

A Dramatic Perspective on the Virtual World *Second Life*

Or how to resolve the immersion vs. augmentation debate



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Keywords

Second life, Avatar, Alt, Immersion, Augmentation, Games, Virtual Worlds.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the expectations and behavior attributed to avatars in *Second Life*, the virtual world whose nature has been the subject of spirited discussion since its inception in 2003. In 2006, a discussion was sparked that revolved around the immersion vs. augmentation debate that is taking place in *Second Life* and on related blogs. Immersionists, the game's early users, see *Second Life* as a separate world, whereas augmentists perceive it as an extension of real life. In this paper, I analyze two related models of categorization and investigate how the terms of the debate can be interpreted in relation to the different levels of *Second Life*. I do this by applying perspectives borrowed from artistic, cultural, and social schools of thought. In this manner, I provide a deeper insight into the nature of *Second Life* and the motivation of its users, and show the relation between the virtual and the real world. In addition, I demonstrate why the debate continues to elicit such a heated exchange of views as well as why it is not a satisfactory method to define *Second Life*. Finally, I conclude by contributing an additional working model based on the relation between the driver and the avatar, and offer a proposal for further research.

While doing research for this paper, I accidentally came across the immersion vs. augmentation debate on a *Second Life*-related blog. What struck me at first was the intense way in which people responded to postings related to the subject. It was evident that something significant was happening: Many *Second Life* users became involved in the discourse because they obviously felt they were part of the topic under discussion. At the same time, users often disagreed in an emotional manner that at times made the debate feel more like a quarrel. It was clearly hitting a nerve. Moreover, the debate was not resulting in a clear consensus, since its participants were unable to agree even on the terms 'immersionist' and 'augmentist'.

I consider the debate an interesting tool to research *Second Life* because its participants are at the same time the subject of the dispute. As a result, one gains simultaneously a useful insight into the nature of the game, the debate, and its users.

To understand the nature of this discussion and to find a better way to define *Second Life*, I took the following steps:

1) After providing a short environmental outline of the virtual world *Second Life*, and introducing the immersion vs. augmentation debate, I gave an overview of how the terms are perceived by the different participants. In a brief anthology of reactions, I sketched the debate itself and the atmosphere surrounding it. I discovered that the first problem in the discussion was to be found in the various interpretations of the use of the term “immersion”. To first gain a deeper understanding of the actual nature of *Second Life* and of the theoretical surroundings of the debate, I analyzed two related models of categorization as constructed by Richard Bartle and Henrik Bennetson. I found out that the approach of these models – where the first was the direct inspiration for the debate and the latter its successor – was not at all suitable to explain *Second Life* entirely. Important characteristics seemed to have been overlooked and other features were being paid too much attention. Before exploring this further, however, I first researched the theoretical background and evolution of the terms as they are used within the field of new media.

2) To obtain a clear and objective overview of the debate and its terms, I traced its roots in media literature of the last century, looking at writers like Andre Bazin, David Bolter, Richard Grusin, and Lev Manovich. I encountered “immersion” in particular as a key term in relation to the experience of reality, and it showed up in most of the theories, with slightly different interpretations and meanings. Whereas Bazin in the days of painting and the birth of photography wrote about

immersion as being achieved by transparency and erasing the medium, Bolter and Grusin interpreted immersion in the digital era as a constellation of immediacy (in which the gap between the signifier and the signified is closed) and hypermediacy (the consciousness of the act of seeing). Next, within a game context, Manovich especially values the obvious user interface (UI) to enable the user to be in control of the game in order to enhance involvement and therefore immersion. Here the human agent is not to be effaced, and hypermedial awareness is an important tool for immersion. In most of the theories that surround immersion, key terms in understanding are reality, illusion, user-involvement, presence, and perception.

3) To trace back the meaning of these terms in *Second Life* and to test the debate and the models here, I examined the subject from various angles by using theories of media researchers such as, among others, Irving Goffman, Ella Tallyn, Gonzalo Frasca, and Brenda Laurel. In so doing, I discovered the shifting relation between the real and the virtual on different subjects and I was able to place the debate within this context. I could see where the debate and the models could be applied, but could also point out most of the debate's shortcomings. The strange thing was that parts of the models and of the debate did function very well and could be applied to *Second Life* in a useful way. However, this functionality was always limited; as soon as there was more than one subject, theories began to fail. Slowly I realized the reason for this was that both the models, and therefore also the debate based on them, were starting off on the wrong foot. They appeared to address the single avatar in *Second Life*, while nobody had researched the actual status of this avatar. The models seemed to assume that every avatar was equal to its driver. However, as was to be found especially in the work of Sherry Turkle, we can see that an avatar more often represents simply a specific aspect of the driver's personality. This – together with the fact that *Second Life* offers the cheap and easy possibility to create as many avatars as one wishes – makes it necessary to look more deeply into the relation between driver and avatar. This important correlation has been overlooked and ignored in the existing models and most certainly offers a new angle for research. On the basis of this theory, I provided an

additional model that included the newly found central characteristic of *Second Life*: the multiple relation between the driver and the avatar.

4) Preliminary research made clear that the qualitative method used by Bartle and Bennetson to construct their models had created a gap in understanding or had even given a misleading perspective. To progress further in the research on virtual worlds, I think it is necessary to move towards a more quantitative method of investigation. In the concluding section of this paper, I provide a proposal for a questionnaire as the basis for continued research.

Chapter 1 Subject of research

In this chapter, I introduce the world of *Second Life*, the research questions, and the method of research. I will introduce the debate and the various reactions and concluding I will analyze the two related models of categorization.

1.1 Topic description and research questions

In this section, I introduce the world of *Second Life* (hereafter also referred to as SL), explain my research questions, show their relevance, and describe the working method.

As Sherry Turkle (1995) claimed, computer-mediated experiences can bring philosophy down to earth. Where the theories of Jacques Lacan, Michiel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze initially remained quite abstract to her, they finally became more concrete within the digital environment. Turkle refers especially to MUDs, but extending this understanding to the sphere of the virtual worlds is not such a big step; Where MUDs create personas, environments, and interactions through language, virtual worlds just add graphics and sounds.

Turkle considers the digital environment as a place where we can think about human identity and post-modernism. Where modernism is defined as linear, logical, hierarchical, and having understandable depths, post-modernism is characterized as de-centered, fluid, nonlinear, and opaque. This last description could very well be used to characterize the nature of computer networks.

The meaning of the computer presence in people's lives is very different from what most expected in the late 1970s. One way to describe what has happened is to say that we are moving from a modernist culture of calculation toward a postmodernist culture of simulation (Turkle 1995: 20)

Virtual worlds can be seen as the successors of MUDs and they are the latest examples of computer-mediated experiences in which we can trace back the

reflections of the post-modern society. *Second Life* in this paper is in particular used as a ground for investigating how the changing relations between people and machines influence human behavior and identity.

Since my first day in SL in the spring of 2007, the number of users online daily has increased from 37,000 to, on occasion, 60,000. Despite recurring tales of first-time visitors (“newbies”) dropping the game after one visit, daily use continues to increase and the total current population (as of July 8, 2008) is 9,147,149. Many of these accounts are seldom used, but at least 1,199,831 users have logged in within the last 60 days (Linden Lab 2008).

SL is a Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) developed by Linden Lab. In this internet-based world, somewhere between 30,000 and 60,000 people worldwide are online daily, using motional avatars. SL inhabitants are called residents, and they can meet other residents, explore, build, participate in activities, and create and trade items. The SL currency in SL is Linden Dollars, which are easily exchanged for any local currency using PayPal or credit cards. According to the wiki-page (SL wiki 2008) residents spent altogether 28,274,505 hours online in January 2008.

The cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (Stephenson 1992) was the inspiration for SL, and the stated goal of Linden Lab was to create a user-defined Metaverse in which people could interact, play, and conduct business. One main characteristic of SL is that it has no fixed goals, and few rules or regulations are imposed. Another important feature is that it is built mainly by its residents. They design not only their own appearances but also the surroundings, houses, roads, gardens, caves, and even sunsets. This entails considerable user involvement. As seen in the extended wiki-page on SL (word-count over 11,000), many users are so seriously involved that one might think they were being paid by Linden Lab. The ongoing discussions among users and the Skype conversations with members of the Linden Family (employees of Linden Lab), with topics such as should “resident” be spelled with an upper- or lowercase “r”, are examples of the level of participation.

One of the most obvious elements in SL is the diversity of life forms. I have encountered squirrels, pigs, numerous Barbies and Kens, pregnant girls, wolves, eunuchs, whole families of mermaids, babes with tails, and tiny little robots with swiveling antennas. Some groups of avatars own their own SL region, called a *sim*, while others own private houses. In general, however, they all share the same space, where they meet and interact. Since each group has a different perspective and set of expectations, opinions on the nature of SL differs, and heated discussions take place both in- and out-world.

In this paper, I first want to examine the nature of SL and its users by referring to the immersion vs. augmentation debate. I will examine the following questions: Is the debate a useful tool to categorize SL residents? Does it help us to gain a more comprehensive overview of their activities or does it instead create a false categorization and therefore blur our perception? Is the related terminology well interpreted and suitable to approach the subject? I will also explain why the debate is sometimes so emotional and how its participants feel about the relation between the driver and the avatar. Finally, I will formulate what is lacking in the existing models and will discuss the design of a better one.

Research into these questions is becoming increasingly necessary as SL and other virtual worlds gain in popularity. As inspired by Real Life (RL) or other media representations, SL can be seen as an interactive adult version of the Disney movie *Peter Pan*. In fact, the surroundings in SL's *Midnight Reflections* for example, the resemblance to the movie is so obvious that it is surprising Disney has not claimed a copyright violation. As well as popular culture, traces of the fine arts are also evident: for example, an avatar modeled after Duchamp's "Nu descendant un escalier" ("Nude descending a staircase"). On the one hand, SL can be seen to be inspired by RL; on the other hand, SL characteristics are slowly beginning to flow over into RL.

On May 18, 2008, during a speech at a Moscow conference, chess grandmaster and Russian political dissident Garry Kasparov was the target of a practical joke involving a phallus-like object attached to a small remote-controlled helicopter. This odd but amusing occurrence was a real-life repeat of an in-world griefing attack (called the “flying penis incident”) on SL’s richest businesswoman, Anshe Chung, in 2006 (Reuters 2008). Griefing, a type of anti-social behavior whereby SL users harass other residents for fun, was in this case the inspiration for RL behavior. This RL event can only be understood correctly if one knows its origin. Here we meet at the point of why it becomes interesting to take notice of developments and motivations in virtual worlds. First we create the avatar, a representation of ourselves, and thus RL is represented in SL. Then these avatars come to shape how we behave in RL as well (Yee 2007). Since an increasing number of people have begun to interact on a social, entertainment, and professional level in cyberspace, the consequences for our perception of friendship, relations, distance, and time influence the way we live and work. The immersion vs. augmentation debate is a practical way to research this, because it is the most structured debate about *Second Life*. Moreover, it addresses SL at the same time that SL’s own residents discuss it, thus providing a double insight.

The semiotic and structuralistic method used will first be based on a study of the literature with regard to the debate and related terminology. I will explain the origins of the terms and how they evolve under the influence of changing technologies. I will then examine SL and its users by applying several cultural and social theories and by defining the relation between RL and SL. Finally, I will propose an additional model to research SL and will suggest further study methods.

1.2 The immersion vs. augmentation debate

The nature of SL has been discussed vehemently since the game’s inception in 2003. In this section, I will outline the immersion vs. augmentation debate and its different interpretations. Finally, I will provide a possible explanation for the intensity of the debate.

Because the originators of SL, Linden Lab, had a game-industry background, and the animated environment and the virtual world itself also looked like a video game, the organization around SL was automatically pushed in that direction. In the game industry, the idea of a self-contained space was central; hence, this was the focus of the company culture. At the end of 2006, Henrik Bennetsen, a Stanford University researcher, ex-Linden employee, and active inhabitant of SL, tried to clarify the notion of the “true nature” of the game. On the *Second Life Creativity* wiki he sparked the immersion vs. augmentation debate (Bennetsen 2008) by defining its two poles, basing his theories on his own experiences and those of other SL inhabitants. The debate continues to rage among active users both in- and out-world (mainly on blogs), and participants struggle to resolve the issue in terms of which side of the debate they support.

