The warfare of the imagined – building identities in Second Life

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Abstract
Much has already been written about the potential of Second Life as a virtual space, but this paper examines the tensions created by its disparate population, one which has grown with incredible swiftness. By examining the history of protest in the game, from large scale events to individuals who have publicly left the game, a fundamental difficulty is unearthed. This is the disharmonious nature of a world where residents are told that they are the producers, rather than the customers. The virtual freedom of action granted to residents within Second Life clashes with the real producers of the worlds, Linden Labs. As the population has grown, this has led to increasing media attention, forcing Linden to take steps contrary to its own ethos, and threatening the already unstable communities within the virtual world.

Introduction

[A nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

[A community] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

(Anderson 2006: 6)

In considering the status of ‘play’ in online performance, it is important to note that many members of the online gaming community choose to engage with other players by ‘presenting’ in the form of avatars, and often multiple avatars, that are empowered with all manner of characteristics that the people themselves may not have. This extends beyond the rather linear view that many people outside virtual worlds may have of stereotyped avatars with rippling muscles and slender figures. Increasingly, as players are able to alter their appearance in accordance with their own wishes, this can include a huge variety of embodied presences within games, which are then commanded by players who may be of any gender, shape or physical ability. So if play is the thing, the place for play is, increasingly, online. The politics of performance are equally relevant to, but take different shapes in, the spaces of online theatres.

Keywords
Second Life
virtual world
game studies
protest
online communities
The potential of games to reflect this is something which I have already investigated at the Women in Games conference of 2007, but is something which finds particular form in a world like Second Life, where the players can appear as anything, and potentially express anything within the confines of the game. It is this latter conflict that this paper investigates.

At the time of writing (17 May 2007), Second Life (SL) had over 6 million residents. Of these, 33,350 were online, although only 1.7 million were recorded as having been active in the last 60 days. Over $1.mill had changed hands within the world in the previous 24 hours. The world was feted throughout international media for drawing in big companies such as Reuters, Adidas and IBM; numerous suppositions about its mercantile potential had spawned sub-industries such as companies dedicated to providing business plans and market research from inside Second Life, and over 127 universities owned spaces within the world.

Second Life's population explosion is the cause of tremendous disaffection in an already violently shifting community. At the root of this is a common problem to virtual world – and perhaps a symptom of humanity itself – its inability to decide on how to control that world, what form this control should take, and where the power lies between users and creators. These issues cause huge tension between the active residents, especially through the formation of unstable communities struggling to create, often literally, their identities in this world. I intend to examine this through the development of personal identity within the world, the history of protest in the game, and culminating with the departure of various well-known SL residents and a series of moral panics and protests that mushroomed in May 2007. Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities (1983/2006), on the formation and dangers of creating communities, is key to understanding these frictions, reflecting the difficulties of creating such a world. This friction also arises through the implementation (or not) of a governmental system where residents are encouraged to regard themselves as producers, yet is run through exterior mechanisms as a corporate state.

It seems somewhat ironic to justify the actions of the Second Life population in terms of digital performance. The fact is however, that in many ways their existence within this world is entirely a digital performance. All of their actions are premeditated; performed through their avatars by users on the other side of the screen. Avatars are designed, dressed and activated originally by their owners – their outward show may be purchased from designers within the world, but it is unique and individual. For many, it is this personal representation that gives Second Life such meaning – the ability to reinvent and roleplay oneself as 'other' – to perform or act different (or the same) as one might in the real world. Second Life allows the player to use themselves, and it is this action that means that much of the behaviour that can be seen within the world is a result of acted out personas. The actions of protest documented within this article all detail extremely stagy performances, some requiring considerable organisation and co-ordination. In this respect they are an extreme, but intensely
pertinent case-study of 'outward show' within virtual worlds, demonstrating how these can be turned into performance/protest sites for different ends.

Identity and place

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

(Anderson 2006: 6)

In Second Life you can create anything you can imagine with powerful, highly flexible building tools, using geometric primitives and a simple, intuitive interface. Building is easy to learn, yet robust enough to inspire your creativity.

And once you've built something, you can easily begin selling it to other residents, because you control the IP Rights of your creations.

