman 1990: 44-45). Adam Smith, remarking the importance of idealisation, wrote that 'if we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we

improve or train ourselves?' (1953: 75). Those ideas are applicable to everyday life but they seem to be just as relevant in Second Life. *Zosia Verino* told me that she 'would like to look like my avatar: tall, slim young girl, long blonde hair'. It is also relevant to consider the way in which a 50-year-old American woman decided to build her avatar. She said that, *Charlee*, is 'a reflection of perfection'. When she is *Charlee* she is 'the beautiful, stunning, but approachable "girl next door"... athletic build in her 30s'. Finally, this is *Darkwater* 's 'sexiest avatar possible' to highlight the importance of idealisation in building your avatar. *Darkwater* reflects the general idea of a very good-looking man. He is skinny, muscular and his hair is extremely well groomed.

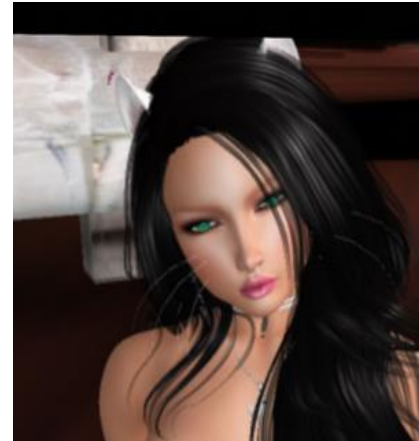## HARAWAY, THE CONCEPT OF UNITY AND AVATARS

Most of the people I interacted with expressed a desire of expanding who they were, creating another version of themselves and just in general escaping the mere idea of singularity that everyday life imposes on us. This relates well with Haraway's (1991) theory; although she applies it to cyborgs, some of the understandings given to cyborgs seem to be relevant to avatar creation as well. Haraway argues that cyborgs are hybrid organisms, simultaneously an animal and a machine and they live both in the world in the craft and nature (1991: 149). What I found particularly related between cyborgs and avatars is that they both do not admit original unity or identification with nature in the Western sense (*ibid.*: 150-151). In fact, just as cyborgs place themselves in between men and animals to break unity and enhance fluidity, avatars have the same function in virtual communities.

Avatars are useful in destroying the male and female binary opposition as, just as *Charlee* argued, 'gender is useless in virtual communities'. *Charlee* highlighted that 'In SL gender is fluid, and pointless... we have dragons and all sorts of freaks, in addition to humans... people here are not here to be themselves, for the most part, but to experience life in multiple ways...

most have several accounts/avatars and looks... and even just one avatar can instantly transform to any number of gender permutations'.

This brings me to talk about the possibility of having *alts* which are other avatars that someone can have in SL. Just as Turkle argues, residents can create multiple avatars in online communities and play with relationships, quite literally using one's second (or third, fourth...) self (2005: 12). This enables people to be *more people at the same time* of different genders, ages and ethnicity. This becomes fundamental to break the binary concept of male and female and it lets SL's residents choose to be both if they want to. There is no need for one to be male or female, you can be <u>both</u>. You don't have to be young or old, you can be <u>both</u>. You don't have to be human or animal, you can be <u>both</u>. Fluidity is a topic that most residents mentioned. There seems to be a need for people to avoid labels and just be who they feel like being whenever they feel like being that. Hence, as Liao (2008: 89) posits experimenting with diverse images of the self gives rise to the flow of identity. Just as physical bodies can transform into anything; boundaries cease to exist.

CONCLUSION AND AVATAR CREATION AS A PROCESS OF SELF-MAKING

The objective of my research was to investigate the ways in which residents of Second Life build their avatars and what pushed them to build them. Firstly, I have introduced the world of SL and described the methodological techniques that I have used to conduct my research. Secondly, I spoke about my encounter with Mr. and Mrs. *Konstantin* to show how different individuals decide to build their avatars and the degree to which they relate them to themselves. Furthermore, my work analysed the main points of Goffman's work, introducing the reader to terms such as 'performance' and 'front'. Goffman's work has been applied to my fieldwork by pointing out how the differences in appearance affected the behaviours and intentions of *Erika78* and *Curei*. Finally, this research has pointed out one of the main reasons why people build their avatars by highlighting the importance of fluidity remarked by residents such as *Charlee.* This has been done by drawing similarities between the functions

of Haraway's cyborg and SL's avatars. That said, to Cummingham's (2006: 16) question if walking as a different gender in the virtual world affects the movement of the physical body in real space, I want to answer that it does. Just as Boellstorff argues avatars are 'not just placeholders for selfhood, but sites of self-making in their own right' (2008: 149). I believe that the ways in which we decide to wear the avatar mask is subjective but this process is nevertheless self-making and it objectively helps to understand our identity. As Gottschalk (2010: 521-522) reasons, this might be because social worlds provide a free 'potential space' where real individuals -qua avatars- try to create an alternative reality. In these worlds, such as Second Life, individuals *reembody* parts of themselves they are too embarrassed to admit or just did not know they exist in avatars. As those avatars interact with others, and are influenced by them, the realism of our participation and the intensity of our emotions are heightened. Thus, the constantly evolving avatar influences the 'real self', who now also orients towards virtual, yet all-too-real others. By replacing the rigid cultural-structured codes of identity-construction with flexible and recombinant digital ones, we construct and present selves in Second Life that are free to explore, expand and innovate (*ibid.*).

We are who we are but we equally are *who we are not and want to be*.

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