Bennetsen sees the immersionist point of view as the oldest: namely, SL is an independent world and should not be contaminated by anything outside itself. This notion is based on the Metaverse concept in *Snow Crash* (Stevenson 2002), where sci-fi worlds exist as independent internet worlds. Currently, it seems that immersionists are residents who practise dedicated role-play and keep their RL and SL identities separate. They also rarely display accurate RL data in their profiles.

“What happens in SL stays in SL”, as someone put it in the SLCC 06 recently. Your SL and RL identity are two different sides of you that should not mix... This separation of the two gives you the freedom to live your second life in a way that you might not feel able to do in your first (Bennetsen 2008).

One of the immersionists’ concerns is that SL is attracting increasing attention from the media, and its commercial aspects are becoming more significant. SL attributes are for sale in RL via eBay (e.g., complete islands or avatars including lists of friends) for RL currency, and RL businesses are opening shops in SL for RL

commodities; it is possible to order Nikes at the Laguna mall and have them delivered in Haarlem. Real-life prices are becoming the standard for prices in the virtual world. Immersionists worry that as real-world companies begin to settle in, SL will progressively resemble the RL that people tried to escape in the first place.

SL-related blogs indicate that the augmentist view has been developing steadily and seems to be more popular among younger inhabitants. The main idea here is that we have to stop looking at SL and RL as two separate spaces. An example of this is that RL pop stars are doing shows in SL, universities are teaching classes, and firms are holding online meetings. For some people, SL is seen as a first step towards a 3D web, where avatars can shop from “website to website”.

Second Life adds things like real-time spatial design tools and stronger sense of presence through avatarization in 3D space to the existing social software on the 2D internet. In a sense, you could metaphorically call SL Wiki 2.0 (Bennetsen, 2008).

At the same time, however, SL is considered a poor medium for sharing information. This is proven by the existence of hundreds of SL-user blogs in which important in-world discussions and information exchanges take place. Another augmentist point is that people who sell products in SL often use their avatar’s name as a brand name. And this results in RL names also being imported as “brand names”. In particular, when a considerable amount of cash is involved, some people only want to do business with persons they have spoken to on the phone and with whose RL identity they are familiar. This interlacing of RL and SL businesses is a significant driver for the continuing augmentist view.

In Bennetsen’s article in August 2006, he states that augmentists seem to hold the winning hand, partly because of all the media attention directed at SL. Nevertheless, he says that when one looks at the population of residents as a whole, immersionists seem to be the majority. This implies that the main group of

residents comes to SL to role-play, but that RL entrepreneurs mainly see a whole new cluster of possible marketing targets. For immersionists, these business-oriented residents are an unavoidable element. They influence prices and user expectations and cause immersionists to fear for their anonymity. Here we see part of the reason that the argument was born. What is SL? For whom was it built? Who is in charge? Where is it heading? Bennetsen makes it clear that he believes it should be possible to keep SL available for immersionists and augmentists alike.

The immersion vs. augmentation debate is still current, and active members mainly try to redefine the terms in the context of their personal situation. Augmentists believe that SL should be an extension of real life; immersionists think SL is, and should remain, a separate world. Discussions about the understanding of these tags address the question of whether they are possible at all, and if so, why would anyone talk about them anyway.

The question now is why is everybody so upset. I think the reason is that it hits an essential cultural nerve: Virtual worlds like *Second Life* have marked the beginning of a new era in which people in cyberspace are beginning to act increasingly more like “complete” personalities. On entering the new worlds, is it not clear who is in charge, whose world it is, who is setting the rules. In comparison to text-based worlds like LamdaMoo, SL offers many more possibilities for different sorts of activities that have a greater appeal to a larger number of people *and* that are more related to RL by, for example, its monetary system. Therefore, the real world and the virtual world function progressively like instruments of communication, and the economy and society as a whole are affected. The discussion on “realness” is no longer restricted to television documentaries or to thought-provoking themes presented in the darkness of a cinema: It is permeating our everyday environment and affecting our daily lives.

In the following chapter, I will show how SL residents are reacting to the immersion vs. augmentation debate.

1.3 The avatar and the debate

In this section I will provide an overview of recent comments on the debate in question. It will be seen that there is no single perspective and that residents interpret the terms quite differently.

An avatar in SL is a digital, interactive representation of its driver (Meadows 2008). The main characteristic of *Second Life* is that every single feature in it can be built by its residents, including the appearance of the avatar. When a first-time user downloads SL, he/she can create an account, and in order to enter the virtual realm must select a default avatar, choose a name, a gender, and a password. This default figure is simply to get the first-timer started, and everybody will immediately identify him/her as a “newbie”. From this point onwards, the user can begin to adapt literally every aspect of the avatar, varying from making it highly realistic or entirely a fantasy figure. The resident can buy skins, hairdos, and gestures or can build them him/herself. He/she can walk, fly, talk, dance, and move freely around SL space, which consists of the mainland and several islands.

When people first drive an avatar named Bill, Candy, or Telemachus, they do not expect to become so attached. But when they interact with others, most users begin to identify with their avatars. In particular, the feeling of identification seems to be generated at the moment a social group has formed, in which residents address each other with regard to social behavior.

One of the characteristics that SL shares with other MMORPGs (e.g., *World of Warcraft*) is the long hours its users spend online. “Playing-days” in excess of 10 hours are not uncommon. Nights are spent without sleep, and RL contacts can fade or be given increasingly less priority. These extensive playing times are partly experienced as the consequence of a strong sense of immersion. It is not achieved, however, through the previously mentioned conditions of transparency but rather by immediacy and hypermediacy. Residents have control over the game by way of its interactive nature, and usually a strong feeling of presence is paired with embodiment and identification with the avatar.

The fact that residents are generally quite involved in the game probably explains their active role in the immersion vs. augmentation debate. Thus, the debate can be considered an important source of information about users' motives, goals, and expectations.

Especially in the SL-related blogosphere, a lively discussion is taking place between frequent SL visitors. In general, a few prominent bloggers occasionally address a new or controversial perspective. This is followed by a string of comments, some of which often link to another blog. Below is a brief anthology of recent ongoing discussions.

Tateru Nino (2008) recently tried to come up with a fresh angle by introducing a new term. In her opinion, "immersion" is falsely caught up in the struggle between polar positions, and she proposes using "escapism" instead. She sees escapism and augmentism as definite choices, whereas immersion is something that simply happens; it is a state of being. In an exuberant response to this, Dandellion Kimban remarks that it is all Bennetsen's fault for using false definitions and that SL is a "big mess now" as a result. Jacek Antonelli, however, does not even consider the debate a real one; she refers to it as "chocolate vs. vanilla" in an attempt to diminish its importance and to turn the whole discussion into a sheer matter of taste. Remarkably, Sophrosyne Stenvaag comments on the post as his avatar, and refers to the "real him" as "the person active in the physical world", with whom he happens to share a mind. He is actually offended when labeled an "escapist", and resents the accusation of "others" that "those escapists" want a wall between RL and SL because of an unsatisfactory and unsuccessful RL. In turn, Stenvaag states that RL-disabled people are the real "escapists" in SL, but because they particularly like to talk about their RL physical circumstances they do not fit the description of a real escapist.

According to Lawrie Phipps (2008), this whole discussion may appear a little strange to those who take no sides in the debate, and she makes the not unlikely

comparison with the ongoing rivalry between Mac and PC users. The Mac as a machine of simulation could correspond to the immersionist side and the PC as a machine of reduction could correspond to the augmentist side. Also within the Mac/PC debate the discussion is stimulating and emotionally charged and contains accusations with regard to fanaticism, snobbery, or being boring. The question Lawrie poses here is with regard to how fundamental this discussion is: Is the debate simply about lifestyle or is it about something more profound? Giulio Prisco (2008) introduces another, newer feature of SL into the mix: the integrated Skype function called Voice. Since March 2007 it has been possible to talk to other avatars, which means that users have had to forfeit some of their anonymity. Gender and age are revealed, as well as the driver's immediate situation (e.g., multiple players or just one person in an empty room). Opinions about this tool are divided. On the one hand, the first-generation SL residents, the immersionists, fear that Voice will spoil the nature of the world as they know it. They want SL to remain separate from RL, and consider requests for RL information to be rude.

On the other hand, the older SL generation, the augmentists, are quite conservative and try to avoid or to obstruct progression that will influence "their" world. The younger generation, however, which sees SL as an RL-extension tool like email or the telephone, considers this anonymity and the role-playing aspect of SL to be silly, like faking one's voice during a phone call in RL. Their attitude is that just because a person has a phone number does not mean he/she changes identity. In general, Prisco is convinced the problem will eventually disappear of its own accord. With the arrival of new residents, expectations and the use of the Metaverse will change, and the preconceived notion of SL as just a role-playing game will soon be ancient history. The more options that can be found in SL, the better. And why restrict others' freedom to use these?

According to Gwyneth Llewelyn (2008), the debate can have a downside: It is possible that it enhances the notion of discrimination between different sorts of players. A certain amount of stereotyping already occurs in SL: for instance, with regard to furies (animal-like avatars) and master/slave role-players, in relation to

their presumed deviant sexual behavior. The debate would only cause further polarization within the Metaverse and would increase discrimination. And SL is seen first and foremost as a safe haven where a person can express him/herself freely.

According to the site *Slidentity* (2008), it appears that Linden Lab itself is pushing SL into a more augmentist direction in favor of bigger companies and successful commerce.

It seems that Linden Lab is more and more actively interfering with residents' behavior, in an attempt to understand it better or even to influence it by anticipating motivations and wishes. When I logged in on SL recently, the first thing I saw on the entry screen was a brief questionnaire from Linden Lab. It asked why I had not yet bought any land and was I planning to do so in the near future.

The implementation of identity verification and Voice is seen by players as an intrusion enforced by Linden Lab. Skype and SL were connected in March 2007, and Voice was the result. From then on, residents have been able to talk in SL, which is perhaps more revolutionary than it seems. Before Voice was actually implemented, heated discussions were already taking place both in- and out-world. Some people were worried or even upset about the Voice option being forced upon them. Their concern was threefold: that residents who were gender- or age-hopping would be easily exposed, since they could no longer hide their real identities; that the hearing-impaired would be left out; and that shy people and non-native speakers of English would feel discriminated against. It was feared that educational, geographical, and cultural distinctions would suddenly return, and the once bodiless, genderless, and nationless utopia of cyberspace would be a thing of the past. Some people, like the anonymous blogger below, responded angrily to the installation of the Voice technology.

People were complaining BEFORE it was planned... people were complaining WHILE it was being implemented.... people were complaining WHEN it was

in beta... people are still complaining.... They are the majority of SL. SL has shown a disturbing trend of trying to force people to reveal as much about their RL selves as possible all the while being disingenuous saying “you don’t have to use it” or “it’s optional.” Please, don’t play revisionist history and say that people only started complaining afterwards.... there are posts and discussions going back to 2003 about how people do not want voice in SL and never wanted it (anonymous blogpost 2008)

While reading blogs about the installation of Voice, I learned that users who are interested in the non-gaming applications of SL – like augmenting RL with distant learning, conferences, events, and collaborated workspaces – see Voice mostly as a plus. However, it is understandable that those who are deeply engaged in role-playing and run the risk of having their real identities exposed are having a bigger problem with its introduction.

In relation to Voice, it is interesting to see the difference in the enhancement of immersion in the context of *virtual reality* and a *virtual world* environment. As we saw in chapter 1.2, in the *virtual reality* environment, a feeling of *presence* and *immersion* was originally achieved by creating an illusion of reality *just with images*. In the theatrical environment of the 1970s, these images were enhanced with touch, smell, and taste to create a more immersive experience (Laurel, 2003). In the environment of *virtual worlds*, however, the immersion sought by the role-players is not the one that strives to involve as many senses as possible, nor is its goal to represent *reality*. Role-players seek a different form of immersion: one that is an Aristotelian and involves a more or less closed, fantasy story.

Remarkable is that in this case the less the senses are involved, the more affected the user seems to be. Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) concept of hot and cool media could well apply here. In his terminology, a cool medium (like a cartoon) is low in definition and therefore leaves the reader a number of blanks to fill in. A hot medium (like television) is high in definition and is in little need of participation.