What if you want something but don't quite have the time or skills to make it? Just do a quick search to find and buy what you want.

(Linden Labs 2007a)

A core aspect of Second Life involves forming one's identity within the social space available. Residents can look like almost anything that can be designed from the sandbox development tools,1 from a floating brain to a Napoleonic soldier, but transforming one's default figure into an original masterpiece (or masterpieces, since residents can change appearance at will) of sculpted pixels is not easy. One of the largest industries within the game revolves around creating a virtual self, with designers selling clothes, accessories, and body parts from hair to genitals to foxtails. Given that the user is represented to others through their manufactured embodiment, there is an emphasis on looking good; an aspect which gains kudos within communities:

I stumbled into a place called 'Shemale Gardens' where a notecard appeared in front of me titled, "No Lame Cock Zone!" The card warned that anyone displaying their 'stupid Q-tip freebie cock' would be ejected. Then I saw a giant sign that had a picture of my very cock in a red circle with a red bar across it.

(Trilling 2007)

Here, identity is granted when effort has been put into appearance (the author needs to find a penis that is not the popular version he has been given!). And since, like all communities, first impressions count, the ability of Second Life to make an avatar look like anything is vitally important. Conformity is inherent within this formation; to fit in with a community, residents must dress the part. At the same time, the demands for specific appearances – only the right type of penis is allowed into the area above – are specific to a type of community which may not exist elsewhere in the game. Since walking naked into a casino or educational classroom is not socially acceptable, whereas in 'Shemale Gardens' it appears to be mandatory, this causes a natural segregation of SL into disparate communities.

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Anarchy in the . . .

Despite, or perhaps because it is a social space built solely for leisure purposes, Second Life is one of the least homogenous communities online. Unlike many online spaces, which have immediately apparent themes or objectives, Second Life is not a game; it is a virtual space which I have previously somewhat blithely described as ‘MSN with legs’ (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler: 2006). The primary objective, if it can be counted as such, within the world is socialisation, although other factors are also at play. Therefore locating oneself within this place is more difficult than say, a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game, where the objective is to fulfil the criteria of the game itself (quests, levelling, etc.), or a themed chatroom where participants discuss like-minded subjects. New entrants to Second Life are unceremoniously deposited on ‘Orientation Island’ upon arrival, and must therefore seek out the communities they wish to associate themselves with. As the population has grown, this has become more difficult.

The main facets of Second Life are socialisation through education, leisure, sexual activity and other activities ranging from balloon rides to roleplaying events to shopping for a new body. All of these activities are facilitated and maintained by residents. Again these vary hugely; boat races, music concerts, universities and sex clubs all jostle for place within the world. Second Life has many micro communities, but it does not have a centralised one; indeed Linden pride themselves in allowing residents to maintain the copyright on their own creations, using the ubiquitous claim that ‘Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents’ (Linden Labs: 2007b) to sanction most activity within the worldscape. Counterpoising this is the End User Licence Agreement, but like many online worlds, the rules as to how people should behave are nebulous. Linden ultimately have control over content, largely through their statement in the EULA that they have the right to withdraw anything they wish and that they do not tolerate unacceptable content. The developers also ask residents to abide by ‘The Big Six’, but all of these caveats are something of a moveable feast, as we shall see.

The most important differentiation between these two aspects is the separation of ‘in-world’, where there is no dominant state, there are no authoritative police or law courts with authority, and the all-encompassing resolution of the EULA, which residents agree to be bound by but which largely governs their entry into the world as users rather than the residents they then become. Crucially, Linden Labs tries to absolve itself of practices within the world by users, by allowing them to create the content (Indecency, for example, is largely in the eye of the beholder, especially in a leisure world where much of the activity is sexual in nature). Thus, there are no concrete rules within the game of how people should behave — this is almost entirely down to social agency.

This lack of specific behavioural guidelines is an aspect of online worlds that is problematic; when rules of behaviour are not established, conflict arises (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007, 2008). Whilst this is not
something that can be resolved – humans are, after all, individuals – it is not always recognised by players (or in this case) residents, who not only wish to be integrated into society, but also want others to conform in order to reinforce their own sense of belonging. There is a fundamental confusion between the rules of content, and the rules of behaviour, with residents/players often (wrongly) expecting content managers to supply them with answers. Thus, Second Life is an anarchistic state in which most people crave utopia, and because everyone’s utopian ideals are different, there can be no accord.

