SECOND LIFE: SECOND CHANCE

**- A netnographical study of the online virtual world Second Life
as a place of conspicuous consumption and parallel identity creation**

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Abstract

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Thesis purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the online community of the virtual world Second Life and to characterise the new online consumer society.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative research methodology called netnography. The data was collected by observing, interviewing and participating in the virtual world.

Theoretical perspective: The study builds on prior literature on the role of the Internet in a consumer society, online identity, virtual reality and identity construction through consumption.

Empirical data: The data was collected via a two-hour passive observation of a Second Life's resident, 15 semi-structured interviews conducted inside the virtual world and active participation in it with a socially accepted avatar

Conclusion: Our study illustrates the nature and characteristics of the virtual world Second Life. We have identified that the online community aims to satisfy hedonistic needs through social and conspicuous consumption, for online use only, concentrating on socially accepted identity construction.

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Preface

Today most of us posses more than one identity, each closely intertwined in several versatile realities and it is, indeed, challenging to define which one is the more real. Due to the continuous extension of the Internet, and the countless encouragements to join whatever is popular at the moment, we are attending several realities. This has been established as a collective truth throughout the past two decades and the examples are becoming increasingly grave.

When Linden Lab built the platform for Second Life (hereafter referred to as SL) in 2003 they forced us to re-think our current prejudices about what is doable and desirable in cyberspace. Today, SL inhabits about the same amount of citizens as Denmark (5.5 millions, and increasing every day), and the potential for every kind of cross-cultural interaction and self-seeking is at hand.

Already back in 1997, when hackers and computer freaks were the only true 'onliners' their offline occurrence was affected by their web activities and possibly visa versa, and today people are living the dream of the 90's hackers – to actually reside, work and physically exist in cyberspace, with no apparent connection to the offline world.

The clear distinction between what was virtual and what was real developed into being a distinction between online and offline activities, but at this instant, the development has equated the two: Online is offline and visa versa.

The thesis will probe how the correlation between online and offline is characterized in today's society and how the boundary between the two can be ascertained with regards to definition of identity and the creation thereof in a novel consumer society such as Second Life.

This thesis will aim for a sociological perspective from a netnographical position for revealing the market mechanisms and norms of the seemingly identical society in spe, which can be downloaded and entered without any prerequisites.

With this as a preliminary introduction to the challenge of this thesis, we ask following question:

'As people construct parallel identities online, what kind of consumer society is being established inside Second Life?'

Chapter 1 will provide the incentive for asking the question, rooted in a descriptive background review of the nature and progression of the Internet.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the subject matter, as regards to exposing the expansion of the Internet as a form of escapism, and furthermore, reasoning for the question briefly mentioned above. The progression will be exhibited in a three-step interval arguing for the motive to move from staying offline, into engaging oneself in the contemporary versions of the Internet, such as Second Life and similar online communities.

The primary incentive for this chapter is to prove to the reader that there is a valid excuse for reposition ones presence due to sociological reasons and to emphasise the significance of Second Life as a place of consumption and identity creation, which builds to the chosen research question.

1.1 Problem Discussion

We will commence the thesis with reasoning for the given problematic through a chronological tour, depicting the development within society.

1.1.1 The Narrow Framework Of Today's Society

Today's hyper dynamic society demands a great deal of involvement from its residing individuals, in order to participate and benefit from the synergy effect considered necessary for the survival of a democracy. Society has developed a narrow framework for existence where everybody is expected to take his or her toll, helping secure those who are not so fortunate to attain a steady income as well.

It is neither a new way of thought, nor does it demand a direct quotation, as the conforming outline of societal norms have been on the agenda for ages – mainly under sharp social denigration from the great novelists of the New Criticism literature critics up to maybe the most acknowledged essay on the topic "Death of the Author" (1967) by Roland Barthes, arguing that *"to give a text an author is to impose a limit on the text"*. By that he means that the reader of any given text material will evidently consider aspects of the author's identity— *"his political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology, or other biographical or personal attributes—to distil meaning from his work".[1]* And this, of course, derived by societal embodied standards. This interprets into, everybody has a presupposed meaning about everything, even before acquainting it personally.

The conservative view is relevant in today's culture as well, which grant some individuals with a more well-reputed and high-esteemed societal presence with a nine hours working day, a mortgage on the house, an eco-friendly Volvo and two children. A boy and a girl. Both very good in school, of course. In short, a contributing person - and his opposite would be judged a freeloader. The surrounding environment is forcing all this upon us and we accept is as true.

Individuals are being shaped by a manipulating community and hence, the ideal self-realization and the path to the top shelves in Maslow's pyramid is depending on how well you

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_the_Author (Retrieved on 2007-03-22, 8.02 p.m.)

perform your expected tasks and function in the societal eyes of others. *[Read more about the offline world in the section 'Offline is Reality'.]*

But as accepted as can be, it is neither or a new-fangled concept to let your mind drift, to daydream or engage yourself in a fantasy world to escape the pressure and dread of taking an inappropriate step in public.

Up until the 1990's, the options given for a fragment of adventure was to be found in imaginative literature; or for the children to *play* in every sense of the word. The adults had little opportunity to crawl around in trees as the neighbour might catch a glimpse, but instead indulged themselves in reading books and freeing their mind in imaginary universes, created in beautiful symbiosis between the author's words and the reader's fantasy merging together in a comfortable chair in the corner of the living room. Or they turned on the TV.

However, then came the Internet and jumping from its early public presence in the 90's to today's edition, the imaginary necessity for escaping has been exchanged with a explorative accession and a search for an unknown concept (the search engine Google www.google.com - is the world's top-ranked brand in 2007 – in front of more grown-up and tangible brands such as General Electric & Coca Cola[2]).

The Internet can be termed the contemporary version of television or books, in the sense of mental escapism from daily trivialities. "A layman's term goes: *"If it's not on the web, it doesn't exist at all"*, which is interesting in the debate regarding reality, but that will be scrutinized later on.

The Internet is utilized as a system of electronic intercommunication and a way of processing and presenting digital information, with the electronic mail system as an immediately useful aspect.[3] But with help from people's imagination, it brings together the features of a gigantic library, an infinitive picture gallery and a communication scenario without precedence.[4] Everybody is welcome on the Internet and every believable interest or activity does now have an Internet group attached to it – from the most solemn of research to the tiniest hobby. And the whole thing is offered to the user by only clicking on an icon.

The latest revolution was presented with the Web 2.0 era that commenced a couple of years ago and encouraged active participation in the creation process of the Internet: The general idea surrounding the new version was a mixture between collectivism, individualism, transparency and knowledge sharing across societal boundaries. The offering of individual homepages ready for customisation increased, the blogging concept (online diary accessible for everyone) was utilised by privates as well as multi international companies and online communities developed concurrently with anything noticeable that was worth discussing.

But we know all this already.

So, what is novel to the history and adds to the relevance of this particular thesis is Second Life. As mentioned above, online identity creation and personal branding has been available for quite some time, but all offers have been YOU as an individual behind the computer

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[2] http://money.cnn.com/2007/04/23/news/companies/bc.advertising.rankings.reut/index.htm (Retrieved on 2007-03-23, 11.15 a.m.)

[3] Graham, G. (1999) *The Internet – a philosophical inquiry*, Routledge, London, p. 22

[4] Ibid

expressing your opinions and beliefs through an interactive text or three-dimensional creation in a game, and never before as an avatar[5] alone, living an independent life unchained from reality. In SL the avatars are part of a creation process, both in regards to personal manifestation but also with regards to actually accomplishing something physical by for example, building a house, a bar, a clothing store, etc, which all contributes to a desired identity and self realisation and thus, the pursue of a productive life.

Whereas before the visualisation was restricted to a certain website or gaming platform or whatever activity was carried out, in this context the sky is the limit (and not even, due to the fact that everybody has the ability to fly). Later findings will show that this society functions autonomously from the real world - an attempt to create an online Utopia without the snaring entrapment of everyday life.

The following section is dedicated to explaining the incessant possibilities of SL as the most recent version of an online community.

1.1.2 Second Life – Real Or Virtual?

As mentioned above, people have always been looking for ways to detach from reality at least for a while by, for example, reading a book or watching a soap opera. As the technologies stepped forward various computer games were created and by the assistance of the Internet virtual worlds became available online for anyone at anytime as another option for escaping the real world and having fun. The online worlds populated by digital personas called avatars came into play at the end of twentieth century and can basically be divided into two varieties. Firstly, there are the combat-focused games, such as EverQuest, Lineage and World of Warcraft (also called multiplayer online role-playing games). Secondly, there are the virtual worlds such as Second Life, Entropia Universe and Sims Online that also include gaming elements but are primary focused on social interaction. In opposition to the pure gaming worlds, the members of the latter mainly use their creativity to construct an alter ego given the option to customize his or her environment and own experiences.[6]

Second Life is an Internet-based, open-ended 3D digital virtual world, launched in 2003. It was created and is owned by Linden Lab, a privately held company based in San Francisco, which acts as a sort of laissez-faire government in SL and makes a profit primarily by selling property in their virtual world[7]. After downloading a special program, it allows the residents to create their avatars, interact with each other, socialize, participate in various activities, create and trade items and services from one another.[8] A basic membership in SL is free, but in order to construct objects and buildings a premium membership is needed (9.95$ per month). The avatars can be as fantastic and eccentric as imagination allows and it is a pure decision whether the resident prefers having blue or red eyes, a mouse tale or angel's wings. The communication with other avatars is based on typed chat, IM (instant messaging) and pre-recorded animations.

In SL it is straightforward for one's avatar to get a job as a stripper in a club, and earn real money for the virtual service!

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[5] An 'avatar' is an Internet user's representation of himself, in form of a three-dimensional character (www.wikipedia.org)
[6] Hemp, P. (2006) "Avatar-Based Marketing", *Harvard Business Review,* Vol. 84 (6), pp. 48-57
[7] Rosedale, P. & Fitzgerald, M. (2007) "How I Did It: Philip Rosedale", *Inc,* Vol. 29(2), pp. 80-85
[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life (Retrieved on 2007-03-19, 7.20 p.m.)

According to the official SL website 19 March, 2007 there was 4,8 million registered residents from which 1,6 million logged in last 60 days and 33,046 were online at the very moment[9]. Almost 5 millions were sufficiently fascinated by SL enough to register. However, it is not only the number of residents that matters for understanding the extent of the phenomenon. Considering that in this virtual world Adidas is selling its shoes (for wearing there, that is), Sweden has launched the first official embassy and IBM has already invested more than $10 million in acquiring virtual real estate and advertising[10] - and held a two-day brainstorm with 150,000 attendants.[11] So, even though it might have been created for gaming purposes it is being taken dead serious by the corporations.