The cool-media theory can be related to Manovich's notion that immersion is a result of the *control of the user* instead of the "*realness*" of the *illusion*, as explained in section 1.3.

This higher involvement with cool media seems to be the case with computer-generated communication in general. Since we receive all input through just a few senses, the senses we *do* have available are wide open and work harder to process the limited information. Regina Lynn, *Wired* columnist, put it this way:

The psychological aspects of relating are magnified because the physical aspects are (mostly) removed. Even regular users might not realize how wide open they are until something drastic happens... They fall in love, get dumped, have a huge fight (Lynn 2008).

This sheds a different light on Voice in SL. On the one hand, it seems to be an enhancement, since more senses are included; on the other hand, less user participation is needed, so concentration and involvement decline.

Still, it is remarkable that Voice is not considered a useful role-playing tool. In my opinion, Voice *could* enhance the game world. Obviously, however, there is still a boundary in role-playing that cannot yet be crossed. The identification with fictional entities, different genders, or hybrids is not a problem, but using one's voice in role-play is apparently not yet seen as a viable option. This seems remarkable, since in cartoon animations, for instance, we find plenty of examples of what a talking hamster should sound like.

I see two possible reasons that role-playing with Voice is not happening.

The first may be found in its resemblance to using one's voice on the telephone. Here we find it foolish to use silly voices, and therefore we have a hard time using Voice for anything other than serious communication. The second could be that role-playing works best in the virtual space of one's imagination. When a person simply identifies with an avatar that looks like a mermaid, most of the action is taking place safely inside his/her head. However, when someone begins to speak,

fantasy collides with reality, which can result in the driver becoming too conscious of the silliness of the situation.

As we can see, sufficient grounds for the debate exist, but none of the participants feel comfortable within the formulated tags, and each resident interprets them differently. In the following section, I will review the roots of the debate.

1.4 Different research models

In this section, I will discuss two related models used to categorize avatars. The first is the taxonomy that was the inspiration for the original Bennetsen model, and was devised by Richard Bartle to categorize game-worlds in general. The second Bennetsen model is also based on Bartle, and is an extension of his first model.

As we saw in section 2.1, the immersion vs. augmentation debate does not cover all the varied expectations with regard to SL. This type of categorization generates considerable discussion in-world and does not seem to function well. Henrik Bennetsen, who initiated the debate, was probably motivated by the critique it received, so he made adjustments to his model and developed an improved scheme based on the taxonomy that derives from the Bartle model (Bartle 1996).

Bartle identified and described four general approaches to play a MUD, an early text-based and non-graphical version of a virtual world. Bartle's approach is based on the relation between two different playing styles: action vs. interaction and world-oriented vs. player-oriented (image 1). He then placed a finer categorization onto the grid. With this model he sought to determine the actual nature of a MUD: Is it a game like chess or tennis, is it a pastime like reading or gardening, is it a sport like hunting or fishing, or is it entertainment like nightclubs or TV?

Bartle suggested four different types of users, each of which approaches the functions of a MUD differently.

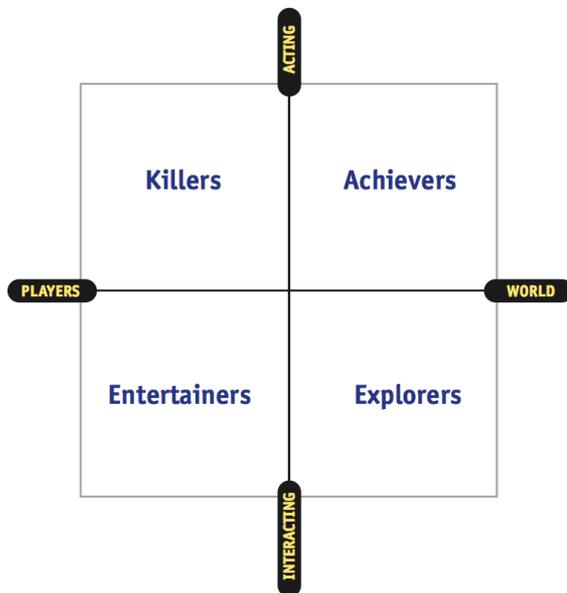


Image 1. Bartle's Interest Graph

1. Killers: see it as a sport;
2. Achievers: see the MUD as a game;
3. Explorers: see it as a hobby like reading or cooking;
4. Entertainers: see it as entertainment like TV or a concert.

Bartle's point is that the balance between the different groups is crucial. If one user group should prevail, the MUD would lose its MUDness and become a single-player adventure game, a book, a chat-line, or an arcade game. Nick Yee criticized this scheme by claiming that Bartle had never tested his categorizations. He suggests that the four types are not independent but are highly correlated. He explains that play motivations in MMORPGs do not preclude each other: for instance, being an Explorer does not necessarily mean that someone is less a Socializer. Another criticism is that Bartle ignores the fact that people play games for a variety of reasons, and therefore the same game can have a different meaning for each player (Yee 2007). Bennetsen, however, did add to Bartle's taxonomy (image 2). He projected it specifically onto SL and used his own in-world

experience to divide SL residents into four new subgroups, which he placed on the augmentation-immersion scale. He proposes the following categorization:

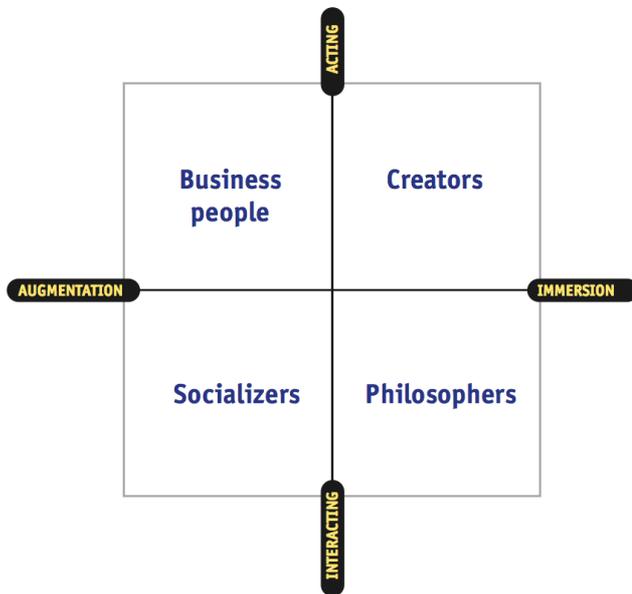


Image 2. Bennetsen's Interest Graph

1. Residents who are interested in SL's economic possibilities (Businesspeople).
2. Residents who like to build things (Creators);
3. Residents who like to think about SL and its future (Philosophers);
4. Residents who like to interact with others (Socializers);

In agreement with Yee's claim that in the Bartle model the different groups are in fact highly correlated, we can say the same for Bennetsen's model. Neither model creates discrete groups of people: A philosopher can just as easily be a socializer as a businessperson can be a creator.

The two models can be seen as a way of approaching SL and its users but they appear not to cover all aspects. Each model presents only a few options from the many possible perspectives; The categories seem random. Many in-world activities, such as therapeutic, cultural, or educational, are absent. Besides this, the models seem to presume that each driver has one avatar, or the models address the avatar and not the driver. In both cases an important point is missing: the

correlation between the driver and the avatar. In SL the possibility of operating multiple avatars is an important characteristic and should be integral to any categorization. To summarize the criticism around the debate and to develop an additional model that can fill the gap between existing models, I will first look into the relation between augmentation and immersion with respect to RL and SL.

Chapter 2 Contextualization

In this chapter the background of the immersion vs. augmentation debate will be traced within the context of technical developments and by exploring the evolution of relevant bodies of thought in the area of new media.

2.1 Immersion and immediacy

According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (Bolter 1999), immersion is based on the notion of immediacy and hypermediacy. In this section, I will show how immediacy is traced back in SL and in what way this has changed the view on immersion.

Virtual reality is immersive, which means that it is a medium whose purpose it is to disappear (Bolter 1999: 21).

In the context of virtual reality, immersion occurs when a representation is seen as the real thing and a certain feeling of “presence” is experienced. The more a representation imparts a feeling of “realness” to the viewer, the more he or she is immersed.

A classic way to achieve this immersion is by *transparency*. According to Bolter and Grusin (1999), Virtual Reality is one of the latest transparency techniques, although it is predated by three older ones: perspective, erasure of brush-strokes, and automation. Perspective was the first step in creating transparency of the medium, and it was followed by the erasure of brushstrokes to make us forget we were watching “just” a picture. Automation is a form of machine-created linear perspective in which evidence of human input is erased.

According to Andre Bazin (1967), photography did away with the human agent, who functioned as mediator between the real and the depiction; the author claimed that film finally satisfied “our obsession with reality”. Bolter, however, considered that Bazin was mistaken: Our culture was not content with cinematic and photographic representations, and therefore interactive computer-generated

images (CGI) should be considered the next step in this teleological process. In the context of new media, one can regard this teleological perspective as being too restricted. Developing technologies and applications influence the perception of the representation. In addition, the question of how immersion is created or should be achieved changes over time.

I will show that in contrast to the third step in transparency, *automation*, where evidence of human input is removed, immersion in SL is achieved by the active role of the human agent.

In their book *Remediation* (1999), Bolter and Grusin explained immersion as the dichotomy of immediacy and hypermediacy, both relying in different ways on the appeal to authenticity of experience. Immediacy was achieved by the lack of intervening media, while hypermediacy was gained through “the insistence that the experience of the medium is itself an experience of the real” (Bolter 1999).

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster 2008) “immediate” means *acting or being without the intervention of another object, cause, or agency. Direct.* Within the context of the remediation theory, this means that the gap between the signifier and the signified is closed and that the viewer should forget the medium he/she is working with. Hypermediacy, however, is the opposite of immediacy: It involves focusing our attention on the medium and makes us hyper-conscious of the act of seeing. This consciousness of the apparatus is seen by Bolter and Grusin as an experience of the real and is thus another way of becoming immersed.

These concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy form the cornerstone of understanding immersion, and they address the way we relate to artificial environments.

The term “immediacy” can be traced in the relation between the user and his/her online representation, the cartoon-like character that inhabits the virtual world SL. Users are real people in the real world, sitting behind their computers.

Members of the first group (the representations) are called *avatars*; members of

the second (real people) are called *drivers*. *Residents* is the regular SL term used to address driver and avatar at the same time. The existence of the term “residents” can be seen as an indication of the existence of immediacy in SL: There is little awareness of the distinction between driver and avatar. It is easily forgotten that the computer is a medium to allow the driver to work with his/her avatar. The signifier (the avatar) merges with the signified (the driver) and the resident is born. This sense of immediacy creates a strong identification between driver and avatar, and results in immersion. Indeed, residents are known to have strong emotional responses to in-world events, and drivers can even experience physical reactions to things that happen to their avatars. An example is given by John Meadows, author of the user-inspired *I, Avatar*, when he was confronted with an avatar-attack by a cat-woman:

I was so shocked that I forgot all my slick, in-world karate moves, and in the real world the attack caused me to gasp and pull back from the monitor. I took my hands away from the keyboard and realized that my avatar had become, somehow, my body (Meadows 2008: 89).

Immersion by immediacy in *Second Life* is not a next step in the teleological evolution of the representation of reality; instead, it appears to be a side effect of playing the game and at the same time it is a necessary ingredient to experience the game to the fullest. The human agent is not “erased” but is placed back in the center as an interactive component. The immediacy part of the immersion is to a great extent the result of emotional complicity, the constant awareness of the presence of other users, and the possibility to interact with them. This interaction is made possible by the interface, and it is here that we find the second immersion component in SL: hypermediacy.

2.2 Immersion and hypermediacy

Hypermediacy leads to immersion by focusing our attention on the subject and by making us hyperconscious of the act of seeing. Though this is considered an experience of the real, it is also in contrast to the traditional idea of effacement and transparency. In this section, I will demonstrate how hypermediacy, by means of the interface, can be seen to result in immersion in SL.

The SL interface is not designed to be invisible like, for example, the intuitive *Myst* interface, where one simply clicks through with as few distracting control panels as possible. In fact, *Myst* has only one interface: the graphical world. In contrast, the SL interface has many windows, all used to exert a greater influence. It is impossible to “forget” or to “look through” the interface, since it constantly blocks the view of the graphical world. However, the different screens are necessary to influence the avatar and its environment. This obvious, even objectionable, existence of something that is such blatant “proof” of the artificiality of the representation enforces at the same time the immersion of the user. This time, however, it is not through immediacy but hypermediacy.