Castronova identifies this in his discussion of online world states when he argues that the enforced absence of authority means governmental systems set up by players/residents have no impact (Castronova 2005a: 213–218). He argues that ‘while in principle governments could exist in synthetic worlds, in practise they do not’, since there is a fundamental clash between ‘government’ as coding authority and players/residents as ‘customers’ (213). The perception that the designers have divine authority (End User License Agreements, the ability to change the world) prevents players from ever successfully establishing their own governmental systems as ultimately their actions will have no agency over the design and implementation of the world. If you buy into a world, you cannot therefore be its ruler. The result is therefore an anarchistic state where players are often profoundly unhappy with their lot, but have little ability to change it. This can be seen through the rise of protests such as Cristiano N. Diaz’s Project Open Letter, which calls for Linden Labs to address the problems caused by population growth and an overburdened server (Diaz 2007). His requests include moves to address such concerns as items lost from personal inventories, to the instability of the server ‘grid’ itself. In this respect, Diaz’s grassroots organisation echoes similar protests in other online worlds – from the infamous Ultima Online strike in 1999, to The Gnome Tea Party (Foton 2005a, b), to early protests in Second Life such as the War of the Jessie Wall (see below), but they all exhibit a profound tension between user and producer. It is to these protests that I shall now turn.

Protest within

... the nature of these political events and their replication under different circumstances in different worlds suggests that they reveal something fundamental. Running a virtual world is a service, as we are often reminded, but it is more than running a BBS or a shopping mall or an amusement. There’s a nascent politics. There’s policy. There’s speech and assembly. There’s terror and reaction. If destroying the world and banishing people are not terror and reaction, respectively, I don’t know what would be.

(Castronova 2005b)

Anderson’s Imagined Communities argues that shared identities create a sense, if not an embodiment of nationalism. In virtual worlds, his writing not only seems to apply in a literal manner, but is directly pertinent to the

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ways in which people use online spaces to negotiate their identities through the expression of protest and dissolution. Whilst protests within Second Life are numerous and varied, they all reach towards what Anderson finds so distressing in the formulation of nationalism – aggressive attempts to promote homogeneity within the community.

As the world grows, so does the discontent with its perceived lack of homogeneity. In online gaming, this can often be witnessed by players flaming or grieving each other for not roleplaying or otherwise playing the game ‘incorrectly’. In virtual worlds, where the ludic does not exist so strongly, there is no set way in which to ‘play’ (Caillois 1962). In virtual worlds, the identity of the resident is far more strongly tied into the identity of the user. Thus protest has far more personal nuances. These often relate to real life concerns which are expressed through avatars, or demonstrate a discontent with the tension outlined previously between game designer and frustrated customer. Most importantly, however, as the community has grown, protest has moved from in-game squabbles, to real world ethical concerns which in many ways have little to do with the virtual world, and more to do with ethics in real life.

The first real conflict in Second Life is characteristic of this tension, expressing discontent with colonisation. In 2003, ‘The War over Jessie Wall’ broke out after a group of WWII Online (WWIIOLers) gaming enthusiasts moved into SL’s Outlands area (Au 2003a/b, Carr and Pond 2007: 79–82). Previously, Second Life had had little gun culture, although the Outlands was a place where combat was allowed. Almost immediately a Mexican Standoff developed. Pacifist posters and confederate flags were plastered all over the Jessie Wall area behind which the WWIIOLers had been moved, and the residents both inside and outside began to shoot and ‘kill’ each other. The WWIIOLers were criticised for bringing aggressive elements into Second Life at a time where the Gulf War was reaching its initial apex, the WWIIOLers responded by asking why they had not been welcomed for adding significant numbers to the community as a whole, and the place became ‘a battleground where people with differing opinions about the real life war antagonized one another’ (Carr and Pond 2007: 81–82).