Several different reasons to enter SL have been stated by companies, non-profit organizations and educational institutions, which includes:

- Selling virtual products and services (e.g. American Apparel has sold 12,000 pairs of virtual jeans, for about $2 each[12])
- Setting up a virtual office to host online visitors and tell them about company's activities
- Conducting onsite trainings for staff or clients (no physical location needed)
- Advertising and promotion for new products and services
- Experimenting with new products, services or even business plans before introducing them in the real world
- Raising money through various campaigns
- Leasing or buying space to teach students
- Providing news & information to residents at Second Life
- Hunting for virtual talents

Apparently, virtual worlds are not just created for the simple pleasure of gaming or socializing but also for online community building, education, political expression and even military training[13]. Although the reasons to enter SL for companies and various organizations vary, the stimulus appears to be collective - the desire to build and develop a personal connection with existing and potential customers in a place where real world manufacturing or service costs can be avoided and where there are fewer obstacles to what is possible and doable[14]. Virtual worlds provides the companies with the opportunity to interact with engaged minds instead of targeting passive eyeballs and it is easier to convince people into having fun with the brand using their avatar than a real person in the physical world[15]. Virtual worlds are a new marketing tool to reach the people who prefer logging on to a games instead of switching on the TV[16] as well as it evades the constraints of traditional advertising in the real world[17] - and assists companies' branding tactics as a hip and forward-thinking platform[18].

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[9] http://www.secondlife.com/ (Retrieved on 2007-03-19, 8.20 p.m.)
[10] http://www.investors.com/editorial/IBDArticles.asp?artsec=17&issue=20070221 (Retrieved on 2007-03-19, 8.36 p.m.)
[11] Loehnis, B. (2007) "Test Drive: Barney Loehnis, Isobar Asia Pacific", *Media*, p. S6 (Feb 23)
[12] http://biz.yahoo.com/seekingalpha/070226/27994_id.html?.v=1 (Retrieved on 2007-03-21, 7.30 p.m.)
[13] http://www.virtualworldsreview.com/info/whatis.shtml (Retrieved on 2007-03-23, 7.00 p.m.)
[14] Hobson, N. (2007) "Should businesses get a Second Life?", *Knowledge Management Review,* Vol. 10(1), p. 5
[15] Hemp, P. (2006) "Avatar-Based Marketing", *Harvard Business Review,* Vol. 84(6), pp. 48-57
[16] Hof, R.D. (2006) "It's Not All Fun And Games", *Business Week,* Iss. 3982, p. 76 (May 1)
[17] Bovington, J. (2006) "Analysis: A licence to print virtual money?", *Marketing Week,* p.16 (Oct 19)
[18] Jana, R. & McConnon, A. (2006) "Second Life Lessons", *Business Week,* Iss. 4011, pg. 17 (Nov 27)

However, to understand what pushes the SL residents to leave their real lives and enter the virtual ones is one of the most interesting aspects of the phenomenon. For the ones at least basically familiar with programming there are various opportunities for profiting from his or her creativity, i.e. anything from a virtual bicycle to a virtual tattoo can be created and sold for residents of SL or, if less familiar with programming, there is always a possibility for renting or selling a real estate that according to many sources made one person a millionaire in her real life. The SL residents own real copyright for the things they create in SL.

Researchers from Stanford University, California compared online behaviour of avatars in SL with the types of behaviours people exhibit in physical world focusing on their interactions. They concluded that social interactions in online virtual environments are governed by the same social norms as social interactions in the physical world.[19]

Furthermore, the Gartner analysts say that the world's leading information technology research and advisory company, predicts that 80% of all active Internet users and Fortune 500 companies will have a "second life" in a virtual world by 2011[20].

1.1.3 Consumption In Second Life

The residents of SL use Linden Dollars (L $268 = US $ 1) to pay for the goods and services provided by other residents in the virtual world. According to official website of SL as of the 12th of May, 2007 its residents spent almost 1,6 million US dollars in the last 24 hours buying virtual land, real estate, clothing, cars, pets, body parts and anything else that one could possibly imagine. Second Life is a place where people literally immerse themselves in their products. Although during April 2007 most of the SL residents (44%) spent less than 2 US dollars, the average cost of square meter of SL land in April was 4 US cents and most of American Apparel's virtual clothing were sold for less than US $1. This indicates the high purchasing power and justifies the incredibly high amount of daily transactions.[21,22]

Obviously, the price one pays for the ability to create a new world is rather ridiculous: *"With all the things you can buy in Second Life, it's hard not to want them, just like real-life stuff"* says one of the SL residents[23]. And although Second Life differs from the first one in the sense that people do not need to satisfy such physical needs as eating and sleeping, it does not stop them from spending time and money on building or buying houses with 5 bedrooms and drinking virtual beer while watching a football match.

Selling anything from notary services to candles that burn down to pools of wax brings some 3,100 residents each a net profit of $20,000 in average annual revenues[24] and it does in fact mean that there is a great demand for virtual goods and services. The tax authorities such as the Internal Revenue Service in America and the Danish tax authorities have already set up offices and started to require about how much SL residents cash out in the physical world[25].

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[19] Yee, N.; Bailenson, J. N.; Urbanek, M.; Chang, F. & Merget, D. (2007) "The Unbearable Likeness of Being Digital: The Persistence of Nonverbal Social Norms in Online Virtual Environments", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Vol. 10(1), pp. 115-121

[20] Nuttall, C. (2007) "It was science fiction - now it's just normal", *Financial Times,* pg.2

[21] http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php (Retrieved on 2007-05-12, 2.20 p.m.)

[22] Zimmer, L. (2007) "How Viable Is Virtual Commerce? -- Businesses that understand the potential of Second Life are finding real-world commercial opportunities in the virtual space", *Optimize,* Vol. 6(1), p. 47

[23] Wllace, M. (2005) "The Game Is Virtual. The Profit Is Real", *The New York Times*, p. 3

[24] n.a. (2006) "My Virtual Life", *Business Week*, p. 72

[25] n.a. (2007) "Virtual Money May Become Taxable", *FinancialWire,* p. 1

It is a fact that people live their second lives in such Internet spaces as chat rooms, forums, website discussions, blogs, creating e-mail identities and so forth. These lives can be made invisible for the ones they do not want to be seen by and, thus, are considerably private. Second Life, on the other hand, is very much a public place. The awareness of being visible to everyone when being online also affects the consumption and the luxurious palaces being built together with diamond bracelets bought in SL are some evidential signs of the conspicuous consumption taking place in the virtual world.

Although the main focus of this thesis is consumption inside the virtual world, it is, however, interesting to mention that the consumption of SL avatars is not purely virtual and intangible:

The average Second Life avatar consumes about as much electricity as an average Brazilian meaning that although the avatars do not have physical bodies they still do leave footprints[26].

The consumption in the virtual world is as real as in the physical in the sense that people purchase goods and pay for services. Although the money spent for shoes or haircut in first and second lives are not adequate and the virtual goods and services do not have a physical utilization form, the fact itself shows the functioning economy in the Second Life.

As the discussion above shows, Second Life categorically is a place where consumption, although virtual, takes place and we continue revealing the phenomenon by asking how the social order denotes consuming online for an online purpose only.

1.1.4 Consumption and Self-identity

Consumerism, as in people purchasing goods or consuming materials in excess of their basic needs, became widespread over the 20th century[27]. The consumption today is much more than satisfaction of needs. It is based on satisfaction of personal desires, the necessity for self-expression and a wish to differentiate our selves from others by creating specific identity.

According to Douglas and Isherwood consumers attach symbolic meanings to goods and services, and the consumption of goods and services becomes a consumption of its meanings[28]. Coca Cola is one of the examples when the company does not just sell refreshing drinks, but rather a specific lifestyle attached to the product. The symbolic consumption helps the consumer to position and categorize him/her in society[29]. In the contemporary consumer society identity is constructed, rather than given and variable rather than fixed, thus, being in control of identity construction people shape it by consuming, i.e. the consumption of goods and services is an integral part of one's identity, both social and personal. Changing the goods we buy, wear and use to create our environment can be a way of changing who we are or pretend to be in the eyes of the other.

According to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption people consume to demonstrate their wealth[30]. This also indicates that consumers are aware of that specific consumption will

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[26] http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2006/12/avatars_consume.php (Retrieved on 2007-05-12, 1.02 p.m.)
[27] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism
[28] Corrigan, Peter (1997), *The Sociology of Consumption*. London: Sage (p.18)
[29] Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998) "Brands as symbolic recourses for the construction of identity", *International Journal of Advertising*, 17(2), 131-144
[30] Corrigan, Peter (1997), *The Sociology of Consumption*. London: Sage (p.21)

signal them being wealthy. In opposition, investigation of our own patterns of consumption and what meanings we attach to them might make our identity clearer to ourselves (who we are, who we wish to be and which group we identify as with). Paradoxically, we want to distinguish ourselves through consumption but at the same time to be linked to a group of similar consumers, which translates into the fact, that identifiable consumption is a key for being accepted in specific group or society.

Thus, the consumption whether of a product, brand or a meaning is a part of our identity's construction, which helps as to communicate to others who we are and who we are not.

As we tried to identify the reasons for virtual consumption in Second Life having fun and socializing appeared to be the major reasons. However, as Second Life makes one actually visible for others to scrutinize, the way you look, walk and fly start to really matter. People create their virtual selves from simple but personalized characters similar to the ones from cartoons to fully developed humanistic characters[31] (see chapter five for further representation of the avatars). Although different amounts of time and money are invested to create the online alter egos, it is extremely rare to encounter a person who does not do it at all.

There are enormous amounts of various details for self expression for sale online. And it is not only skin colour, type of clothes or style of haircut. In Second Life residents also buy the abilities and skills i.e. to breakdance or walk sexy. Just as in the physical world people are aware that some details of their appearance and behaviour might signal their specific believes, the class of society they belong to or a reason for interaction.

Based on the discussion above we strongly assume that the construction of identity is the reason for the millions of dollars and many hours being spent in Second Life daily. Although interacting and having fun might be the resident's motivation, and thus in order to commit to the fun aspect firstly, one has to be accepted and noticed by the people around.

We continue revealing the phenomenon of the virtual world by considering it as advanced way of escaping the reality.

1.1.5 Definition

The interpretation of the societal repositioning is being divided into the three foremost important subcategories with regards to escape from realism:

- Life without Internet
- Life with Internet
- Second Life

Research has been done on the nature and advancing of the Internet as well as the sociological character of the life before the Internet, and even Second Life is continuously kept under razor-sharp observation by the entire world.

Escaping the reality is not a new personal prerequisite. Taking a look back to pre historic society there are similar efforts to be identified; the early homo sapiens lived with the constant fight-or-flight stresses of survival and thus, they learned to rest in caves sitting by the

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[31] n.a. (2007) "Pick Of Tthe Month: Alter Ego Book", *Creative Review,* London (Apr 1), pg. 60

fire meditating[32]. Afterwards people started to immerse themselves in the worlds of fictional stories, symphonies and movies and ever since the Internet became popular in the 1990s the gaming, networking and interacting moved into cyberspace. The virtual communities came into play as time and place boundaries were dissolved and connected the people worldwide.