In general, the interface allows the user to communicate with the operating system: keyboard, mouse, and computer system menus. The user-interface can consist of a random collection of screens opened on a desktop, but can also refer to the carefully designed selection of sliders, buttons, and pointers that are part of the game and the game experience. In general, one can look at the interface on a scale of transparency. At opposite ends are the two kinds: the one intended to be as transparent as possible and the other, in which the interface has strong hypermedial characteristics and where use of the interface is actually part of the game.

Myst is an example of the first type. The controls here are basic and the only interaction with the game-world involves clicking on objects in the correct order in trial-and-error fashion. We can take SL as an example of the second type and

the interface has many more options. The driver operates his/her avatar and environment with the interface, and this is an important part of the fun. It is like being the pilot of a plane: The driver does not want to forget he/she is in the cockpit, as it is part of the thrill, and being able to interact with all the levels is as pleasurable as the flight itself. The interface in this case is the intermediate link between the driver and the avatar, and it creates possibilities to turn the user into a producer: Everything in-world can be designed.

The interface can be seen as the combination of television (lean-back medium) and computers (lean-forward medium), and it emphasizes process and *performance* rather than the *finished object* (Bolter 1999: 31). With its resizable and scrollable windows, the interface is the main connection between the computer and the user. Every screen has its own vantage point, and users can move smoothly from one to the other. On the one hand, windows and icons on the desktop are entrances to other worlds, to other media; on the other hand, they are simply icons on a computer desktop. Lev Manovich's conception of immersion (2001) takes off from this point of oscillation between the different spaces on the desktop and addresses the production of illusion within computer-generated environments.

Websites, virtual worlds, and computer games have as a common feature this constant fluctuation between the illusion and its destruction. At one moment, we are focusing on a cinema-like representation; at another, we are working on the grid that creates it. In other words, with the GUI, the user constantly switches between dimensions of representation (filmic illusion) and of control (buttons and sliders).

Operating the detailed SL interface is an important part of the game. With its more than 150 functionalities it is easy to create visual chaos, which can therefore be experienced as hypermedial. As well as the building and searching features, there are many screens for basic practical use. For a normal session, one probably needs the public communication screen, a private instant message (IM) screen, an inventory screen (landmarks, clothes, animations), and occasionally a map to

determine location. In between, it is possible to choose from drop-down menus, among a number of other things, lighting, type of locomotion (walk/run), or what pose to adopt. The “background” of all of this is made up of the actual visuals, the SL world with its inhabitants, and the participant/driver, the “you”.

This hypermedial SL interface is at the same time the tool by which one becomes immersed. Immersion does not involve effacement; instead, it has to do with the presence of the medium and one’s interactions in it.

In avant-garde theatre and film productions in the 1960s, it was fashionable to show the means of production in order to deliberately dispel the illusion. For example, actors suddenly addressed the audience, or the camera was pointed intentionally towards the script girl. In section 3.2, I will show how Brecht employed these techniques in his epic theater and how we can relate them to SL.

Perhaps in contrast to the performance arts, revealing the machinery within a computerized environment does not seem to diminish the fantasy. Quite the opposite, in fact. The user actively completes the interactive text, which ensures involvement (Manovich 1999).

Less than a century ago, we may have wanted to suspend disbelief in the presence of a representation. Today, however, we are entirely aware that it is all an illusion, and we enjoy participating in its process. This places the viewer in a much more active role. By deconstructing the representation, the user actually becomes more involved.

The user invests in the illusion precisely because she is given control over it (Manovich, 2001: 209).

In SL, the resident has a high level of control. This includes designing himself/herself as well as clothes and surroundings. The resident can build complete worlds, including cliffs, skies, lighting, and weather conditions, and can

also decide who can enter and what rights they have (build, change objects, use of Voice, behavior restrictions). This control places the viewer firmly at the side of the creator – the artist – and generates a greater sense of involvement.

Manovich wonders if a new form of production based on the cyclical shifts between perception and action is possible. A marriage, perhaps, between Hollywood and Brecht. A military simulator-training tool would be the only serious comparable form of interactive narration. Perception and action are blended by cinematic realism and controlled by interactive computer interfaces. The downside here involves poor narratives: staying alive is all there is. Other aspects of narration are important in SL: for example, the role-reporting agents and narrator positions. I will return to this in the section on narration.

The obvious presence of the user interface (UI) creates many possibilities for SL users, and enhances involvement and therefore immersion. This is because the realness of the illusion is now definitively replaced by the control the user has over the game.

2.3 Hyperreality and virtual worlds

According to Jean Baudrillard (1994), we are living in a “Desert of the Real”, where media forms like television, film, and computer images seem more authentic than the non-mediated reality surrounding us. In this section, I will show to what extent SL is just such a desert and how it relates to actuality.

The term “Desert of the Real” is based on the story *On Exactitude in Science* (1946) by Jorge Luis Borges, in which an empire’s cartographers had created a map so detailed and extensive that it covered the entire area that it represented. The people living in this area took the map to be the place itself, and when the map began to fall apart, the sandy territory beneath it became visible: the “desert of the real” emerged.

Hyperreality relates to the concept of the simulation and the simulacrum. Simulation refers to the idea of the blurring between the real and the virtual. A simulacrum is characterized as a copy without an original (Deleuze 1990), and the succession of simulacra create a world that is partially or entirely simulated.

We have learned to take things at interface value. We are moving toward a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real (Turkle 1995: 23).

These simulations of reality replace the real and they produce a giant simulacrum completely disconnected from an earlier reality. This simulacrum is called hyperreality.

A prominent example is the way a casino induces its costumers to think they are dealing with play money while in fact they are losing hard cash. The illusion – which includes plastic chips, flashy decor and ornaments, and music designed to elicit a sense of wellbeing – is accepted by the players because it all appears to be a fantasy. Everything feels “fake” and therefore the whole experience feels “fake”. The casino has succeeded in turning money into something “not real”.

We can trace this notion of the fake and the real back in SL as well. On the level of personal relationships, for example, feelings and emotions are at first not taken seriously, because they are part of the game and therefore not “real”. But eventually, for many users, these feelings turn out to be deeper than had been thought and they result in massive problems in RL. *Second Life* widows and broken marriages directly attributable to SL demonstrate that this fantasy world is more authentic than it appears, even with its low-resolution imagery and laggy animations. Special support groups like www.GamerWidow.com have even been established to help victims.

Hyperreality can also be seen as a way to explain the American cultural condition wherein sign value is becoming more important than real value. Baudrillard concentrated on the way media could influence our perception of reality, and

introduced the term “symbolic value”. This exists in the imaginary status that people perceive in objects. The prize of a BMW is more significant for its status than for anything else.

Baudrillard also claims that we consider the “maps” of reality to be more real than reality itself. For instance, “soap opera” friends feel closer to us than real friends and ex-film stars become political leaders.

Virtual worlds can be researched as a form of hyperreality in the sense that they consist of simulations of the real world, but at the same time they form a new entity because the reference to the original seems to fade or not to exist at all. If Disneyland and Las Vegas are the hyperreality of the real world, SL can be seen as the virtual hyperreality of the hyperreal: a form of Meta-hyperreality.

As mentioned previously, Bolter and Grusin’s view of immediacy is that the gap between the signifier and the signified is closed. Thus, we can also define immediacy in SL as a form of Meta-hyperreality, in which the original seems to be a representation as well. A number of pertinent questions arise. For instance, which parts of this virtual world are themselves becoming real: the RL tears shed for the loss of an SL love, or the RL tears shed when the RL husband leaves for the SL lover?

To what extent is an avatar a representation of its driver? Or is it a new entity altogether? How should we look, for example, at the representation of the “me” when the driver has 15 avatars, each representing a different aspect of his/her personality? One might consider each of these avatars to be a significant part of one’s RL identity rather than an artificial layer that simply represents the driver. I will return to this subject in a later chapter.

Residents approach this question of the virtual and the real differently, depending upon their perspective. In the next chapter, I try to trace back the consequences of the debate in *Second Life*.

Chapter 3 Applied Theories

In this chapter, I will apply the debate to different aspects of *Second Life* and I will test the models of Bartle and Bennetson by using various bodies of thought. By exploring the border between the real life and the virtual life I will provide an alternative model based on the correlation between the avatar and the driver.

3.1 Online-offline perspective

This section examines the distinction in behavior between the SL avatar and its driver, and how email can be seen as a medium of communication between the two. By applying the theories of Erving Goffman and Nick Yee, I look at the limitations of identity and how it can be used to explain the strong emotions surrounding the debate.

The Internet has become a social laboratory for experimenting with one's personae that reflects on post-modern life. The design of the avatars poses questions in the direction of the distinction between the RL self and the SL selves. In virtual role-playing environments, the boundaries between self and the game, self and role, self and simulation blur (Turkle 1995).

One player says, "You are what you pretend to be...you are what you play". But people don't just become who they play, they play who they are or who they want to be or who they don't want to be (Turkle 1995: 192).

Role-playing is an important ingredient of SL and is a way to investigate the different selves.

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) published a dramaturgical approach to role-play in daily life. He departed from the concept that it did not matter whether you were playing a role but to what extent you and others in your environment believed in this role. At the extremes of this scale of emotional investment, he placed on the one end the sincere person (who considered his/her role to be reality)

and on the other end the cynical person (who did not believe in his/her *performance*). For Goffman, this *performance* is in fact the interaction shaped by the environment and the audience in order to provide others with *impressions* that fit the desired goals of the *actor*.

If the individual (and others in the environment) believes in the reality of his/her own act, the lack of artifice inures him/her from seeing through this act or the acts of others. Once he/she has chosen to be cynical, everything becomes an act, and sincerity is irretrievably lost. This creates a tremendous tension (Goffman, 1959) due to the emotional investment in each position, where each party has a great deal to lose if proven wrong. To be “in between” is painful, which is expressed through self-doubt and frustration (Mortenson 2008). Torill Mortenson compares Goffman’s theory with Johan Huizinga’s definition of Play. He explains that with regard to play you can also speak of an investment and a feeling of loss when it is over. This calls to mind the position of the sincere person and the cynical individual, wherein the one who is upholding the believability of the other position will experience a loss of status, time, and identity.

The tension created by this loss of believability could partly explain the intensity of the augmentation vs. immersion debate in SL. When one group of residents challenges another group’s perception of reality, it is unsurprising that discord is the result. An in-world loss of identity occurs, and the vanilla-chocolate debate is thus placed in a possibly more serious and understandable perspective.

Identity, or loss of identity, is a crucial factor here. It is often thought that role-players mix their online and offline identity, and moral judgments are made in negative terms, such as “weakening” identity. Role-players talk instead in terms of IC (in character) – in-world – and OOC (out of character) – out-world. There is an educational surplus value in this conception of “character”. Online role-playing can create a higher level of awareness among gamers about the authenticity of their real-life roles. By identifying with multiple characters, they can become

aware of their *front*. This front is understood by Goffman to include clothes, manners, and language, and is used to communicate one's identity to others. In SL, the *front* is constituted by the avatar's looks, manners, and *profile*. This online role-playing can create awareness about the way we stage our presence in real life and in online profiles, and makes clear that identity is not a fixed feature. Online role-playing environments can help users to experiment with different roles or to explore different aspects of one's being.

According to Sherry Turkle (1995), the essence of having a virtual identity is the mutability of self-representations. She wonders where the real life ends and the game begins and whether the real self is always the one in the physical world.

As more and more real business gets done in cyberspace, could the real self be the one who functions best in the virtual realm (Turkle 1995: 241)?

Nick Yee (2007) conducted an interesting study on the topic of the driver-avatar relation and sense of identity, in which he discovered a phenomenon that he called the Proteus Effect. The study revealed that drivers with attractive avatars were more willing to talk about themselves and were friendlier than those with ordinary looking avatars. This phenomenon even persisted in the realm of RL.

The set of studies (...) makes clear that our self-representations have a significant and instantaneous impact on our behavior. The appearances of our avatars shape how we interact with others. As we choose our self-representation in virtual environments, our self-representations shape our behaviors in turn. These changes happen not over hours or weeks, but within minutes (Yee 2007).