The protest is symptomatic of a disrupted community as it demonstrates several things. The emergence of substantially greater gun culture in Second Life, was counterpoised by the existing residents on both sides who felt that the WWIIOLers were ‘poaching’ their territory, including existing Outlands residents who felt that the WWIIOLers were intruding on their space. The WWIIOLers highlighted an obvious intrusion of violence into an allegedly peaceful world. They brought a far more serious series of issues to bear on the flippancy of the Outlands (which had a rather baroque Wild West Outpost atmosphere), including the identification with the ongoing Gulf War. At the same time, their actions were perceived as an aggressive act of colonisation since they represented a significant population increase in a minority area. All of these latter aspects render the arguments over guns and violence redundant – in fact this was a classic territory dispute. The intrusion of real life (Gulf War) into a virtual one also destabilised the community, forcing it to recognise its ‘false’ roots.
**Small fish, bigger pond**

In 2006/2007, several ‘well known’ residents of the game publicly left the game and made statements to the *Second Life Herald* stating their reasons for leaving (Wayfinder in UrizenusSklar 2006; Massiel 2007). Largely, this related to Linden’s inability to control such a huge population, as demonstrated by frequently downtime on the grid, lag, inventory loss and other technical problems, but it also related to what many saw as Linden’s inconsistent policies towards freedom of action within the world. Once again, the conflict between customer and service provider underscored protest.

*Second Life*’s expanding world had pressed many people into what they felt were untenable situations. Like many pioneers, early residents felt that Linden ‘owed’ them something, even if this was simply the right to access the Grid when they wished. Amongst other things, they protested that the integrity of the world as a space for design and for experimentation was being lost. It is perhaps understandable to see why Linden accorded these people little weight, struggling with a burgeoning population and with issues of which they were well aware. For Linden, the thousands of potential new developers landing in their world on a daily basis could easily replace the dissenting voices (Vielle 2007). Furthermore, these dissenters were able to locate *Second Life*’s problems far more easily through their familiarity with the world, spotlighting the issues of overpopulation. *Second Life* encourages development, but its secondary qualities also mean that it is a world of avarice and egomania. It is thus very easy to accord oneself a far greater importance than one actually has. Finally, *Second Life* is aggressively capitalist in both facilitation and enactment. Quite simply, the competition that exists means that irrespective of the noise that they make, these people simply did not matter.

Ire towards specific residents is also a target for protest. Although grieving and harassment can be traced and GMs usually deal with excessive acts, in *Second Life* the line between art form and harassment is often blurred. In December 2006, resident Anshe Chung, credited with being the first real life millionaire from in-game sales of real estate, was attacked at an in-world press conference by giant penises, making the interview impossible. The stunt had been arranged by artists hoping to gain an entry for ‘Second Life Safari’ on SomethingAwful.com (Peterson 2006–7), but it also highlighted the tensions between those who bought up viable land in the world and sold it on for profit, and those who felt that this business was reprehensible. Whilst Chung was powerless to prevent the attack in game, avatar owner Ailin Graef filed a DMCA that prevented recordings of the incident being shown on You Tube (Actual News Guy: 2007). In this case, in-world wrangling spilled out into the real world, but once again the ‘rules’ of *Second Life* allowed the protest to go ahead. It was only in the real world that Chung was able to ban recordings on You Tube, and of course this proved futile as copycat sites spawned all over the web (see for example Anon 2007).

**Beyond Second Life**

As the world has grown, so *Second Life* has started to become more rigidly politicised. Unlike the previous protests, 2007 saw not only an explosion of
people entering the world, but also the implantation of serious real world issues in the game. Whilst *Second Life* can easily house forums for debate and discussion, its concerns have usually remained insular. However as it gained more international attention, so too did its protests become more directly politicised, speaking more to issues from outside of the *Second Life* world than those within it. Riots between French political groups in January 2007 made international news (More4News 2007; Kane 2007). The riots followed the establishment of an embassy for French nationalist group French Front National within the world. Importantly, this was a protest about real world politics being played out within *Second Life*, not an internal dispute.