However, virtual worlds, such as Second Life, took a step further and provided a physical person with the possibility to become the personal creator of the specific world and the option to craft a virtual, customised projection of oneself (playing God). Very similar to dreaming, however, with intense awareness of the actions and the way it can affect the other members of the same society.

In connection, while reading a book everybody catches himself or herself missing a paragraph from time to time as they start daydreaming. However, the power of a virtual world is stronger as one fully immerses in it; nothing transpires around him/her (in a TV or person's fantasy) and the 'Onliner' is for the first time 'on' throughout the entire session. There is no time for the mind to relax as with TV, due to the fact that constantly YOU are walking around and interacting with people, much like strolling down highstreet on a Saturday forenoon.

The word "virtual" refers to situations almost the same as "real" and indicates a very near substitute. In this sense, the term "virtual reality" might be startling because it asserts that reality might take many forms – and this is what is actually happening! As we travel we enter different, foreign to us, geographical points that are all real. However, virtual can also be real as long as users identify with that particular world making it existential reality. As mentioned earlier there is something unambiguous and almost spiritual about leaving one world and entering another, i.e. a person from a virtual world feels discrepancy when returning to the primary world, which marks the 'physical presence' gap between the virtual and the biological bodies.[33]

The Internet connects millions of people in new space where the self and the rules of social interaction are built rather than received, and it is changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality (i.e. intimate relationship with someone one never met physically), the form of our communities and our very identities[34].

Imagine entering a parallel universe where you decide every detail of your identity and can start building a new life and the more you immerse in your second life the less real becomes your first. As time and space boundaries were already dissolved with the prior step in development will boundaries of identity be next?

Supported by the rationale of the above discussion, the thesis will strive towards answering following research question:

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[32] n.a. (1995) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: cultures of technological embodiment* edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, London: Sage, (article by M.Heim "The Design of Virtual Reality", *Theory, Culture & Society),* p. 69
[33] n.a. (1995) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: cultures of technological embodiment* edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, London: Sage, (article by M.Heim "The Design of Virtual Reality", *Theory, Culture & Society)* pp. 67-68
[34] Turkle, S. (1996) *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*, London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, pp. 9-10

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Chapter 2: Methodological Approach

This chapter provides a summary of the research methods utilised in this study, which aims to supporting the quest for answering the research question as discussed in the previous chapter. It is concentrated on the collection and reasoning for the implicated primary data, as secondary data is collected from various databases and is validated through peer-review.
This chapter aims to discuss the choice of data collection and reason for their significance for the question asked, in order to obtain the necessary information needed to carry out an competent analysis.

2.1 Approach

The research design will aim to answer the main research question through following set of sub-questions, as these are the essential uncertainties, which need to be deciphered for an optimal analysis to be carried out:

- Who inhabits SL?
- Why inhabit SL?
- Are the avatars of SL direct projections of the persons' alter egos?
- Does the avatar or the person behind control the interaction or is it enhanced by environment and societal norms?

These issues will be dealt with from an explorative point of view through qualitative methods.

2.2 Method

The aim of this study is to provide a snapshot of the existing scenario between the online and the offline worlds and hence make a broad generalisation based on qualitative data.

The primary empirical data was gathered in following order and will be described in detail and reasoned for subsequently:

- **Passive participant observance of active SL user**
  Observed interaction between the avatars will serve as an 'on-site interview' as well and the characters encountered will be briefly outlined.
- **15 Semi-structured qualitative interviews with SL avatars**
  The researchers in question will conduct on site interviews with different avatars across geographical boundaries)
- **Active participation in SL flowing from researching norms**
  As part of a magazine project in SL, the avatar used for the interviews undergoes a complete makeover initiated and controlled by the magazine's personal stylist.

When combining the qualitative data it is possible to evaluate the different types of interaction citizens in between and researcher to citizen and then comprehend whether any significant

deviation is revealed.[35] Furthermore, with the different settings in the online locale, it is possible to make a generalisation and comparison regarding the nature of reality and in that way validate the research through cross references.

Documentation of the empirical data, such as transcripts of interviews is available upon request.

2.2.1 Qualitative Study

Since this study is of an explorative character, i.e. it endeavours trying to understand the incentives for consuming and the different stakeholders connected, a qualitative study is the most suitable. Due to the complex phenomenon a knowledge generating approach is demanded and hence, the direct interviews with the avatars is the only justifiable entry point. As argued for by Easterby-Smith, face-to-face interviewing is a time consuming process, but however the best way to achieve a direct and elaborative answer to the questions asked.[36] In this case a positivistic approach with a loose framework for the questions, allowing flexibility and opinions to be explored and clarified. The given scenario requires a great deal of thought and consideration and demands confidence from the interviewee – this is attained though direct interaction on the terms provided by SL and the residents, i.e. all parties were free to walk away or log off whenever they felt uncomfortable. In connection, when communicating directly, it is possible to explore the clothes, inflection of voice and general appearance, which in this case customised the questions to each interviewee.[37] It is even more interesting when interviewing the projected ideal self of an individual, i.e. controls the facial expressions and pitch of voice through a monitor and a keyboard. For example, the most commonly used expression indicating that one is happy with the progress and feels pleased with the situation, is 'lol' (laugh a lot). When feelings are expressed through a secondary action, i.e. typing there are grounded reason for believing they are more genuine and thought-through, than merely a physical reaction which can be regretted few seconds later.

The research question opens up a extraordinarily demand for in dept understanding and to observe and act yourself as a researcher is the only way for providing a scrupulous societal depicting and hence, qualitative, explorative measures are required. The question 'what kind of consumer society' points at interacting data in the direction of a total embodiment of SL and the best way to capture requested quality is to start interacting on the given requisites.

Qualitative data gathered through social interaction will automatically be tainted by the circumstances the researcher and the interviewee are in.[38] However, when the avatars are "caught" in their natural environment, a minimum of stress and uneasiness is released and the 'home ground' ambience provides a serious platform for free speech and non-directed answers.

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[35] Bryman, A. & Bell, E (2003) *Business Research Methods,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 291
[36] Easterby-Smith M, et. Al. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction,* Sage Publications, London, 2nd Edition, p. 86
[37] Ibid, p. 86
[38] Ibid, p. 89

2.3 Method of Primary Data Collection

The above data collection methods have been chosen as a result of previous research experiences and the need for answering the considerable amount of sociological questions head to head.

Following two theoretical justifications depict in brief why they have been preferred as empirical foundation for the study.

2.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary idea behind using interviews with the practical moulders of the community in question is that they should act as supplements to each other as well as the other applied methods and supports the research with real-life examples with high certainty. Direct contact is often the only way to decode the complexity of human beings and interpret the answers,[39] as goes for ´real´ avatars.

The expectations are that the interviews should provide access to detailed and first-hand knowledge and theory. Due to the in-person interaction and informal disposition of interviews and case studies, the potential outcome involves direct access to the interviewee's identification with the question and personal evaluation of the matter. These issues cannot be achieved through journal studies.[40]

With the aim to come by informal and factual information, structured and straightforward questions have to be asked and hence, an open semi-directed interview technique[41], leaving opportunity for the interviewee to elaborate on details on own premises, is required.

The interviews functioned as an important part of a bigger framework, with a synergic effect and a generalisation context as end result.

As the majority of the actual citizens of Second Life are very intangible and secretive about their real life character, and the credibility of their answers are questionable due to the conflict of the researcher's role as a 'real figure' asking real questions and the online interviewee's acting out his alter ego, the validity and usability of answers could be doubted.

However, it all comes down to trust in the gathering of empirical material. In today's society we have absolutely no chance of judging any book by its cover in transferred meaning, i.e. the general public has developed a sociological reasoning about the nature of civilization, and why should these directives not apply online? Physical presence alone does not imply truth nor sincere answers, but by assuming the form of an equal citizen, visiting the territory on the same terms as the interviewed we believe the validity to be at least as high as in a real life interviewing scenario, or maybe even higher, due to the fact that the actual physical distance and the avatar itself serves as a shield against inappropriateness and the possibility to 'sign out' at any time amplifies willingness and openness, and hence a tranquil and honest environment is created.

When entering a new community acceptance, adaptation to the social order and unwritten rules are required and the synergic outcome should hence be a form of 'friendship'.

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[39] Easterby-Smith M, et. Al. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction,* Sage Publications, London, 2nd Edition, p. 87
[40] Ibid, chapter 5
[41] Bryman, A. & Bell, E, (2003) *Business Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 156

As Barbara A. Misztal emphasizes in her book *Trust in Modern Societies: The Search for the Bases of Social Order (1996)*:

> *"Friendship provides individuals with community, self-esteem, and*
> *a model for dealing with uncertainty. As social roles become less*
> *scripted and social networks become more heterogeneous, the informal,*
> *flexible, and voluntary relations that characterize friendship can*
> *be seen as the paradigmatic form of trust."*[42]

So, by questioning the surrounding environment, in form of assorted SL citizens with different motivations and desires for their presence in the online world, the research will be able to complete a picture of the phenomenon in question though accepted presence on the given terms and conditions.

2.3.2 Passive Participant Observance of Active SL User

To truly understand a community, it is unconditionally essential to join it and seek acceptance among the inhabitants. However, in this case the environment is potentially being manipulated by the researchers' presence and could disturb and taint the actual findings if they were left to stand-alone. This is why this thesis will validate its online interviews through the eyes of an already existing and active resident, familiar with the social norms of interactions.

By reflexively observing and asking open questions the researcher elevates him from directing the product and hence, acquire the unique opportunity to validate through the eyes of another.

However, the thesis will start with defining the nature of reality as it has been commonly accepted as true, and subsequently follow the development to the online status and the progression of a parallel consumption model.

2.3.3 Active Participation

The cross-validate the above we chose to involve ourselves more to the point of what is already visible and accepted among SL residents – the incentive was caused by the encounter of one interviewee who offered to incorporate our previously used avatar in accordance with the consumption patterns of SL with the purpose of uncovering the before and after effects from a visible physical alteration. A professional SL stylist selected the modifications in concurrence with her experiences with building a socially acceptable avatar through consumption of designer shapes, skins and hairdos.
The desired outcome was to observe, independent from the earlier responses to the researcher in a default avatar body, other peoples' reactions and willingness to interact, and whether these improved after a noticeable effort was applied.

This will provide first hand verification for the sub-question: is conspicuous consumption a necessity for annexation in SL to truly benefit from the present social opportunities.

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[42] Miztal, B. A. (1996) *Trust in Modern Societies: The Search for the Bases of Social Order*, Cambridge: Polity Press

2.4 Literature Review

For identification of a potential literature gap we focused on consumer literature by investigating the topics related to identity construction, self-concept, virtual reality and various sociological Internet topics. We are aware of the fact that the identity and self-concepts are widely discussed in sociology and psychology literature and did use such sources in our thesis. However, such literature is mainly concentrated on human's personality rather than considering a person as online consumer and thus, for defining the literature gap we decided to concentrate on the consumer research.