In SL, most of the residents have more or less normal, attractive avatars, but there are also many avatars with a completely different appearance. Linden Lab claims that more than 150 unique sliders can enable you to change every single aspect of your appearance. Sometimes the avatars are used as expressions of certain moods.

On the blog of Wagner James Au is a review about a meeting he had with Tasrill Sieyes (Au 2008). He displayed a number of fantasy avatars: a different one for every mood. His avatars are built like sculptures and consist of unusual materials and combinations. A furry purple fox with octopus tentacles is the basic avatar and seems the most “normal”. Others are constructed from all kinds of materials, such as shiny, round, chrome surfaces or black, barbed, spiky lines. He tells Au that he likes to be *abstract* because then he does not have to worry about preconceived notions of gender, race, or anything other than the other person’s view on abstract art. “I can just be pure intellect”, he says.

Tasrill uses his abstract avatars as psychic expressions, and in a literal and expressive way he is using SL’s representation abilities. If we tried to place him in the augmentation vs. immersion debate he would end up on both sides. His avatars look as though they are part of the immersionist world (fantasy-like and highly suitable for role-playing), but their appearances are actually based on his RL feelings. For him, the main motivation is to express these, which is decidedly augmentationist behavior. Tasrill is a clear example of why the immersion vs. augmentation debate is not functioning.

How might we now see the relation between the driver and the avatar? The avatar’s driver is the main portal between the offline and online world. The driver can decide not only to what extent either identity is involved but how much of the game content may enter his/her real-life situation. One main tool for this is email. In digital storytelling are interesting examples in which email or even sms and the telephone are used to involve the user/reader/player more deeply. One example here is *Online Caroline* (Walker 2004). In this story, the viewer is invited to log in to a website and is introduced there to a girl named Caroline. She is in a troubling situation and asks the viewer for help. He/she can make decisions for her about small things, such as what to eat, as well as about more important life issues, such as whether she should break up with her boyfriend. Every day the viewer receives an email from Caroline, with a personal update or question. Slowly the viewer begins to feel increasingly responsible for her, and this feeling becomes stronger

as Caroline's situation steadily worsens.

To a great extent, the viewer's involvement is a result of the emails. Due to the simplicity of this medium, it is easy to forget that Caroline's messages are part of a fictional story and our decisions have absolutely no influence on its course.

Nevertheless, our emotions are engaged as though the emails were real. One might see it all as a Pavlovian experiment: Even when we know the emails are not real, our mind processes them as though they are.

In addition, SL has an RL email feature and an instant message (IM) sent within SL can arrive in an RL mailbox. When these messages are responded to, the sender will receive the replies as IMs in SL. This enables an offline user to communicate with someone online, making it practical to continue dealing with SL business while at an RL day job. It simply entails keeping track of one's inbox; if someone is needed, he/she can let the other person know when he/she will be in SL. For additional fantasy-based activities, being able to receive RL emails can enhance involvement in the role-play and can integrate the RL and SL identities more fully. Progressively more games are experimenting with the use of SMS, and even phone calls are used to enhance RL with regard to the game content, and vice versa. One example of this is found in Meadow's *I, Avatar*, in which an SL slave starts to get RL phone calls in which she is approached as her SL avatar. They wake her up at night to ask what she is doing and try to make her visit a RL meeting. This way they are extending the virtual realm into her RL bedroom.

Recently, Ajaxlife was introduced for Iphone use. This application enables a person to receive and to reply to SL IMs on his/her phone (Ajaxlife 2008).

Both groups in the immersion vs. augmentation debate use this converging message function between RL and SL. Augmentists use it to keep an eye on their businesses when they cannot be online; immersionists use it for social interactions.

In this case, the distinction between the two sides of the debate is not whether one

is more or less in touch with RL but for what purposes the in-between media such as email are used.

3.2 Narrative consequences

In this section, I examine how narration is influenced by interactive online virtual worlds. I will explain how the documentary and fiction form can be detected in SL and how we can distinguish between them for a deeper insight into authenticity with regard to SL avatars.

As we saw in the project *Online Caroline*, trespassing between the virtual and the real can instantiate a new form of storytelling. This is even more so when we focus on virtual worlds: They are interactive, and their users, the drivers with their avatars, are in control of events. This means that they have an active role in creating narrations that, in the context of SL, can take different forms. For instance, narrations originate mostly in SL, and afterwards are screened on different platforms, like Youtube, regular cinemas, or television. Some of these narrations are fed back into SL, and various fiction novels have been published worldwide with an SL event as a topic. The blogosphere around SL is also lively, and many narrations have been born, evolved, and publicized here. The blogosphere functions as a place where in-world matters are discussed, information is shared, and even battles are fought. It is of interest, however, to see that the world of SL as an informational platform is apparently not enough on its own; interaction with the worldwide web is necessary as an additional source to meet, to discuss, and to give meaning.

Narratives can be divided into documentary and fiction. In RL, this distinction can be difficult to make because the two tend to blur. It is even harder in SL because the whole environment is under discussion as to whether it is real. Documentary narrations in SL can be identified as being constructed by realistic avatars behaving in a very “RL-like” manner, while fictional narrations can be seen as role-playing avatars with artificially constructed background stories. In general, both

categories spill over into each other. The free interpretation of a documentary fact can be more fictional than a highly “objective” fiction story. As regards SL, one could say that the authenticity (of emotions, for example) of a role-playing *wolf* could be greater than that of a realistic “augmentist” banker. And since the whole matter of authenticity, realness, and reality is an unresolved issue in SL, this also influences storytelling.

Behavior in SL, be it “authentic” or “fictional”, can directly instantiate narrations. Ella Tallyn (2005) addressed this subject in her research on interactive storytelling.

Tallyn looked at the connection between the interactive story world and the narrative participants and came up with three main points that relate to the specific qualities of a virtual world: (1) participants, actors, and viewers can be intertwined in the story world; (2) stories, happenings, or events are retold and can be fed back into the same world; (3) participants, actors, and viewers can influence the story at any point in the narration.

This means that the distinction between the audience, the writer, and even the actors is diminished and large parts of the story can be adjusted.

These different kinds of participants do create different forms of narrative voices. Based on theories of literary critique, they can be divided into several groups: the implied voice of the author, of a character in the story, and of different narrators at different times in a single story. Narrators may be embodied (i.e., have a physical presence) or they may be omniscient. When they are embodied, we can think of actors who speak directly into the camera to share their vision with the audience. When film-director Jean-Luc Godard uses his own voice for the voice-over to refer to the film text as subject, he can be seen as an omniscient narrator who has no physical presence and can be at all places at all times. When the voice-over is more objective, it is referred to as ‘the voice of God’. We often consider this voice to be an objective truth. Embedded narrators, however, color their view with their personalities and personal goals. They often have something to gain by

biased representations, and the audience may or may not be aware of this. The interplay between the narrators, their goals, and the audience's insights is a popular storytelling device.

All these types of narrators can be found in regular narration as well, but in the case of interactive environments they have the power to influence each other and thereby the story. This kind of multivocal narration has replaced the almighty author.

Sherry Turkle reflected on this in the context of MUDs, where players became authors by being the consumers and creators at the same time. She sees the resemblance between MUDs and scriptwriting, performance art, street theater, improvisational theater, and even *commedia dell'arte*. (1995) But she also adds:

As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction...MUDs provide worlds for anonymous social interaction in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one's "real self" as one chooses (Turkle 1995: 12).

We also find this self-construction in SL; the author is not only the creator of the story but is the narrator, consumer, and creator of his/her own personae as well.

In Second Life, we can thus find three factors at play: first, there is the creation of one's own character, the avatar; second, we have the variety of narrators and their relation to the audiences; third, there is the interaction between the world where the story is recorded/constituted and the world where it is told or screened.

We can find an example of this in one of the initiatives of the Second Life Performance Group: *Second Life/ First Life performance* (Second Life Performance Group 2008). This project consisted of a performance executed in RL but controlled in SL and then streamed back to RL. Three laptops with video cameras attached were each installed at three different locations in Stockholm: in a cafe, in a park, and in an apartment. The three live broadcasts were streamed in three

different SL sims and the avatars present could influence the behavior of the artists in Stockholm. For example, by sitting on different cubes, the avatars could influence RL components like the kind of painting the artists were making or what kind of costumes they were wearing. While avatars were teleporting themselves between the different sims, the performers biked from location to location. The stream and the SL images were screened together in a gallery in Stockholm. By taking SL equally as seriously as RL, the artists question the differences between the real and the virtual. They seem to prove that the moment one considers the virtual world to be a serious partner it can become a serious condition of RL art. The art even becomes proof that the virtual world is a real world that produces real artifacts.

This is an example of how a piece can be a documentary narration and a work of fiction at the same time. It can be considered a documentary because it was actually happening in “real life” and a work of fiction because the roles followed the rules of a script with little room for improvisation. This is an example of a narration where the distinction between the documentary and the fictional level is not clear and perhaps depends mostly on one’s point of view. Even the nature of the narration can be seen differently, depending upon on which level it is received: namely, from the RL point of view of the performers, of that of SL in the form of the participants, and of the audience in RL where they watch the final stream.

When we now pair the documentary and the fiction level with the augmentation and the immersion side of the debate, respectively, we can see that here the same problem occurs: There are no fixed levels. SL events and identities are a constellation of mixed realities. It is difficult to say what is fiction and what is documentary. Things tend to blur, change, shift, and transfer. I think this is the nature of SL narration and the essence of an avatar, and it should not be a matter of moralistic discussion. It is simply a characteristic and possibly an interesting research topic.

3.3 Aristotle and Brecht

Just as narration can create fiction *and* documentary stories, a dramaturgical approach can be used to tell an Aristotelian fantasy narration as well as a Brechtian realistic tale.

Goffman's dramaturgical approach to shed light on role-play in daily life, as we saw in section 3.1, can also be used to clarify interaction within the virtual world. Brenda Laurel (2001) looked at the possibilities for new forms of drama in the context of interactive digital technology. In her Ph.D. thesis, she applied the six qualitative dramatic elements of Aristotle's Poetics to the environment of the computer as tools to structure the design of a play as well as to analyze and break it down. I will show how Laurel interpreted these six elements and will compare them to the Brechtian vision on theater within the environment of SL. I will illustrate how we can divide SL avatars into Brechtian and Aristotelian actors and how this facilitates a clearer understanding of the debate.

Aristotle defined a play as being an organic mechanism wherein all the elements had causal relations. He formulated six qualitative dramatic principles and defined a *formal* and a *material* relationship between them. Bertolt Brecht created a different vision of theater when he coined the term "non-Aristotelian drama", otherwise known as epic theatre.

Brecht objected to the Aristotelian notions of catharsis by terror and pity, identification with the actors, and illusion. Indeed, we can see Aristotelian as well as Brechtian influences reflected in the immersion vs. augmentation debate.

The epic poet sets his events in the past; the dramatic poet sets them in the present. The *epic* event favors calm, detached contemplation and judgment, while the audience of a *dramatic* event shares the passion and emotion expressed by the actor. Brecht's opinion was that since it was people who constructed society, they could also change it; he considered his epic theater to be a tool for this purpose (Curran 2001).

The first dramatic element defined by Aristotle is *enactment*. This is the actual performance, which traditionally addressed only the eyes and the ears. To this, Laurel adds that since the 1960s, artists like Robert Wilson and John Cage have experimented with the use of smell and touch to facilitate greater audience immersion. This extension of agency gave viewers a more active role, and is similar to what happens in a game environment in which the user is part of the story development and where kinetic aspects greatly influence the perception of the enactment. In SL, enactment is extended further by embodiment. The driver can experience physical reactions in RL in response to in-world actions (see section 1.2), and *enactment* in SL is extended by a strong physical identification with one's avatar. This is indeed Aristotelian, since Brecht would consider that this identification obstructed calm and detached judgment.