Finally, an exterior protest about in-world ethics had a real effect on the *Second Life* grid. In December 2006, Terranova author Ren Reynolds predicted that a real world backlash against *Second Life* would cause moral panics about the world's content (Reynolds 2006). In early 2007 he was proved right, as a debate over ageplay (residents who had sex with other residents whose avatars looked like children) brought to bear real life fears over paedophilia. In this case, protest came mainly in the form of the media, seizing on what one commenter to Reynolds's entry identified as the 'most sensational possible headline' (in Reynolds 2007), and forums debating the topic. Crucially, although the topic was also debated in-world, the main argument took place outside within the public domain of the media. Linden Labs, who had previously stated that 'If this activity were in public areas... it would be viewed as being broadly offensive, and therefore unacceptable. *What consenting adults do in private, however distasteful others may find it, is allowed under these standards* [original emphasis]' (Robin Linden, 2005, in Psaltery: 2007), were forced to retract their previous position. On 7 March 2007, the company decided that despite their earlier statements, various international laws (most specifically, laws against pornographic images of children in the Netherlands) meant that they should begin to ban this behaviour and began to shut down areas and groups that promoted it. On 31 May 2007, they took this further, issuing specific guidelines banning the following:

Real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depiction of sexual or lewd acts involving or appearing to involve children or minors; real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depictions of sexual violence including rape, real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depictions of extreme or graphic violence, and other broadly offensive content are never allowed or tolerated within Second Life.

(Daniel Linden 2007)

Ageplay was ultimately prevented because of real world legal fears, not those enforced by Linden Labs (Metropolitan 2007). The issue highlighted the difficulties inherent in creating a community which nominally promotes free expression, but has nebulous guidelines as to what this is, and no internal law system that can enforce these. In this case, Linden were
permitting what many saw as a horrendous infringement of clause 5 (unacceptable content), because their virtual laws were unable to prevent it. Only outside pressure and 'real world' laws were ultimately able to allow them to prevent ageplay within the world, even though many dissidents acknowledged that actually policing this content within the game was going to be extremely difficult.

These protests, both social and political, also demonstrate a final evolution in SL's worldness – as the world grows, so concerns have moved away from the game itself. Neither the riots nor the debate over ageplay originated inside Second Life; they were both expressions of exterior belief systems. Finally, then, the world has become a place where exterior ideologies from 'real' legal and political systems are of far more importance than residential territorial disputes or single person actions. In these latter protests, Second Life is simply one of many places where these debates are active, and has become a convenient place for staging extremist demonstrations.

Conclusion

Second Life has been regarded as the golden ticket to virtual reality, a hotbed of insurrection, the most useful tool on the web for interaction, and a passport for virtual wealth. It is all of these things and none of them; with critics and residents alike often forgetting that it is a world entirely within the hands of the users. The contradictions caused by its rapid expansion have curtailed some of its early freedoms, whilst at the same time opening the door for many others. It is an imperfect tool that many find dazzling, bewildering, or simply incomprehensible. As a progenitor to something greater it shows how a sustained online community has the potential to bring people together, but its size and lack of cohesion also demonstrates that it is like any other community – riven with dissent. As an imagined community it is diffracted; perhaps this is for the best. Some contradictions within the world are too large ever too meld, although this multiplicity of approaches shows that the world does have the potential to innovate. Second Life has certainly revolutionised the world of cybersex, bringing a new integrity to this particular society. Similarly, perhaps ironically so, its ability to develop online and distance learning is incredible.

At the same time, Second Life’s inability to control its people and form a stable community has led to a gradual movement away from the virtual world itself. Whereas early protests spoke to residents about issues within the world, these have gradually exploded outwards. Politicised motives from outside now cause riots, not squabbles over virtual land. Despite their professed delight in free expression, some aspects proved too extreme for the community, yet real world concerns were what eventually prevented ageplay within the game. The developers found that their own rules could not prevent it, and it was only an external law coupled with an external moral panic, that finally meant they could act against it.

Overall, Second Life demonstrates a community that is not only imagined, but is totally out of control, and at present the population growth is so
dramatic that there is currently no way to stop this. Whilst early communities within *Second Life* were able to resolve their differences within the context of the world itself, overspill into the real world, alongside the inclusion of real issues, has proved very problematic. Whether the lessons that are still being learned from the development of *Second Life* will have a positive effect on future virtual worlds (or *Second Life* itself), remains to be seen.

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Suggested citation

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