There is a significant amount of consumer literature devoted to the creation of identity through consumption in a physical world, most of it found in the Journal of Consumer Research. The construction of identity is done by possessions and activities that consumers love[43,44] or purchase of specific brands and creating self-brand connections[45]. By acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods people develop and enhance their personal and social identity as well as using it for stressing their uniqueness[46]. Consumption activities are significant to both maintenance and development of a stable, harmonious self-concept[47], however the consumption of specific goods might also be used to move between one cultural identity and another which emphasizes *"the dynamic and mutable nature of self, social identity, and cultural identification in global consumer culture"*[48]. Kozinets and Handelman have also contributed to the consumer's identity field by researching the collective identity of consumer movements' activists and discovered that it is linked to an evangelical identity related to U.S. activism's religious roots[49]. Some marketers started connecting the brand to specific social identity of interest that the consumer would identify with[50] and thus consume their brand.

Schau and Gilly researched the self-expression online by investigating personal websites as a conspicuous form of consumer self-presentation when identities are constructed by *"digitally associating themselves with signs, symbols, material objects, and places"*[51]. However, the personal website is a different kind of self-expression comparing to building yourself in a virtual world which is not yet uncovered by the consumer literature.

The consumer literature related to the Internet and online activities is mainly covering the e-commerce, shopping online[52], the E-Dating and how Internet influences human conscience

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[43] Ahuvia, A. C., (2005)"Beyond the Extended Self: Loved Objects and Consumers' Identity Narratives", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 32(1), p. 171

[44] Belk, R. W. (1988) "Possessions and the Extended Self", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 15(2), p.139

[45] Escalas, J. E. & Bettman, J. R., (2005) "Self-Construal, Reference Groups, and Brand Meaning", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 32(3), p. 378

[46] Kelly, T. T., William, O. B. & Gary, L. H. (2001) "Consumers' Need for Uniqueness: Scale Development and Validation", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 28(1), p. 50

[47] Schouten, J. W. (1991) "Selves in Transition: Symbolic Consumption in Personal Rites of Passage and Identity Reconstruction", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 17(4), p. 412

[48] Oswald, L. R. (1999) "Culture Swapping: Consumption and the Ethnogenesis of Middle-Class Haitian Immigrants", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 25(4), p. 303

[49] Kozinets, R. V. & Handelman, J. M. (2004) "Adversaries of Consumption: Consumer Movements, Activism, and Ideology", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 31(3), p. 691

[50] Reed, A. II, (2004) "Activating the Self-Importance of Consumer Selves: Exploring Identity Salience Effects on Judgments", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 31(2), p. 293

[51] Schau, H. J. & Gilly, M. C. (2003) "We Are What We Post? Self-Presentation in Personal Web Space", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 30(3), p. 385

[52] n.a. (1998) "Shopping goes online", *Consumer Reports,* Vol. 63(11), p. 18

and relationships[53], online shopping behaviour[54], engagement of customers to enjoyable online experience[55], website quality connection to purchase intention[56]. However, the main issue of our disclosed phenomena of Second Life is that people buy on the Internet for use IN the Internet rather than using the Internet as a tool for purchasing. Some early studies of the Internet have noted that online games and discussions groups could be viewed as a set of services that people consume[57]. Nevertheless, SL residents not only consume the virtual world as a platform but also purchase virtual goods and services inside the world, which do not exist in physical world and are only utilized in cyberspace.

According to Andrea Hemetsberger, consumers who engage in online collaboration construct, re-present, and create their Net self for self-realization rather then for others to view[58], however, we are not yet convinced that consuming in a virtual world is mainly for the purpose of realising yourself as socializing appears to be one of the main reasons for online identity creation through virtual consumption and needs further investigation.

As we have reviewed the consumer literature focusing on identity construction, self concept, and online activities (Internet) topics we identified a gap in connection with the construction of identity by consuming online for online use only. The key issue which strike us the most while taking a look at the Second Life is the walking and interacting alter egos, the identities separated from physical bodies floating in the cyberspace and paying money to consume virtual goods and services. It is nothing similar to a dating website where people create their profiles hoping to find a person interesting enough to meet in a physical world. Evidently, the money and time SL residents spend in construction of self from appearance details to the virtual houses they live in, is very much for the purpose of improving the virtual experience rather than having a goal to benefit oneself in the physical world.

2.5 Netnographic Positioning
[Theoretical and methodological approach]

Netnography is defined as ethnography adapted to the study of online communities.[59] This is an appropriate method for the study of sensitive research topics, which helps gaining deeper insights into consumers' opinions, motives, concerns and experiences[60]. By reading online-posted data researchers analyze consumers' discussions about various products, services, brands, events, etc. The previous netnographic studies were focused on the role of a virtual

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[53] Close, A. G. & George, M. Z. (2003) "Romance and the Internet: The E-Mergence of E-Dating", ", *Advances in Consumer Research,* Vol. 31, p. 153

[54] Hansen, T. (2006) "Determinants of consumers' repeat online buying of groceries", *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research,* Vol. 16(1), p. 93

[55] Mathwick, C. & Rigdon, E., (2004) "Play, Flow, and the Online Search Experience", *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 31(2), p. 330

[56] Soyoung,K. & Yuri, L. (2006) "Global online marketplace: a cross-cultural comparison of website quality", *International Journal of Consumer studies,* Vol. 30(6), p. 533

[57] Fischer, E., Bristor, J. & Gainer, B. (1996) "Creating or escaping community? An exploratory study of Internet consumers' behaviors", in Corfman, K.P. and Lynch, J. (Eds), *Advances in Consumer Research,* Vol. 23, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT, pp. 178-82.

[58] Hemetsberger, A. (2004) "Creative Cyborgs: How Consumers Use the Internet for Self-realization", *Advances in Consumer Research,* Vol. 32, p. 653

[59] Kozinets, R. V. (2002) "The field behind the screen: Using Netnography for marketing research in online communities", *Journal of Marketing Research,* Vol. 39(1), p. 61

[60] Langer R. & Beckman, S. C. (2005) "Sensitive research topics: netnography revisited", *Qualitative Market Research,* Vol. 8(2), p. 189

community in wedding planning[61], the power that a virtual brand community exerts over a brand of a mass-marketed convenience product[62], Internet Wrestling Community, its beliefs and attitudes about itself and its relationships with offline fans and the wrestling industry[63], differences between communities centred on brands and those centred on product categories[64] and such.

With the netnographic study in question we aim to investigate the nature of Second Life and the characteristics of a new online consumer society. As the studies described above are mainly focused on communities connected by something physical (product, brand) our research is concentrated on a community being connected by one virtual world, which is both a place for consumption and interactions. Moreover, the previous studies were focused on opinions, motives, concerns and experiences whereas this thesis will incorporate additional investigation of consumers' online self-expression. Thus, not only what people write is important but also the way they look and behave while being present in SL. In a different way than blogs, e-mails, home pages and entries on message boards, the researched person (i.e. his or her graphical representation) is visible to the researchers.

Second Life is relatively new phenomenon and very few studies have been done inside the actual virtual world. Although there are plenty of descriptive articles about SL and its interpretations (mainly concentrated on potential for marketers), we have only identified one scientific study of online behaviour and interactions of SL members that analysed the social behaviour and norms in virtual environments (concentrating on Second Life) collecting data by passive observation of avatars[65].

THEREFORE, our netnographic study aims to fill both the gap of literature on the online consumer in society SL and the netnographic gap in method for studying identity construction online.

Whereas the preceding research had a foremost theoretical angle and elaborated on the Second Life phenomenon, this thesis actively reveals the unwritten social norms in SL by interacting, observing and listening, which should add important contributions to the field of Netnography due to a more practical hands-on approach and direct, physical interaction with the (not just members) residents of the culture in question.

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[61] Nelson, M. R & Otnes, C. C. (2005) "Exploring cross-cultural ambivalence: a netnography of intercultural wedding message boards", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 58(1), p. 89

[62] Cova, B. & Pace, S. (2006) "Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment - the case "my Nutella The Community", *European Journal of Marketing,* Vol. 40 (9/10), p. 1087

[63] Weisberg, D. (2005) "Wrestling with the audience: Fan culture on the Internet", Dissertation, Northwestern University, p.1

[64] Haas, S. M. & Arnold, M. J. (2004) "Brand-Self Convergence: a Netnographic Investigation of Brand Communities", American Marketing Association, Conference Proceedings, Vol. 15, p.240

[65] Yee, N.; Bailenson, J. N.; Urbanek, M.; Chang, F. & Merget, D. (2007) "The Unbearable Likeness of Being Digital: The Persistence of Nonverbal Social Norms in Online Virtual Environments", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Vol. 10(1), pp. 115-121

Chapter 3: Transformation Of The Internet
From an identity-theoretical approach

Following chapter will describe the online possibilities for constructing a parallel reality and a new identity though the means provided by the Internet platform. This chapter aims to employ earlier studies conducted within the subject matter and to argue further for the cultural transformation of society.

There is a boundary between the online and offline phenomena, which will be pinpointed below and the overlapping of the two states of reality will be measured up to each other in terms of similarities and divergences. Taken as a whole, the online version of reality is becoming increasingly real to a vast amount of users, and is occupied in the same fashion as the offline reality, and this section will argue for why that is the case.

3.1 Offline is Reality?
[Characterization of community migration]

Reality is defined as "the state of things as they actually exist." [66] In this reality, we interact and co-exist, following unwritten rules of interaction and nothing has really changed in the past decades, the Internet besides.

Since the 1970's most visible initiatives for the social life is speed dating, running dinners, Halloween, Valentines day, bachelor parties, lambada dancing, corporate teambuilding, rave parties, role-playing in the forests and water pipes, but is this enough to keep folks entertained and continuously challenged?

Apparently no. Society is moving generously from analogue entertaining to digitised interaction. Whereas the Internet previous merely was a source of information version 2.0 is taking precedence over real interactions.

The physical space has drained its resources and options for expansion, and real world citizens are migrating to online communities and new territories, which are becoming increasingly real in every aspect, as regards to paying rent and taxes, receiving pay checks, dating, leisure consuming, etc.

The offline world still holds some obvious advantages, such as the ability to have sensation. Scent, taste, touch etc. can still not be translated into binary, but if the mind receives sufficient alternative inputs and draws a parallel to previous experiences, how important are these features in present reality? Moreover, can these feelings be aroused by an online reality? Absolutely, but this matter will be scrutinized in a following chapter.

Firstly, the word virtual can misleadingly be interpreted as being less tangible and real as physical civilizations[67], this is however wrong. Simply because the interaction has moved to the other side of the screen, the interactions and existence for participants are the same and thus, the impact and subsequent effects on consumer behaviour likewise.