The second dramatic element is *pattern*. Aristotle described melody as a form of pattern, the use of which is seen by Aristotle and Laurel as a characteristic source of pleasure in dramatic representations. I think *pattern* in SL should be seen in a broader sense: for example, more as a shaping of time. Since SL is a 24/7 application with users from all over the world, residents need to create their own pace and rhythm. They do this by creating rituals like, for example, starting the RL day with an SL coffee while looking out over the ocean from their patios. Another example of an SL ritual could be the DJ shows that take place on regular nights at regular venues. Perhaps Brecht would have had little affinity with the notion of "pleasure" being the result of dramatic representations, since he was more interested in heightening political and social awareness. Nevertheless, this interpretation of *pattern* could fit his theory with regard to a play's epic structure. The playwright Döblin explained this epic structure as one in which even if the play was cut with scissors into individual pieces, each segment would still be capable of standing on its own, no matter what came before or what followed. The structure of SL as a whole reflects this. SL can be regarded as a collection of stories and moments, each with its own chronology, that can be placed anywhere on a timeline. Thus, extending the definition of *pattern* as actions placed in time could be seen as Brechtian.

The third element, *language*, refers to words and diction. According to Laurel, however, graphical signs, symbols, nonverbal sounds, and animation sequences can also be considered when applied to human-computer interaction. In SL, *language* can be seen as written text (IM), voice, and gestures. An interesting aspect is the ASCII-signing used (image 3), on the one hand, to express emotions and, on the other hand, to show off one’s coolness and identity within the group. This signing combines graphics, phonetic vocal references, and written language. It is not always intended to establish a dialogue but sometimes simply to express an emotion or an opinion about a current event.

```
[14:41] Object: Parcel URL set to: *hooooooooooooo* .....DJ West Live in The Mix:....
[14:41] Dione Kohime: (\/) .-""""-...-""""- (\/)
[14:41] Dione Kohime: (..) ! I Love ! (..)
[14:41] Dione Kohime: o(")(") . DJWest . (")(")o
[14:41] Dione Kohime: ':- .-'
[14:41] Dione Kohime: ^-...-^
[14:41] Dione Kohime: (\/)
[14:41] Dione Kohime: (..)
[14:41] Dione Kohime: o(")(")o
```

Image 3. ASCII signing in SL

This manner of expression is emotionally charged and can therefore be seen as an Aristotelian treat. It is often a statement of “being in the flow” and an attempt to communicate with other residents and to encourage them to join in the fun.

As the fourth element, *thought* is seen in drama as the “content” of characters. It leads to all decisions and actions and implies that which the audience and other characters infer. If applied to the domain of artificial intelligence, the question would be whether computers have thoughts. According to Laurel, this is the wrong question to ask.

Computer-based agents, like dramatic characters, do not have to think (...); they simply have to provide a representation from which thought may be inferred (Laurel, 2001: 567).

In SL, the agents are partly computer-based and partly human. The digital element can be seen as the prefab animations that make the avatar move, fly, pose, and gesture, but these are activated by the human component, the driver. He/she imbues the digital avatar with human “thought”. Sometimes the sphere around an avatar – its appearance and utterances – is a closed universe. This unity creates a dramatic authenticity and can be seen as an example of Aristotelian drama. Brecht, however, showed the machinery of his dramatic representations by using his *Verfremdungseffect*. This was based on the principle of audience disorientation concerning the relation between time, place, and action. For example, stage props were changed and adjusted in full view of the audience, and the actors were fully aware that they were acting. This aspect can be found in SL in the way players are able to switch from being IC and OOC within a single conversation.

With *character and agency*, Aristotle defined a fifth element, with four criteria for dramatic characters: A character should be *good* (successful, so as to fulfill function), *appropriate* to its actions (match between character traits and actions), *realistic* (causal relations between thoughts, traits, and actions), and *consistent* (throughout the entire sequence of actions). This definition of character and agency especially fits those residents who practise role-play in SL. Those not involved in this type of story creation will dislike the Aristotelian character and agency and will prefer to remain in the Brechtian camp. Here the actor is not supposed to identify with the character but has to analyze his/her role and sometimes literally address the audience.

Finally, we have *the whole action*. In Aristotle’s view, a play has three major characteristics: the first is that a play represents an action and not a person. The characters are there simply to represent the telling; the second is that the plot needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The sequence is necessary to produce a pleasurable dramatic experience; the third is that of magnitude. A play should not be so long that the beginning is forgotten before the end has been reached.

All three of these traditional Aristotelian values are found in SL, but in reverse. For one, SL is character-driven and the way the avatar is shaped is central to the action. Moreover, the sequential treat – the beginning, the middle, or the end of a play – does not have an important role. Since it is an MMORPG, the various players all start and stop at different times. Stories evolve, begin, or disappear in a parallel fashion, and the viewer/audience/player can choose at any time to be part of another new one. The magnitude problem is solved by the interface. In the private profile screen, one can keep notes about the other characters. When an avatar disappears for a long period and suddenly shows up again, the notes can be of help to remember where he/she left off.

Thus, SL can partly be conceived of as being in the Aristotelian tradition of drama, especially when we look at the role-play aspect of the game where dramatic coherence is important. Other uses of SL seem more representative of the Brechtian tradition. It appears that players who stay closer to their RL personalities fit Brecht's notion of epic theater, while those who relate to the identity of the avatars better suit Aristotle's concept. Brecht wanted his audience to become aware of and to reflect upon the relationship between the human being and society, and this is hard to do for a driver who prefers to forget his RL personality while online. However, this certainly could be an option for anyone who uses SL as an extension of RL.

To make a useful transition from the Brecht vs. Aristotle debate to that of immersion vs. augmentation, it is necessary to note how SL can be observed as a play with rules that are related to drama. When looking at SL from the vantage point of Brecht and Aristotle, one sees that both are represented. I will give an example of each.

Epic and dramatic motivations are easy to spot in the personal *profiles* of the avatars. In here are descriptions of expectations and intentions, likes and dislikes. It is similar to reading the character definition in a script: the description of the

personae someone has chosen to be. The history of the avatars can also be found here, and general developments can be traced when checked on a regular basis: Character descriptions are altered, moods and goals change.

Take Sammy's profile, for example. Through talking to her I know she is an RL housewife from Illinois, with a two-month-old baby and happily married to a sales manager. Her SL character description, however, tells another story. It relates how she was "raised on earth in a military family, and abducted during her biology studies by a Gor Slaver and finally ended up with her contemporary tribe, where she was submitted to her lesbian masters". With this detailed profile, Sammy provides the people she meets with an Aristotelian, closed narration of her avatar's past and intentions. In her role-playing profile, she sketches a fictional role not connected to her RL identity; therefore, we can place her on the immersionist side of the debate. Her SL *front* as explained in her profile seems to match Aristotle's three criteria of drama: catharsis by terror and pity, identification with the actors, and illusion. By providing this dramatic, closed narration, Sammy tries to exclude reality and to drag her "audience" and her fellow-actors with her into a highly realistic role-play game.

The counter-example I want to give here is a statement often seen in SL profiles, and is something along the lines of: "Cut the drama. I'm here to have fun, meet new people, and have a good time". Sammy's attitude is clearly different: She invites people to join in her fantasy. The second request, however, is to keep things in perspective: "Don't get caught up in emotions, stay centered, and get real". The Brechtian view we can recognize here is in the way reality and awareness are central to these users. They do not want to be swallowed by the emotions of the game but prefer to maintain a certain perspective. This might be seen as a simple personal goal, but remarkable is that users find it necessary to publish it in their public profiles. This way it can be seen as an "acting directive" or as a means of instructing the other actors in how to play their roles or to interact with them. This example can be considered to reflect the augmentist point of view.

The connection to the debate can be found in particular on the level of the actors' identification with their roles and how they perceive the "level of reality" of their "play". In Aristotelian drama, audiences identify with the actors as much as possible and become immersed in the play's illusion. This calls to mind the basic characteristics of the immersionist view in the SL debate: Here the aim is that the actors and other participants become emotionally involved in the illusion. This illusion is established by coherence between all the aspects: *enactment, pattern, language, thought, character, and action*. This means that the avatars' appearance, residence, lifestyle, behavior, and language should constitute a logical unity.

Nevertheless, augmentists can be seen as being on the side of epic theater. They strive to keep SL as real as possible and perceive it as an extension of RL society. They try to avoid becoming immersed in the role-play and want to get to know the real person behind the avatar, just as Brechtian actors should not forget they are simply playing a role. Brecht saw the theater stage as a direct connection to society in the same way the augmentist sees SL as an extension of RL. The political intention Brecht added to his plays – the reformation of his audience – can be seen as a missionary drive of the augmentist in SL, who wants to convince the immersionist to be more open about his/her identity. Repeated questions like "What do you do" and "where do you live" are examples of this. This distinction between the Aristotelian and the Brechtian perception of the game could be seen as the equivalent of the discussion as to whether SL is a game or a world.

3.4 Game or World?

In this chapter, I want to show how *Second Life* can be seen as a game, as the immersionists do, and how it can be seen as a place similar to the real world, as the augmentists do. I will examine this distinction to determine how it influences opinions about and behavior within *Second Life*.

It is tempting to distinguish between a game and a world, and to claim that games are about winners and losers and that worlds do not have such prefabricated, fixed

goals. Games have endings and a world simply comes to an end when the player quits. In his *Video Games of the Oppressed* (2001), Louis Frasca has explained different ways of looking at the nature of games. First he looked at the definition by referring to Johan Huizinga's essay, *Homo Ludens* (1968).

A voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life. (Huizinga 1968: quoted by Frasca 2001)

Of particular interest with regard to SL is how Huizinga distinguishes between ordinary life and a game, since the question is whether SL is something other than ordinary life or simply an extension of it. When we follow blog discussions about the immersion vs. augmentation debate, we see that not all users share the same opinion about SL. As we saw earlier, for some it is a place to “play” within a fictional environment. For others, it is like using a telephone or email as just one of the tools used for communication and to maintain social interaction. For yet others, SL is a place to make serious money, which renders it even more like a non-game. In particular, since it is so easy to exchange RL currency for Linden dollars and vice versa (in fact for a European it is easier than setting up a US dollar account), the border between RL and SL is fading.

Another sign that people consider SL to be more than an extended playground is its therapeutic use whereby real-world challenges can easily be bypassed. The British organization ARCI for example, is using SL to help abused children by enabling them to work on socialization, collaboration, and computer skills. *Live2give* is an initiative by people with Cerebral Palsy who share one avatar named Wilde Cunningham to experience how it feels to interact with other people without being judged on the way they look (Terdiman 2008).

Nevertheless, despite these practical, non-game-like attitudes, we do find resemblances to games as well. Using the categorization created by Caillois (1967), I will demonstrate how we can trace back game elements in SL. Caillois distinguished between four different categories within games: *Alea*, *Agon*, *Illinx*, and *Mimicry*. *Alea* games are based on chance, *Agon* games on competition, *Illinx* games on the pleasure produced by movement, and *Mimicry* games on role-playing with an alternative reality.

The first group, *Alea*, is represented in SL by serious gambling games like organized poker. After criticism from the American government, however, these games were recently forbidden and even the FBI was involved in tracking down illegal activities.

Agon games are based on competition and can be found in-world as a major form of entertainment for many SL residents. Among others, we can find, for example, the *Starfish Treasure Hunt* for a scouting experience or *Pixel Sumo* for virtual wrestling. Last year there was even an SL architecture competition organized by the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz. This way, SL is used as a platform and a container for other well-known forms of entertainment as well as for new ones.

Illinx games, pleasure from movement, can be found on two levels. The first can be seen as the flying possibility that all avatars have as a basic necessity to get around in SL. This may be a normal means of in-world transportation, but it is also a significant attraction for many. Perhaps an innate primal longing of humans to fly is fulfilled here. The experience of embodiment creates the real sensation of flying. The second form of *Illinx* can be found in the many places where one can surf, hang glide, cycle, or even ride on horseback.

Mimicry games can also be seen on two levels. First, SL is all about role-playing in the sense that it is necessary to make an avatar in order to play. This avatar is a representation of the person, and the moment he/she enters SL he/she is already adopting some sort of role, even if unintentionally. Second, one can go a step further and enter specific role-playing sims that have strict character descriptions and behavior regulations.

This list gives us the perspective of SL as a game. In a sense, we could consider *Second Life* to be a meta-game. The word *Meta* in English is used to indicate that it concerns an abstraction from another concept and is used for theoretical considerations of its foundations, methods, form, and utility. Epistemologically, it means that a subject is referring to itself. *Second Life* can be called a meta-game because it refers back to other forms of games and is therefore a fruitful object of study.

Caillois adds a further categorization, based on the complexity of its rules. Here he uses *ludus* to mean games with complex rules and *paidea* for those with very simple rules. Frasca explains this distinction by taking the English term “play” for *paidea* and “game” for *ludus*. He then adapts these terms in order to implement them in the context of video games. His proposition is to use *ludus* for games that have winners and losers, and *paidea* for those that are based on *regularities*. Frasca gives a clear example that the difference between certain kinds of *paidea* and *ludus* is at times difficult to distinguish.

For example, a child who is jumping on one foot is following a *paidea* rule: to maintain her equilibrium without using both feet. But if the child has a watch and wants to see if she can stand jumping during 10 minutes, she has created a *ludus*. As we can see it is easy to switch from *paidea* to *ludus*.

(Frasca 2001: 10).

Although Frasca’s theories are not designed for virtual worlds, this distinction between *ludus* and *paidea* can be useful with regard to SL. The poorly defined border between a game and a non-game is exemplified, for example, in Julian Dibbell’s last book *Play Money* (2006) Dibbell turns the *paidea*-like virtual world into a *ludus*-like game in order to prove that the virtual world is actually real. He gives himself the *Agon* ultimatum to make \$1000 from *Ultima Online* within a certain period. Restricted in space and time, Dibbell turns this world into his own

game where he works with his own rules. They involve winners and losers but also concern fair play.

With his game, Dibbell tried to prove the realness of virtual goods by earning more money trading in them than from writing articles. His goal was to involve the IRS as proof that the *virtual* actually became the *real*. With regard to our debate, in this case the first part of Dibbell's game can be seen as an immersionist activity, focusing on the game itself and adapting to its written and non-written regulations. The second part, its background, can be seen as an augmentist activity because Dibbell tries to make an RL point by using a virtual world example.

In general, the immersionist and augmentist visions can be found on all parts of the gaming scales and apply to all levels. The large variety of ways a person can "play" is a typical feature of SL, and it also addresses the actual distinction between play and work. I will return to this in the next chapter. In conclusion, we cannot say that SL is just a game or just a world. Many resemblances to Frasca's game definitions are present, and RL-like uses made by some residents also exist here.

SL is multi-faceted. In fact, many diverse worlds and uses intertwine, and inhabitants continue to meet and to discuss. That the discussion becomes heated on occasion is mainly because not all participants realize that each person has a different perspective. Indeed, all these possible approaches should include the following questions: Are we playing at being real? Are we pretending or are we indeed what we appear to be? Is this my place or your place? It is the multiplicity of attitudes towards these questions that cause in-world problems. For example, for a person who wants to become someone's friend, it can be painful if the other party sees it just as a game, even if the persons involved are a crocodile and a robot.

3.5 Work and play

SL as a game, could suit the point of view that activities within should be considered as play, while SL as a world, would fit the description of work maybe better. In this section I will show that this distinction is not that discrete and that also these categories are correlated. With reference to the books of Julian Dibbell, I will show that the ludo-capitalist tendency is at odds with the immersionist-augmentist differences.

Linden Lab originated as a company with a gaming background, and SL was primarily intended as an entertainment area. Due to SL's increasing popularity, however, users joined who were more business-focused. The contemporary immersion vs. augmentation debate is partly fueled by the difference between the two concepts. The immersionists fear the commercial consequences of augmentist activities (see section 1.5).

Steven Shaviro (2007) wrote an interesting reflective article on the work-play relation using as a grid the two Dibbell books, *My Tiny Life* and *Play Money*. Shaviro compares Dibbell's socially-based MUD experiences with his commercially-based MMORPG experiences: two different eras, two different worlds, two different stories, but sequentially related. In the first book, *My Tiny Life*, Dibbell talks about identity with regard to the social, sexual, and aesthetic aspects of life in LambdaMOO. He considers LambdaMoo to be a Foucault-like other-place, a realized utopia with real locations. Here, virtual life is separated from real life, allowing its inhabitants to freely experiment and to alter the boundaries of reality. According to Shaviro, the nature of virtual worlds has changed and activities have become as common as emailing, P2P networks, and chat rooms. One could regard Dibbell's books as a sort of coming-of-age report on these virtual environments.

The first book is about sex, violence, and revolution; the second concerns economics, taxes, and financial wellbeing. The author discovers the

indistinguishability between work and play in online worlds, between RL and virtual life. One of his discoveries in particular involves the gaming factories/gold farms in China, where young people play in garages and are paid regular wages to maneuver the avatars of rich western drivers through the boring parts of the games. Dibbell recognizes in this the Marxist thought as the “relentless drift towards abstraction at every stage of the production process”, and Baudrillard’s hyperrealism is here pushed to its edges as digital bits are traded for money and even game-playing is outsourced. Play becomes money in its most literal sense and money becomes virtual.

Gold farms mark a new frontier in hyperreality because the labor performed and the products manufactured are themselves entirely virtual (Shaviro 2007: 7).

The economic systems of virtual worlds makes them real in the sense that they are not virtual as opposed to real but are a part of the real world because their currencies are exchangeable. For some people, this is causing a shift in what is regarded as the real world. In *Everquest*, for example, people consider their place “up there” to be home. They return to earth for brief periods simply to get a few things done before rushing back. Dibbell noted that the more he became involved in the money part of the *Ultima Online* game, the more he lost interest in the social element of the interaction. Hence, does money rule, even in virtual worlds? Maybe the immersionists’ greatest fear is seeing their “free space” being transformed into a commercially driven society.

A remarkable finding, though, is that worlds based on plain wealth are not popular at all; to build a popular virtual world, create money but make it hard to get. According to Shaviro, scarcity-driven worlds are more attractive. People seem to need obstacles in order to be able to visualize a better world for the future.

Scarcity facilitates fantasy.

The focus on commercial aspects can be found in the evolution of virtual worlds in general. Shaviro calls this ludo-capitalism: productive play. Play is seen here as a

spare-time activity, but when combined with opportunities to make money it results in strong immersion. This way, capitalism is dynamic and fun and has a gut-feeling appeal. Work and play are no longer indistinguishable but combine to achieve maximum immersion. Dibbell lost interest in the social aspect of the game once he became caught up in its commercial aspects. We might consider this a reflection of mainstream RL, where capitalism in the end seems to overrule other *isms*. This perhaps is what immersionists fear as well; when play and work (and SL and RL) become too entangled, RL regulations begin to rule and there is no more room for SL to be used in other ways.

In this sense, immersion contradicts the premises of the debate. Here immersion is the opposite of augmentation, whereas in the ludo-capitalist perspective, we see them converge. Play actually becomes productive and encourages immersion within the augmentist sphere.

3.6 New research model

As we saw in the preliminary sections, the distinction between both sides of the debate is not always that clear. The additional Bennetsen model, and the Bartle model it is based on, try to be more specific but perhaps are focusing in the wrong direction. In this section, I will show why Bennetsen's and Bartle's models cannot provide a satisfactory categorization system for SL. To add to their models, I will propose a different system with room for more diverse relations between driver and avatar.

An important aspect is missing in these theories and models discussed in section 2.2. All the theories focus on a one-to-one relation between the avatar and his/her driver. In SL, however, this is not always the case, since it is possible for drivers to have more than one avatar. And with each of these avatars, a driver can have a different relation to RL and to his/her own personality. One can even say, as Bartle claims, that the balance between achievers, explorers, killers, or entertainers is crucial for the MUD in order to keep its "MUDness", just as the possibility of

having multiple avatars is crucial for SL to keep its “SLness”.

I think that in order to understand SL, one has to come to terms with the aspect of the alt: the alternate account. On the SL creativity blog last year, Tatero Nino posed the question about who had an alt and why.

I possess two alts. Without giving away their identities (they're entitled to their own lives just like anybody else), I can say that they were originally created for purposes that are no longer operative. So, for the moment, one of them is "on ice," while the other gets a chance to experience the world occasionally, as well as being used for some more mundane purposes (Evans 2007).

In this comment (one of many), one can see the serious relation a driver can have with his alts (“they are entitled to their own lives”), how the use of alts can evolve (“it is on ice”), and how alts influence SL behavior (“mundane purposes”).

In addition to alts, changes in appearance under the same avatar name also need to be taken into account. Within a few seconds, residents can transform their avatars into something entirely different but still carry the same name. For example, at one moment Wolfie has a tail and a long tongue; at the next moment he can turn into a regular Ken. Identity within one avatar is not fixed and gender- and race-switching is common.

Alternate accounts or second avatars (alts) are often used for different levels of realism, anonymity, and activity. The models proposed by Bartle and Bennetsen are based on the question of how avatars behave in the virtual world. In response to this, I want to ask how drivers use their avatar(s) within this world and for what purpose. Bartle claims that the balance between achievers, explorers, killers, or entertainers is crucial for the MUD in order to keep its “MUDness”. In my opinion, however, it works the other way around in SL. The possibility of one driver oscillating between different sorts of usage is in fact what gives SL its “SLness”.

The variety of activities facilitated by the alts is a core characteristic and is made possible and even encouraged by the following:

1. Residents can remain anonymous;
2. Physical characteristics and limitations are absent;
3. Actions do not need to have RL consequences.

However, the models designed by Bartle and Bennetsen could be useful to a certain extent, once applied to user-behavior and not just to single-avatar behavior. Once the relation between driver and avatar is clarified, the models might illustrate the essence of a driver: namely, not *whether* he/she is a socializer or a killer, but *to what extent*. But even in this case, it is not clear what Bartle's categorization is based upon and why he uses this one and not another. Bennetsen's categorization is obviously based on Bartle's model, which, however, is based on games, and many non-game characteristics are overlooked with the transition to SL. Other tags emerge when SL is considered from the perspective of a world. For example, educational, cultural, political, and therapeutic could be interesting categorizations. Detailed in-world research would be necessary to discover what the activities of the avatars actually are and how they are related to the drivers. With their models, Bartle and Bennetsen are searching too hard for a single-option categorization of SL residents. I think the essence of SL lies in the fact that there exists the possibility of a greater variety of activities than in RL. A research model to study SL should reflect this.

The model I propose (image 4) is simple and can be seen as a preliminary survey to be conducted before undertaking a detailed activity categorization. This bare-bones model is in fact based on factors missing in existing research. To test it, information would be gathered by distributing a detailed questionnaire to about 500 anonymous residents. This questionnaire forms a part of section 4.2, where I look at the subject more closely. For now, I will present the model and provide examples to clarify the different categorizations. These examples are based on

personal in-world experience and are therefore working models, to be tested in the final research.

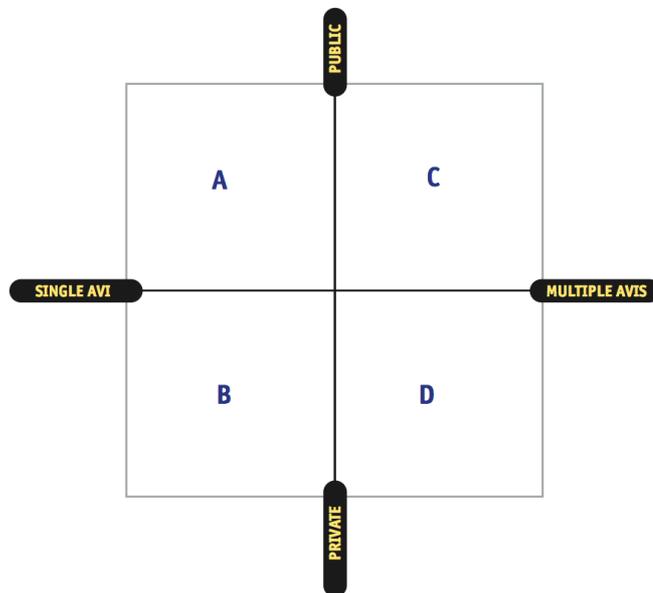


Image 4. Proposed new model

A) Single-avi public: Members of this group have just one avatar. These drivers generally lack advanced technical skills, and he/she has only one “second life”, mostly for social purposes. No matter how unrealistic the appearance, the resident likely identifies with this one avatar, whose character in all probability will match the driver’s personae. The driver probably has a consistent group of friends, and alters his/her appearance mainly only on the level of clothing and hairstyle. This group often forms part of the augmentist contingent, and can be quite open about RL matters.