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[66] Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Oxford University Press, 2005

[67] Kozinets, R. V. (2002) "The field behind the screen: Using Netnography for marketing research in online communities", *Journal of Marketing Research,* Vol. 39(1), pp. 61-72

The virtual world is being interchanged with an online 'real' version, and the online edition does not constrain itself in any manner; the latest 'version' of the Internet, branded Web 2.0, encourages everyone to change and help shaping the online environment via blogs, community participating, personal, interactive websites and shared dictionaries, which are just waiting for your personal definition of a chosen content. This exists and is far more real than the physical world in the sense of becoming an active participant, so the offline condition offers merely a physical requirement in form of eating (though, you can consume pizzas from Domino's in SL as well) and sleeping. The remaining of Maslow's pyramid can be accomplished online.

3.1.1 The New Communities

Is the Internet an extension of the current society or is it transforming the world, as we know it and creating a new social agenda, i.e. are the Onliners merely adapting to the modern society or are they establishing a new, parallel civilization?

Going back offline to search for the cause for the migration, one has to look at the development within society. That reality is harsh is commonly agreed, so the need for comfort and the search for equals to share the load with have always been a part of dealing with reality. Previous kinship was attained within ones own family, through religious gatherings or membership of voluntary associations or organizations however, with the progression of the general public it is difficult to continue the same course. The last couple of decades have been characterized by the decline of the traditional family unit. Both in correlation with the increase in effective birth control and the straightforward und accepted process of divorces. To have 8 brothers or sisters is a rarity nowadays, whereas single-person households are an accepted way of living. Furthermore, the disintegration of religious and social organizations and the greater labour mobility resulting in breaking of family and social ties due to geography has taking its toll on the sense of belonging and solidarity. People are forced into being more individualistic, and whereas some succeed, others are alienated due to social network and are destined 'loners'.[68]

The phenomenon of communal disintegration is becoming callous reality and the backlash is joining a community based on mutual passion for an object or occurrence.

'Communities' has become a buzzword, and the meaning blurred to the point of meaninglessness, and hence, it is almost unavoidable to be member of one or another community, whether this is the local community, the scientific community, the gay community, the urban community, the Harley Davidson community or even the international community.

The Internet provides a trouble-free platform for socializing and establishing friendships, with the advantage of 'logging off' whenever one has had enough. This provides an intriguing agenda for interaction, which will be explored in the following section.

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[68] Graham, G. (1999) *The Internet – a philosophical inquiry*, Routledge, London, p. 128

3.2 The Potential Of Being Online

The virtual world is a successful competitor to the physical one[69]. As mentioned before the Internet allows one to create a flawless alter ego and acting under a pseudonym, however, being intangible on the Internet possesses far more general opportunities than that.

With regards to the above community terminology, the Internet as whole can be labelled a subjective interest group in the broader sense of the Internet as a specific subject matter. If this is the case, one can further rationalise that the moral anarchy and radical individualism to be found online proposes a genuine challenge to the pursue of ones desires and values, i.e. what *you* want out of life, as already mentioned as a westernised ideal derived from self-realisation.

In her book Sherry Turkle argues that computer screens are the new location for our fantasies and that life on screen is used for becoming comfortable with new ways of thinking about politics, evolution, relationships, sexuality and identity[70].

From the first look Second Life might appear as a very democratic world where its residents create and rule their virtual anarchy. SL does not have laws and borders and people govern themselves without the help or control of any kind of local or national governments. However, it would be very naïve to expect endless tolerance towards each other and behaviour according to everyone else's expectations. Even in a virtual world. SL simply cannot be labelled democratic, as there are no elected leaders, representatives, mayors, judges, etc. Naturally, the lack of government (the power of everyone and no one) leads to an online anarchy.

Although, as mentioned before social interactions online are governed by the same social norms as in the physical world and in addition, in Second Life residents generate new ways of social interactions, i.e. It is often very dissimilar the way people greet each other and the forbearance towards having intimate relationships with complete strangers.

As regards to discrimination of sex, race, age, such data is determined by the creator of the online identity, and it IS possible, for example, to choose being unisex (transgender) to avoid any stereotypes attached to the sex. However, SL is not a paradise where everyone is equal and treated well. For example, some players of World of Warcraft do not accept other players into their group if they can't chat in perfect, unbroken English[71], and SL discriminates against those lacking skills or energy to customize their avatar.

3.2.1 Who Is Online?

A survey study of 30,000 multi-user online role-playing games players showed that the players are 26 year-old in average.[72] Naturally, most of players are from "net generation" described in the book by Don Tapscott. The "Net Generation" describes people who were born in 1970s, 1980s (the Boomers' children) and grew up in a digital environment,

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[69] Jenkins, P. S. (2004) "The Virtual World As A Company Town: Freedom Of Speech In Massively Multiple Online Role Playing Games", *Journal of Internet Law,* Vol. 8(1), p. 1

[70] Turkle, S. (1996) *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet,* London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, p.26

[71] http://www.edery.org/2006/01/discrimination-in-world-of-warcraft/ (Retrieved on 2007-05-13, 19.27)

[72] Yee, N. (2006) "The Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively-Multiuser Online Graphical Environments", *PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, Vol. 15, pp. 309-329

interacting on their computers, with various media, and with each other using their computers and the network. As Tapscott pointed out; rather than losing social skills, N-Geners are in fact developing these skills at an earlier age than their parent's generation.[73] As said by Turkle most of the dedicated players of multi-user domains are people who work all day with computers at their regular jobs, such as architects, secretaries, programmers, students and stockbrokers.[74]

According to the official website of Second Life 12 May 2007 most of its residents come from US (27%) and secondly Germany (14%), and the biggest proportion of users fall into the 25 to 34 year-old bracket (39%). In the beginning of the SL era 35% of the population were females, however, the percentage increased rapidly to 42%.[75] Although creating an account in SL does not include any control of provided information validity and the numbers cannot be taken as a pure fact it can, however, provide some understanding about who the Second Life inhabitants are.

As mentioned earlier, the even more intriguing question is what could be the initial motivation for entering a virtual reality?

3.2.2 Why Online?

People enter fantasy-themed online virtual worlds for a simple reason – hanging out with each other. As the conventional talks are usually based on small talks, in virtual worlds such as Second Life talking is secondary as it is all about sharing experience,[76] whether admiring birds in a virtual park or watching a concert of U2. There is no specific task that a resident categorically has to perform – neither killing a dragon nor eating in order to survive – it is all about expressing yourself and interacting with others. The computer technology made it possible for humans to escape their body when entering virtual worlds and hence, the body, requiring to be fed, washed and rested just gets in the way when being in a cyberspace.[77]

According to Mechthild Maczewski who explored the online experiences of youth, the on-ground (the physical, local) and the online (the virtual, global) realities can serve diverse purposes and needs and one is not necessarily better than the other[78]. The level of anonymity is one of the most important aspects separating the two: The Internet provides people with anonymous socializing place and a secure outlet for inner feelings[79]. As some academics say, *"being anonymous enables one to express oneself and behave in a way free of the expectations and constraints placed by the people one knows."*[80] The remainders are not yet convinced that the anonymity online in fact allows escaping embodied selves, the daily

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[73] Gerstner, J. (1999)"Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation", *Communication World,* Vol. 17(1)

[74] Turkle, S. (1996) *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet,* London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, p. 12

[75] http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php (Retrieved on 2007-05-12, 2.20 p.m.)

[76] Kushner, D. (2004) "My Avatar, My Self", *Technology Review*, Vol. 107(3), p. 52

[77] n.a. (1995) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: cultures of technological embodiment* edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, London: Sage, (article by D.Lupton "The Embodied Computer/User", *Theory, Culture & Society)* p. 76

[78] Mechthild, M. (2002) "Exploring Identities Through the Internet: Youth Experiences Online", *Child and Youth Care Forum,* Vol. 31(2), pp. 111-129

[79] Ookita, S. Y. & Tokuda, H. (2001) "A Virtual Therapeutic Environment with User Projective Agents", *CyberPsychology & Behavior,* Vol. 4(1), pp. 155-167

[80] Bargh, J. A., McKenna, K. Y. A. & Fitzsimons, G. M. (2002) "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the "True Self" on the Internet", *Journal of Social Issues,* Vol. 58(1), p. 35

expectations and norms[81]. Nevertheless, the anonymity liberates the persons to tolerate some aspect of their often "unreal" identity and a virtual identity or as Fowle calls it an "e-identity" can be used for reshaping the self to boost self-esteem or to change our impact on the others[82]. Perhaps stressing good qualities and hiding the bad ones is ordinary aspect of our daily representation of selves but virtual world makes it way much easier for such embellishment.

In relation, a study of Internet users' e-lifestyles was done on which motivations were present for commencing in online games. This was measured considering online games contents, commerce, community and communication and following four e-lifestyle types were identified: **Information-seeker, electronic purchaser, member of cyber society and fun-lover**.[83] (This will prove relevant for the categorisation in the user observation in chapter 5)

The motivations for being online differ in multitude, and over rationalised, sometimes one just needs a feeling of being connected with others in a specific space to produce a feeling of belonging to some kind of community. Would you stay offline while all the others are online?

3.3 Between Online And Offline

Entering a virtual reality people leave their bodies behind and construct their online forms and identities. The division between real and virtual worlds might appear as separation of what is real and not, however, behind the virtual world, there are real feelings, emotions, hopes and dreams[84]. Seeing a virtual pizza might provoke opening the real fridge and online attraction to another avatar might be the reason for a sleepless night. There is no strict boundary between real and virtual world and they are, in fact, just extensions of one another.

As Second Life functions more as a social space than a game, there are fewer incentives for its residents to maintain a strict boundary between real and virtual. The avatars are more likely to take a human form, perhaps even representing their offline appearance, and are investing time and money on avatars as the virtual representation can affect the user's real-world personal reputation.[85] Photo-journalist Robbie Cooper organized a photography exhibition of avatars' appearances from massively multi-player online role-playing games together with their offline looks and he noted that most of the times people's real lives were echoed in their digital alter egos in role-playing environments[86].

The self is not experienced as a fixed entity and exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time. From the role of lover to mother, from teacher to student – every time one can choose a dissimilar part in accordance to the position of others, the present environment and the purpose of interaction. The identity is not something rock steady as the individual is changing, growing and learning on a daily basis, and cyberspace merely opens the possibility for further identity play[87]. A study of identity construction in cyberspace illustrated that

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[81] n.a. (2006) "Virtual Worlds: Today And In The Future", *Business Credit,* Vol. 108(6), p. 57

[82] Fowle, M. (2006) "Interdentity: Belonging, Behaviour and Identity Online", *Telecommunications, AICT-ICIW '06. International Conference on Internet and Web Applications and Services,* pp. 1-6

[83] Kim, K. H., Park J. Y., Kim D. Y., Moon H. I. & Chun H. C. (2002) "E-lifestyle and motives to use online games", *Irish Marketing Review,* Vol. 15(2), pp. 71-77

[84] Scramaglia, R. (2002) "Love and the web", *European Review,* Vol. 10(3), pp. 317-338

[85] n.a. (2006) "Virtual Worlds: Today And In The Future", *Business Credit,* Vol. 108(6), p. 57

[86] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3683260.stm (Retrieved on 2007-04-04, 3.23 p.m.)

[87] Turkle, S. (1999)"Cyberspace and Identity", *Contemporary Sociology,* Vol. 28(6), pp. 643-648

identities are not a static characteristic of participants in virtual worlds but are negotiated through discourse in interaction, based on the context features and the roles assumed by the participants within the context[88].

Thus, the virtual identities and experiences are not separated from identities and experiences in the material, physical world and by shaping each other the identity develops.

3.3.1 Online Representation Of The Alter Ego

So what is so special about attaching a tail to one's self-representation in a virtual world? An avatar used in computer-mediated communication represents the user's self-identity and desire for self-disclosure and accordingly, self-disclosure is related to the extent to which a person expresses himself or herself to other people and telling the truth (whether good or bad) and self-identity is associated to how a person distinguishes himself or herself from the others. The primary purpose of a graphical self-representation serving these purposes is to build and reveal an identity for the sake of satisfactory communication in cyberspace.[89] Thus, by creating our virtual appearance we are considering the signals that the selected identity will send to the other people online.

The possibility for people to be what or whom they want in cyberspace makes it difficult to know whom the person under his or her graphical representation actually is. It complicates not only the work of researchers but also makes it difficult for the marketers to know whom actually to target. If I am a twenty years old female student pretending to be a 40 years old businessman whom should they actually target? P. Hemp suggests that online alter egos are more likely potential customers than their creators; the flesh-and-blood individuals.[90] In fact, it does make sense, as identifying the real identity hidden under a brilliant mask might be unlikely possible.

There is something additional about interacting by using avatars instead of exchanging text messages. The study of web-based retail showed that using an avatar to deliver product information leads to better consumer's satisfaction, more positive attitude toward the product and a greater purchase intention.[91] So, when shopping online we mainly miss the social interaction, the avatar may substitute the sales person and to some extent make the shopping experience more interpersonal. The same could be adapted to the interaction for the purpose of socializing itself.

Virtual images (from a picture of a virtual street or avatar) are unlike the images in a painting. As people online are interacting with such virtual entities and become entities themselves virtual images become reality. Cyberspace, being another layer of reality, is the place where

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[88] Talamo, A. & Ligorio, B. (2001) "Strategic Identities in Cyberspace", *CyberPsychology & Behavior,* Vol. 4(1), pp. 109-122

[89] Kang, H. S. & Yang, H. D. (2006) "The visual characteristics of avatars in computer-mediated communication: Comparison of Internet Relay Chat and Instant Messenger as of 2003", *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies,* Vol. 64(12) p. 1180

[90] Hemp, P. (2006) "Avatar-Based Marketing", *Harvard Business Review,* Vol. 84 (6), p. 48-57

[91] Holzwarth, M., Janiszewski, C. & Neumann M. M. (2006) "The Influence of Avatars on Online Consumer Shopping Behavior", *Journal of Marketing,* Vol. 70(4), p. 19

the transported entities meet and are present to one another although the physical bodies are left at distance.[92]

3.3.2 Being Online In An Offline World

The "virtual" and the "real" are not distinct spaces and rather than disconnecting people from each other the Internet can enhance social life and create new forms of connections and social exchanges. The power of virtual environments to implicate their users is extremely strong and can be compared to religious rituals and sacred dramas[93]. The transition from the cyber body to the primary body requires a decompression procedure so that will be no shock feeling when logging in or out and thus, there is a need for the user to bring attention back into the primary mind-body and to reintegrate the nervous system.[94]

The reconstruction of the self through a virtual reality indicates the highest risk in the human evolution, i.e. the virtual reality extends our senses and physical reach and transports our nervous systems into the electronic environment and loosing part of our selves, our health, our body-mind integration becomes the evidential problems.[95] The self can be multiplied without limit as one can play many characters in many games or virtual worlds and such experience can lead to better self-knowledge and personal growth. However, it is not always the case. Sometimes it can also entail people to get stuck in a space there in most cases is simpler than the real life and the retirement of characters is possible.[96]

The issue of identity manipulation can be a very negative Internet feature when the virtual performance manipulates the real world identity. One of the most obvious examples of the negative consequences is the way manipulation of identity can make cyberspace a dangerous place, particularly for children when adults act as if they were minors in order to befriend and possibly exploit those children.[97]

Virtual world interactions can cause various illnesses ranging from net addiction to techno stress, as well as online personality disorders and conflicts in multiple identities that exist in the virtual world[98]. Considering online suicide pacts of five Koreans and nine Japanese in 2004 and continuous terrorism, rapes and violence attributed to the Internet[99] there are obvious consequences of online interactions transferred to the offline actuality.

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[92] n.a. (1995) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: cultures of technological embodiment* edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, London: Sage, (article by M.Heim "The Design of Virtual Reality",*Theory, Culture & Society)* p. 70

[93] Ibid, pp. 67-68

[94] Ibid, p. 76

[95] Ibid, p. 75

[96] Turkle, S. (1996) *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*, London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, p. 185

[97] Simpson, B. "Identity Manipulation in Cyberspace as a Leisure Option: Play and the Exploration of Self", *Information & Communications Technology Law*, Vol. 14(2), p. 115

[98] Ookita, S. Y. & Tokuda, H. (2001) "A Virtual Therapeutic Environment with User Projective Agents", *CyberPsychology & Behavior,* Vol. 4(1), pp. 155-167

[99] Fowle, M. (2006) "Interdentity: Belonging, Behaviour and Identity Online", *Telecommunications, AICT-ICIW '06. International Conference on Internet and Web Applications and Services,* pp. 1-6

3.4 Identity And Self

Before representing the collected empirical data and its analysis it is important to understand the concepts of "self" and "identity" which is one of the main focuses when observing and interviewing inside SL.

The concept of 'self' highlights the reflective and reflexive ability of human beings to consider themselves objects through the eyes of others[100]. Thus, if I see myself as an honest person it is also what I think others think about me. Most of the theories on the 'self' have three main aspects – **reflection, embodiment and social relationships**. Firstly, being a 'self' means having the self-consciousness and being able to reflect upon our identities, actions and relationships with others. Secondly, the 'self' is defined by embodiment, thus there is no free-floating consciousness. Final aspect refers to the notion of the 'self' as a historical product of society and that the 'self' is always situated within social relationships.[101] According to Mark R. Leary "self" is used in so many different ways that it is difficult to know what a particular writer means by it and suggests to everyone who writes about the actual 'self' to select and define their terms carefully. But he also notes that although used differently the 'self' is connected to the processes that underlie the capacity for self-awareness, self-representation, and self-regulation.[102] Morris Rosenberg has as well distinguished the extant 'self' (our picture of what we are like), the desired self (what we would like to be like) and the representing self (the way we present ourselves in a given situation).[103]

The identity-concept derived from the Latin root *idem* implying sameness and continuity and came into popular usage in the twentieth century.[104] However, most of the dictionaries of sociology up until the 1980s did not describe "identity" as an individual concept. The idea of human beings having an identity or identities, which "*are assumed to be socially constructed and hence, invented, replaced previous notions of character, which signified individual fixed and permanent attributes*" [105]. Defining identity very much started with Freud's theory of identification (child assimilates external persons or objects) and later speculations emerged from the theory of the 'self' discussed by William James and George Herbert Mead who perceive 'self' as a process with two phases – "I", which is inner, subjective, creative, unknowable and "me" which is the more known, outer, determined and social phase.[106] The identity is formed out of conversation between others and us and is like a narrative about the self and related communities that has to be constantly retold and reformulated as the circumstances change. As the human's identity might affect the community there are also institutions for regulation and monitoring of identities (from prisons to the education system).[107] Through identification we place ourselves in socially constructed categories and understand who and what we are by interpreting the various meaning attached to us by others and ourselves. The personal identity refers to the identity reflecting the parts of one's self-

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[100] *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Bryan S. Turner, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 277 (by Nick Stevenson)
[101] Ibid, p. 544 (by Bryan S. Turner)
[102] Leary, M. R. (2004) "Editorial: What Is the Self? A Plea for Clarity", *Self and Identity,* Vol. 3(1), pp.1-3
[103] *A Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Gordon Marshall, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 294
[104] Ibid, p. 589
[105] *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Bryan S. Turner, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 277 (by Nick Stevenson)
[106] *A Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Gordon Marshall, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 294
[107] *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Bryan S. Turner, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 277 (by Nick Stevenson)

definition connected to personality traits, physical attributes, interpersonal styles and the like.[108]

Although the concept of identity is still not clear and sometimes is used as a synonym for ego or the self concept, it mainly refers to one's sense of self, his or her feelings and ideas about himself or herself, which, again, are shaped by expectations attached to the specific role one takes[109]. The socio-identities are never fixed and they keep developing, growing and changing affected by people and events, real and symbolic[110].

Collective identity is being characteristics by a group and concerns cognitions, values or symbols shared by members of that group. Thus, belonging to more than one group means sharing different collective identities. At the individual level, collective identity appears as a social identity that based on context might make individual act as a member of a group rather as a unique individual. Identity is a dynamic concept with unanswered questions why and how the one identity rather than the other become salient.[111]

3.5 Chapter 3 in 1
[Preliminary findings from chapter 3]

Consecutively, to answer our research question we have reviewed the related literature concentrating on how being online affects our identities and consumption (in the virtual world). As we looked at previous research the Internet is mainly scrutinised from two perspectives: As a tool for e-shopping (from collecting information to paying online) and as a space for gaming and interacting. In our research we consider the Internet, or SL to be more precise, as a place for socializing, sharing the experience and creating one's alter ego separated from the real, physical world.

Looking at our thesis as a whole the theory review led us not only to disclosure of the applicable topics to our study but also to the more precise and appropriate performance of the empirical data collection.

By reviewing the consumer literature we have identified the role of consumption as being a significant part of the identity construction. However, previous research is carried out as a balance between online and offline, i.e. people drive Harley Davidson motorcycles to represent their life styles and their selves in real life and, what similar online activities are there? We have, on the other hand, focused on the inside of the computer monitor in order to identify any signs on identity construction through consumption online FOR online use and the main reasons for having a virtual life.

The literature exploring the Internet illustrated the migration of society to virtual reality for expressing oneself (from creating a personal website to attention-grabbing avatar) and interacting (whether by e-mails, chat or gaming) reasons. As we questioned the concept of "virtual" in the case, there were significant signs of virtual being much more than a near

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[108] *The Social Science Encyclopedia* edited by Adam Kuper & Jessica Kuper, 1996, p. 789

[109] *A Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Gordon Marshall, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 589

[110] Babad, E.Y, Birnbaum, M. & Benne, K.D. (1983) *The Social Self*, Sage Publications, Inc., Beverly Hills, p. 70

[111] *The International Handbook of Sociology* (edited by Quah, S.R & Sales, A.), SAGE Publications Ltd., London, 2000, pp. 245-246 (chapter "Social movements: trends and turns" by Bert Klandermans)

substitute for real. Moreover, we illustrated how the virtual one in both the sense of developing and causing harm can affect the offline identity. We identified literature showing real and virtual worlds being extensions of one another, however, considering the virtual consumption in SL it appeared that some activities could only exist in a virtual life, for the benefit of virtual experience. The potential and advantage of being online is very much focused on being anonymous (in reality), having the power of creating whom you are, expressing yourself in a more free way and thus, escaping the real world.
.