B) Single-avi private: Members of this group also work mainly with one avatar, but use it to experiment on subjects when there is no possibility to do this in RL. Perhaps the consequences are risky or maybe he/she is just experimenting. These avatars are usually reluctant to give information about their RL and they keep both worlds separate. This group can be seen on the immersionist side in the Bennetsen model.

C) Multiple avatars public: These people are mainly from the augmentist side, and use SL as an extension, often for business, educational, or cultural purposes. Working with multiple public avatars points towards a busy SL, and these residents are likely to spend many hours online. They also use the avatars to experiment in designing avatars or for testing behavior. People in this group are often from the creative industries, and are graphic designers, artists, or game developers.

D) Multiple avatars private: Here we find the layer in SL that is probably the hardest to reach because it is difficult to determine which avatars belong to which main avatar. A well-known example involves the alternate accounts created for griefing.

Collecting information to fill this model would have been done anonymously, since avatars on the private side of the scale in particular would probably deny having additional avatars. An interesting point is that people who use SL as an escape from RL and who seek anonymity often find themselves trapped in new social constellations in SL. Alts can be used to escape these, and discrete groups within SL can be created.

The suggested research model is based on three major changes in comparison to the existing models. The first is that it is focused on the driver instead of just the avatar; the second is that it is based on quantitative in-world statistics as source of information; the third is that it works with the notion that the used categories are not discrete and tries to extract meaning from a different angle; namely, multiple avatars combined with the level of anonymity.

4 Conclusion

In this paragraph, I will walk through the several topics presented in this thesis and offer a proposal for further research

4.1 Overview

In this section, I will outline my reasoning in the preliminary sections to reach my final conclusion. The goal of this thesis was to determine the nature of SL by evaluating the immersion vs. augmentation debate as a working model for the definition.

In the first chapter I introduced the topic of this paper and gave an overview of the research questions and described the debate. The used terms appear not to be entirely adequate. Debaters continue to argue about their interpretation and find it difficult to place themselves in either of the groups. To gain a better perspective, I took a closer look at the model upon which the debate was based: the Bartle model, developed to study user behavior in games. The gaming perspective might be part of the problem, however, since SL is not just a game but is also a world; the issues are therefore different and perhaps more complex.

The main problem is that according to the existing models, the different groups should be seen as separate but in virtual worlds they are in fact highly correlated. Every driver can have multiple avatars and therefore the target group for the taxonomy should not be the single avatar, but the driver, who may in turn have multiple avatars that can be categorized in different ways. Each of these multiple avatars can select a variety of ways to use SL. They can approach it as a game or as a world, as work or as play, as an extension of or a flight from RL. And when these visions collide, they often collapse because the goals and expectations of the avatars do not match. We see this reflected in the argument around the immersion and augmentation debate.

In the second chapter I outlined the theoretical contextualization in new media environments and I provided a short history of the debate. I explained how Bolter and Grusin interpreted the term immersion as a constellation of immediacy and hypermediacy. They hold that hypermediacy causes immersion through making us hyperconscious of the act of seeing. In SL, hypermediacy can be found in the dominant interface and in the way it enables the user to be an interactive part of the game. The authors' perspective of immediacy is that the gap between the signifier and the signified is closed. In SL, this can be found in the relation between the avatar and the driver when strong identification occurs.

In addition, we can also define immediacy in SL as a form of Meta-hyperreality, in which the original no longer exists and the question is which parts of this virtual world are manifesting in the real world. SL can be considered a successor to Disney creations and to the gambling city Las Vegas: in both, the distinction between real and virtual is blurred.

The actual nature of SL has always been disputed, but lately the immersion vs. augmentation debate has given users a new handle. The debate is an attempt to divide the population of SL into those who prefer to see it as a separate world and those who view it as an extension of RL. Some users are so involved in the debate because RL and SL have become increasingly interwoven due to the increasing popularity of virtual worlds. This has led to all sorts of opportunities as well as to difficulties. With the arrival of increasingly more newcomers using SL to suit their own purposes, older residents have cause to worry about how "their" world is made use of.

In the third chapter, I researched those aspects related to the connection between the avatar and its driver and proposed a new model for research.

Starting with Goffman's dramaturgical approach, we saw that role-playing in SL is similar to the adopting of roles in real life. The idea of a fixed identity has been undermined by the notion that we all play roles and communicate these by way of a *front*, both in SL and RL. The tension that can ensue from a skeptical environment concerning the authenticity of someone's role can be seen as an

explanation for the occasionally emotional aspect of the debate.

Another feature that highlights a different aspect of the debate is the use of email. This is an important communication tool between the offline and online world and is used equally by immersionists – for social interaction – and by augmentists – for purposes that are more commercial in nature. The conclusion is that the convergence of RL and SL in the form of email is not an indicator for an augmentist attitude, since it can be used equally for “immersionist” role-playing situations.

This notion of sincerity and the ‘believability’ of ones ‘front’ can be seen as related to the distinction between documentary and fictional narrations. The distinction between immersionist and augmentist, and fiction and documentary, is not entirely clear either. However tempting, it is a mistake to see the immersionists as narrators of fiction and the augmentists as documentary narrators. Even when immersionists are role-playing, feelings can be authentic. By the same token, augmentists’ perception of reality can be highly colored by their goals and needs, and are therefore not realistic or objective.

Another dramaturgical way of looking at the debate is to compare it to the contrast between Brechtian and Aristotelian theater. Both visions on dramaturgy and acting can be traced back in SL to the point where the immersionist perspective seems to resemble the Aristotelian vision and the augmentist notion appears to fit that of Brecht. The Aristotelian identification with immersionist role-playing and the augmentist request for a realistic perspective in the epic would be seen by Goffman as two sides of the same coin. Despite what residents write in their profiles, it is all part of creating a “front”. It may or may not be believed, but it is still part of a negotiable identity.

With regard to the issue of whether SL is a world or a game, we have the contradiction between work and play. The distinction between the two has been a favored topic for many researchers, including Huizinga (1938), Caillois (1967), and Frasca (2001), for whom – in relation to the real world – virtual worlds were originally considered to be play. But when we look at Dibbell’s two books, *Tiny Sex* and *Play Money*, we see that the focus in virtual worlds seems to have shifted from

the social to the commercial: a movement from play to work. This corresponds to Bennetsen's observation (see section 1.5) that the ancient immersionist perspective is slowly being replaced by that of the augmentist. Shaviro highlighted that the ludo-capitalist way is creating convergence between the two, since the productive side is causing immersion to occur within the augmentist sphere.

To further explore the actual behavior of drivers on a level beyond that of avatars, I proposed another model that is based on three major changes in comparison to existing models. The first is that it is focused on the driver instead of just on the avatar; the second is that it is based on quantitative in-world statistics as a source of information; the third is that it works with the notion that the categories are not discrete. The new model is based on the conception that one driver can have multiple avatars in a more or less anonymous way. This possibility is an unavoidable characteristic of SL and should be taken carefully into account in any study on SL.

The theories described in this thesis are based on a study of the literature, on readings from the blogosphere, and on my personal in-world experiences. I have used bodies of thought on the topics of art and society and projected them onto *Second Life*. As a further step in this research, I propose to continue with the anthropological and ethnographical method in order to collect concrete information to use in the model.

4.2 Further research and questionnaire

SL is a place where people can hide: behind their screens, behind remarkable avatars, and behind wonderful names. This affords a great deal of freedom to experiment without fear of consequences. We saw that the models proposed by Bennetsen and Bartle were highly hypothetical and focused on avatar behavior. Thus, to gain a better understanding of the nature of SL, I suggested a new model, based on driver behavior.

SL can be seen as an enclosed space, in the same way a person's mind can be perceived as being inaccessible to onlookers. Everything that happens in SL is known only to the participants who experience it. They can share these experiences or keep them to him/herself. This aspect is important, since it is the result of SL's three most important characteristics: anonymity of the residents, absence of physical characteristics and limitations, and actions that need not have RL consequences.

For a realistic overview, the following questionnaire should be filled in anonymously by at least 500 residents from different countries and different sims. To gain random access to as many residents as possible in an anonymous manner, Linden Lab could be approached as partner in this research.

List of questions

Concerning RL

Where do you live?
How old are you?
What is your profession?
What is your average income?

Basic SL

How long have you been a resident?
How many hours a week/day do you spend here?
Have you had periods when you were not logged in at all?
How many friends do you have in SL?
How often and how many of them do you see?
What is the nature of the friendship?

Avatar-based

How many avatars do you have?
How many hours are you online with each of them?
What is the nature of each avatar?
How are they related and do they have mutual connections?
What are their main activities?
Do you feel equally represented by each of them?
Do all your avatars have public identities?

Privacy

Are people in your RL environment aware of your SL activities?
Are they familiar with the details?
Is your RL name connected to your avatar name in-world and out-world?
Do you meet in-world friends out-world?
For what reason?

Conclusion

Does SL improve or worsen the quality of your life?
In what way?
Do you consider yourself a long-term participant?
What would you like to change in SL if you could?
What do you hope will happen with SL?

4.3 Summary

The set-up of this thesis is quite broad because I have attempted to define and to come to grips with the eclectic nature of SL. In addition, little in-depth scientific investigation has been done on SL and thus there was scant literature to fall back on. This broad approach was a focused decision intended to result in a solid basis for further research. Indeed, topics like grieving in RL, avatar modeling as a mirror of RL identity, and narrative constructions are highly suitable candidates for this purpose.

I consider that the immersion vs. augmentation debate is not a satisfactory approach to define SL, although it can provide an interesting categorization (image 5) and can be used as a tool to look at certain aspects of this virtual world. However, despite the claims, the terms of the debate are not per se extremes on a scale, since they can occur on different levels in diverse ways. With regard to the topics reviewed in this paper, the following distinctions can be made:

Immersion	Augmentation
Illusion	Hypermediacy
Game	World
Play	Work
Fantasy avatars	Realistic avatars
Role-play	Real identity
Anonymity	Known identity
Online	Offline
Representational art	Reflective art
Aristotle	Brecht
Impressionists	Avant-Garde
Spielberg	Godard
No voice	Voice
Conservative	Progressive

Image 5. Opposing terms

As well as the fact that these opposing terms are not subtle and in many cases the situation is not as black and white as the immersion vs. augmentation discourse suggests, another problem with this model exists. For instance, if a person is deeply involved in the *Illusion* aspect of the game with regard to the appearance of his/her avatar, he/she may at the same time very well be engaged in the *Work* side concerning daily affairs. This may be why residents do not feel entirely at ease in the immersion vs. augmentation division and become caught up in the discussions surrounding it. The opposing arguments occasionally make sense at a discrete level, but as soon as the constellation of different aspects is approached as a unity, problems occur and logic becomes unstuck.

Immersion and augmentation are not two ends of the scale, since the first can very well be experienced in the environment of the latter. In this case, rather than being a category of its own, immersion appears to be more a side effect, indicating simply that a person is deeply involved in the game.

Second Life is a place with many possibilities, and users have vastly different reasons for being there. It cannot be defined in the simple categorizations proposed in Bartle's or Bennetsen's model.

The additional Bennetsen model, in which he placed *creators*, *philosophers*, *socializers*, and *businesspeople* on the two axes of immersion and augmentation, suffer partly from the same disorders: These categorizations are not as discrete as they look like. An avatar can very well be a creator and a businessperson at the same time. A driver can have more than one avatar, and each of these alts can fulfill totally different roles on the spectrum. Hence, if we want to have any idea of what SL is, we have to look at the driver and his/her actions and motivations, and not just at singular in-world behavior.

Moreover, the categorizations themselves are too random and are highly hypothetical. They fail to include many of the activities in SL. Categories like "therapeutic use", "educational", or "cultural" are highly represented in-world but cannot be traced back in the SL model.

The conclusion that Bartle's and Bennetsen's models overlooked the fact that the driver and the avatar are not identical makes new research necessary. While their categorization focuses on the avatar, the actual "brain" behind its behavior, the driver, the one that imbues the avatar with thought, remains invisible. In my opinion, the driver's motivation is of utmost interest because here we can determine what drivers seek in SL and how they pursue it. To provide a comprehensive insight into this situation, a quantitative research method is necessary as proposed.

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Images

Image 1. Bartle's Interest Graph

Image 2. Bennetsen's Interest Graph

Image 3. ASCII signing in SL

Image 4. Proposed new model

Image 5. Opposing terms