To get an in depth understanding of identity we have investigated what the identity and 'self' actually means in an SL context and what the role of the avatar is as an online representation of one's self. The identity and self-concepts are focused on the way we see our selves and the avatar is a tool for revealing the identity.

With this summary in mind, the next chapter will provide some more tangible examples of identity creation and online consumption.

Chapter 4: Primary Data

This chapter will describe the primary data collection in an epic style, as the material gathered demanded a vastly imaginative and hands-off approach due to the fact that all information was gathered outside this world, on the terms of a parallel culture.

The section will commence with an epic user observation, which should be perceived as a snapshot scenario of the given analytical foundation. It will continue with describing the physical approach for obtaining the interviews and end with the researcher's own experiences as an individual residing in SL for all other reasons than writing a thesis. The chapter will be divided by some temporary findings, which will be finally utilised in the next chapter's findings and contributions.

4.1 User Observation

Observation of MRH (real name known to the authors) aka Mads Papp on www.secondlife.com, Sunday 8.4.2007, login 20:29, logout 22:30

In order to unveil the unaffected activities inside a given community, the key is found within its users as regards to undisturbed interaction and open behaviour study.

When following observation was carried out, the goal was to passively monitor how first contact was initiated and how the relationship progressed from there. Furthermore, the observer was hoping for a deeper understanding of how the colourful avatars were created in relation to real life appearance and why the specific features were chosen in preference to other. Additionally, the expectations were to run into some relatively colourful characters, where contact normally would be avoided due to physical dissimilarity and prejudices regarding the nature of origin.

Does online civilizations shun colourful characters in the same way as the physical world, or does it in fact, encourage avatars to stand out to be noticed?

MRH (full name known by authors), aged 26, is a male graphic designer for a major Danish communication agency and has vast experience with utilising the Internet and its various possibilities. He has been actively involved in SL since February 2007 and visits the virtual world several times per week. MRH says that a newspaper article regarding a female real estate agent employing 34 persons in SL aroused his interest and encouraged his first visit, but that he was aware of its presence about a year earlier. His primary motive for joining SL was curiosity, but with time his mere presence advanced into a three-dimensional chat room, spurred by the fascination for encountering new 'people' and questioning the creativity that lies behind every costume and the seemingly useless consumption of various add-on gadgets.

Fortunately for this observation, MRH is himself an explorative and critical person, which allows the observer to remain passive and silent throughout the session.

In First Life, the observed looks like an ordinary individual in his mid-twenties, normal height and weight, wearing a hooded sweater, blue jeans and day-old stubbles. However, in SL, Mads Papp is bow-legged, the lowest possible height, the maximum amount of weight,

wearing a skin-coloured waistcoat from nervous velour and flared trousers from colourful shower curtain - and brown sandals. When asked about the appearance of his alter ego, he replies that from the many options given, this was the most comical, and that it is a counter reaction to all the physically flawless characters residing in SL. Nevertheless, Mads Papp is still a male human, even though the opposite sex and several animalistic features are available. Moreover, when asked why he has not taken fully advantage of the feature list with regards to maximizing or minimising all physical features, such as the length of earlobes and width of his nose – and maybe spice it up with a woolly tail and a new gender, he was unable to provide a feasible explanation.

So does subconscious First Life norms have a say, even for the self-respect of hobby users in a fictional universe where everything is possible?

Mads Papp has the Danish 'Ungdomshus'[112] as his default point of entry to SL. The reason for that particular geographical selection is previous positive experiences with talkative characters, whereas other locations sometimes accommodate more closed societies, where groups from real life meet to talk about real-life experiences, go to concerts together, play battle simulator games, etc.

When entering the Ungdomshus, the scenario comes across much like the now demolished physical house, with graffiti tags and slogans on the walls and dark, gothic music in the background. The major difference manifests itself in the smoking zebra-striped goat and the bible in the corner blowing soap bubbles.

One other character is present at his time of entry; MVSD (abbreviation used, but full name known by authors), a tall punk-looking male, with spiky black hair, purple pants, chains and multiple piercings. Mads Papp approaches him and presses the 'muscle' button, which sets a series of bodybuilder-movements in motion. Mads explains that this usually accelerates the process of initial contact and as expected the other character replies by break-dancing on the floor. Contact has been accepted.

Mads Papp commences the conversation by asking who the other character is (in SL or in real-life?), and after a few mutual amusing comments on each other's choice of outfitting, the conversation progresses to comprehend real-life associations, such as occupation, number and frequency of visits, and what activities are preferred. During the conversation Mads Papp flies around inside the house, meditating in one corner and trying out different sitting options in the sofa corner (Cuddle/snuggle/ sit Indian style, etc.)

Mads Papp asks him how his chosen SL appearance complies with his real-life look and MVSD answers that he is a middle-aged man, working as a radio technician but that he used to cultivate the punk culture when he was young, which emphasises the reason for his presence in Ungdomshuset and the chosen look. He explains that he is active in SL every day and that he primarily uses it for going out with his friends, listening to concerts and just letting out some steam, without having to move from his home. Mads Papp asks him whether he normally approach strangers and why, and to that he replies that he usually encounters lots of interesting characters when going out in SL and that the motivation simply is to meet people *(which seems a whole lot easier in SL, compared to the observer's personal experiences with the contact process of Ungdomshuset)*.

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[112] http://www.thatswhy.dk/ (Ungdomshuset was a sanctuary for youngsters in Copenhagen until demolished in 2007 due to political hypocrisy)

Mads Papp leaves Ungdomshuset, and starts looking for a music venue recommended by MVSD. Flying there, he is telling about his dislike to all the different merchandise offered for sale in SL. He clarifies that all the garments are crammed with tacky prints (such as marijuana leaves and familiar brand-fonts spelling out something 'creative', for example ADIHASH) and political statements. He claims that the porn industry already has taken over the majority of the community and that everywhere you turn, there are ads and stuff to buy. He recalls one time where he accidentally brushed a poster hanging on the wall where after the order immediately was confirmed by a subsequent telegram to his real-life email address. He addresses this as an important aspect for the future development of SL.

All of the sudden he chooses to make a pit stop in Naughty Thoughts (predominantly for the pleasure of the observer he emphasises), which is a social establishment with a fetish theme. He immediately addresses a female character (MBB) with a hello followed by his customary muscle show-off. This proves an efficient icebreaker for the second time, as the approached replies with 'bravo' and Mads Papp goes straight to enquiring about her outfitting and what she is doing here. The character is dressed in a tight, black latex suit with a grey, firm plait down to her lower back and bright red lips. She admits enthusiastically that she dresses the same in real-life, that it is her first time in SL and that she just wants to look around some more.

When I ask Mads Papp why he chose to interact with her in specific he replies, "just for fun" – "and because his last encounter was with a (seemingly) male character." When asked whether he assumes that the person behind the avatar really is female he hesitates, and answers that in this case he really hopes so, but normally it is with some reluctance. And as he stresses, animals talk too and that it is reasonably difficult to distinguish whether it is a female squirrel or opposite.

Mads Papp leaves the club and flies around for a bit, whereupon he claims that he is lost. He checks out his virtual map and transforms himself to the closest region with most activity. He approaches a group of people 'speaking' on a street corner and tries to make himself heard through the stream of inside-conversation. Mads Papp makes a comment about why they all wear guns and weapons and whether he is in danger of getting shot? He points out the fact that all characters in the group are wearing a lot of extraordinary clothing, and several even have tattoos and sunglasses with familiar brand-logos on the side. Finally, someone replies Mads Papp and explains that he is in a battle simulator, and that he cannot get shot unless he purchases a 'CCS' pack from a computer on the wall. Mads Papp tries to walk in front of the bullets anyway, but nothing happens and the other characters start ignoring him, returning to their conversation about attack strategies, which syndicates are currently recruiting, etc. It seems like they are meeting regularly.

Mads Papp is getting tired and wants to log off for today. And so do MRH and the observer.

4.1.1 Temporary Findings

This was the observer's first encounter with SL, and he was truly bedazzled. Even though the graphic was a bit slow and grainy the message came across unmistakably.

When accumulating what was witnessed in the above session we have encountered four types of SL users (without generalisation of entire user base):

1. **The pastime user** (Mads Papp): Chooses avatar appearance just for kicks. However, by signalling no apparent affiliation, risk being excluded from particularly dedicated societies and therefore, has to win friends by 'flexing' his muscles, i.e. humor, followed by eloquence. Nevertheless, even though this specific user was an overweight colourful character, the maximum amount of features has not been fully utilised, i.e. with regards to the pure 'I don't give a damn' guise. He chooses the same gender, race and seems true to his real-life person in choice of wording and subjects.

2. **The sideline user** (MBB): Chooses avatar to exhibit her belief and signal belonging, but otherwise has similarities to the pastime user. The major difference lies within the fact that by already belonging to a group of minority players with a taboo leisure pursuit, the need for fellow companions and acknowledgement is higher than for the pastime user. The sideline user seeks users with the same interest, and enjoys a liberal, transparent platform where everyone can instantly comprehend and act on the signaled message. The sideline user plays a game in reality and seeks to transfer this game to a committed community, without receiving judgment from a conservative social order.

3. **The using user** (MVSD): Living out his inner rebel in real-life time and settings. This user utilises his alter ego to revive bygone days, while his real-life persona has settled for the grown-up life. This user is enthusiastic about the communication possibilities and seeks kinfolks to interact with. Though, he is aware of his real-self masquerade, but chooses to take advantage of SL to liberate himself from trivial reality. *(By far the most interesting user)*

4. **The neo-gaming generation** (group of battle simulator contestants): These users are only present in SL due to the presence of game simulators. They come from various gaming backgrounds and are not interested in communicating with outsiders. They spend large sums of money on supplementary equipment and status symbols, and expect no less from their fellow gamers.

These can be counterbalanced with the four e-lifestyle types identified in chapter 3: **Information-seeker, electronic purchaser, member of cyber society and fun-lover.**

To prove whether these presumptions are impermeable, the researchers in question will relocate themselves to pursue the role as interviewers in the Second Life.

4.2 We are ONLINE!

> *"AK: If you can imagine it--or if you can't, it's here."*
>
> *"BT: Sex brought the people - people brought the businesses - businesses brought the money ...and in the end money makes the grid go round"*
> **Quote: Interview Extract**

To attain a complete picture and understanding of the cyber society in question we decided to go online ourselves. So under the pseudonym 'Janus Janus', a number of interviews with random avatars were conducted across geographical sectors in SL on the conviction that this

is the closest one can come to the utopian society – joining, observing and asking. (The outcome: More than 100 pages of transcript history)

"Janus, was a two-headed god of gates, doors, beginnings and endings in Roman mythology, and this subterranean ideology was what inspired the name of Janus Janus: The forward-looking face representing the side of a researcher scrutinizing a contemporary parallel society, whereas the backward one was his real life ego indicating the individual behind every avatar's chosen identity in SL."

Over a period of one months Janus Janus was online almost every second night, and not every time was as productive as the other, but in retrospect the membership proved crucial for the in dept analysis.

With the intent to spend nothing and still look for acceptance among the almost 6 million inhabitants, (13 May 2007) Janus Janus took the identity of a real life master student, with nothing to offer except honesty, genuine interest and the linguistic capability to communicate across languages, i.e. the referred-to interviews were conducted in Danish, English and German, but will, however, all carry the researchers personal English translation if quoted in any manner. All quotations will be assigned with an abbreviation of the complete avatar name from SL name, which is known to the authors.

To present the findings of the gathered empirical material, one has to first set the scenario and try to expose the social practices while depicting the surroundings, so following will provide a brief presentation of what to expect when entering Second Life:

4.2.1 Entering SL

The first barrier to enter occurred already when trying to log in, as the PC available did not have the sufficient power to run the program. Secondly, as soon as equipped with an up-to-date silvery laptop and login was accomplished, the next step was to 'qualify' for entering the 'real' Second Life: To prove that you are worthy and possess adequate technical understanding, you are to begin with restricted to a 'practice island' where certain tasks have to be carried out in order to proceed.

Already at this point the first couple of hours were wasted and one can only speculate how many potential SL immigrants gave up during the gruelling quest for entering the consecrated grounds…

However, after understanding and completing the different missions, one were allowed to advance into the platform, where the only subsequent problems were caused by a slow response and stuttering graphic – despite the fact that the equipment utilised was purchased for 3000 Euros four months ago!

The first impression of the Second Life ambience were quite enjoyable and brought associations to various gaming platforms; i.e. a real life scenario made up by state-of-the-art buildings, palm trees, rolling waves (he started in Barcelona) and so forth. The users are equipped with an interactive map that shows you the densest amount of people present in your area and the ability to search for names of places or popular events. If not in close proximity one can teleport oneself closer or simply fly there… To judge from first impression, the key

areas of interest and the heaviest industries represented seem to be sex, nude beaches and dance halls.

The intention to achieve as broad a picture as possible while preserving the qualitative approach, took Janus Janus around the world several times, from Barcelona to Denmark to a Hara Krishna temple in Nepal, a prevailing Dutch community and everything in between - and the only incentive for the next location was the interviewees' recommendations.

One notion is to act as reporter or researcher, and the findings will surely be affected thereby. Another perception is to liberate oneself from the given framework and start commencing in a serious relationship with the society in question. Our main idea was that this would provide absolute purified material, when acting, not under cover, but merely wide open to whatever is offered. Of course this was not possible as neither one of the authors knew how to advance Janus Janus to the normal SL beauty ideals – luckily the random search for interesting people paid off and a mutual partnership was made with an online magazine…

4.3 Five Hours Of Blue

> *"A: what is the single most important bit of advice for the avi (avatar, edited) trying to find its unique identity?*
> *M: Well...*
> *K: Get a good shape, good skin and good hair*
> *M: But find your own style, and change combinations to suit you*
> *K: Like they say, your avatar is your highest form of expression in SL so make it look good."*
> **Quote: Legendary design and advertising duo in SL** (interviewed by 'FOR the love of MEN' magazine)

On his random quest for interesting people, Janus stumbled upon the editor for a recently published SL magazine called 'FOR the love of MEN', run by AH and his partner Blue. The magazine deals primarily with SL manifestation issues and recommendations for how to pull off a socially accepted avatar by interviewing subject specialists and providing useful insider tips for the 'newbies'.

AH offered Janus the opportunity to follow the stylist Blue around one evening to get the pretty standard-looking avatar up to the latest subjective trend, and in return Janus should pose on before and after photos, taken in their fancy-looking studio with an ocean view.
The outcome should be an article on Janus in the June issue on how to differentiate yourself from the crowd without being a technical genius – and the subsequent effects such a makeover would have on the presence in SL and the interaction with the other flawless characters. (**See appendix 1 for article draft provided by Janus**)

Janus gladly agreed, as this was seamless empirical material for the thesis he himself emerged from, and a unique opportunity to observe how and why the avatars look the way they do, with a professional by his side to provide guidance and inside knowledge on what is hot and what is not.

After the before photos were taken by Blue, they left for a club to mingle with some of her anatomically correct acquaintances, for Janus to get some inspiration, and after half an hour of small talk we continued to a shape-shop to search for the perfect shape. Blue proved surprisingly interested in my RL anatomy, and based the final purchase on my real life information about height, stoutness, colour of skin and hair etc. – Together they decided to go with the blond 'Hugh' shape from GB – designed by the earlier quoted design duo. Apparently the only option was to be vastly muscular or extremely beefy and Hugh was somewhat in between. Cost, 1500 Linden dollars (268LD: 1USD). Immediately after the new shape was worn we progressed to another shop selling various skin types, and again Blue was considering real life information and compared this to the recommendations from the designers of the shape. She decided to go with a semi-tanned with new facial hairs to 1000 Linden Dollars – and admitted, the change was remarkable; Janus went from being a shabby-looking sock puppet to assume an almost human character. Final step was a hairdo, which Blue picked out without much hesitation; a blond half-long untamed do that moves in the wind (!) when you walk. Cost, LD 300.

This was the last step and Janus and Blue teleported themselves back to the studio, to customise the purchased items and shoot the after pictures.

Before and after pictures (not from the studio though):

Default Janus Janus dancing in a discotheque   **Jan after his makeover by Blue**

After the last pictures, Blue proposed some insider recommendations for Janus' approach and progression in SL:

> *"Blue: I think we have completed our mission*
> *Blue: now I would suggest when you meet people*
> *Blue: you introduce yourself as Jan*
> *You: just Jan?*

Blue: yes
Blue: like i go as Blue
You: got it :-)
Blue: has to do with recognition"

Subsequent Blue suggested Jan to revisit the places he encountered earlier and report back whether the reception was any different now he looks like an 11 USD worth anime, and not just a nosy default character.

The above could be mistaken for being an easy, effortless process, but the truth is that it lasted 5 hours of intense work in front of the screen, including the computer and SL platform crashing. The total cost for a new appearance was 2800 Linden Dollars*, which translates into USD 11,2 not including the five hours of labour for a professional SL stylist.
*Expenses paid in full by the 'FOR the love of MEN' magazine.

4.3.1 Temporary Findings

To judge from the above session with an experienced SL working resident, the first impression counts in SL as well as it does in real life, and to fully benefit from the world one needs to attain an intriguing and appealing outside. This should smoothen the entry to the society and break the ice when engaging in interaction.

Janus decided to revisit the same geographical places as before Jan was born and it DID prove a somewhat different experience. However, this time the researcher in him was secondary and the avatar took on a personality of its own as Jan, the good-looking designer puppet with shape, skin and hair amounting to the astronomical cost of 11 USD.

In accordance with Jan's earlier experiences grounded in his explorative quest across sectors in SL, he has distinguished the differences from place to place, as a degree of talkativeness and physical involvement in the creation of avatars – some areas, as in real life, are dominated by residents harvesting the fruits of hedonism acquiescence and the validity of the fact that money indeed can buy beauty – and with the significant buying power and favourable Linden dollar exchange rate, everybody has the opportunity to achieve a relatively flawless character (with room for personal adjustments) for a few bucks.

Now, Jan tried the same approach as during the preceding research, i.e. jostling around, contacting whomever seemed interesting (that itself is a pretty superficial standpoint even for a not-working scholar). The primary difference from the time of scrawny Janus Janus was the point of initial contact – whereas before when Janus was forced to commence every conversation with the fact that is was in the interest of science he disturbed the harmony, currently more avatars came to Jan and initiated a conversation or simply asked questions such as 'where to buy decent clothes', good clubs, etc. He felt accepted. This observation had the same outcome throughout various places, disregarding the fact that some wee more physical manifested than others, i.e. places to be seen and display your latest adjustments and purchases.

If the intention was to overcome the natural reluctance to interact with anybody who looks different or less engaged in the unwritten rules of the "game"(i.e. you could at least spend time outfitting yourself, lazy bastard – we are trying to build a civilization here), the goal was achieved.

The primary aspect of the makeover is the obvious appreciation of hedonism – you automatically move up the hierarchy when the outfitting is not bewildering the eye, i.e. much like the discotheque culture of real life, to observe and be observed. Creating an identity through objectification is the key to SL – awareness and interest are spurred by this among the citizens, so although you are a nice eloquent person, your physique or anxiety for social rejection keeps you from interacting in public in RL – this aspect can be removed in SL.

The monitor provides a shield that buffers initiatives and freedom – everybody can merely log off if it gets too personal for individual comfort - and to the extracurricular amusing aspects; everybody can dance – be normal – be accepted, i.e. RL prejudices are diminishing and your ideal self projection is liberated from time and place, enabling you to start building your own personal network of beautiful friends.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Findings

We have decided to divide the findings into following themes, describing the major areas of differences in between SL and RL. Following themes and findings are deducted from the user observation, the 15 interviews with various avatars and the researcher's own experiences as Jan (chapter 4) and, furthermore, will incorporate the secondary data from chapter 3, to form a theoretical aloofness from already written studies and contributions to it.

However, firstly the most important differences between the consumption arena in real life differs from the one in Second Life, as regards to supporting the research question.

5.1 Consumption On Both Sides Of The Monitor

The term of consumer society describes human society strongly influenced by consumerism[113] when people regularly buy new, mainly not essential goods, and put a high value on owning many things[114].

Although no thorough empirical study on real life consumerism was carried out, as this is secondary to our research question, following findings were based on common logics and will define the differences between real and virtual consumer societies.

First of all, as mentioned earlier, in Second Life the residents are skipping the first steps of Maslow's hierarchy and are concentrating on satisfying the more hedonistic needs for belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation. So in correlation to the given question, how does this affect a society, when all consumption is based on egocentric principles and the need for proper display? Naturally, as people do not need to waste time eating and sleeping, the time online is dedicated to the pure creation of an ideal self and interactions with other equally engaged residents. As everyone is aware of the given possibility to create a unique, eye-catching avatar, failing to do so closes the door to some aspects of SL. Thus, lack of money or inborn personal qualities does not work as justification for failure in a world where everything is possible and right at hand.

So what differs the SL version of a consumer society from the RL one? Firstly, in the virtual world every resident has a momentous purchasing power, which boosts consumption significantly. Even give-away products (freebies), which can be customized to fit your personal requirements, are in high course. The consumed products and services might seem meaningless for the physical life and the same product can have a different function in the two worlds, i.e. although SL residents eat on-site hamburgers or pizzas (virtual ones) the intended function of the product has nothing to do with taking the edge off one's hunger, but acts merely as a social buffer.

The relationships are often built on the same interest or mutual attraction. Consumption is one of the ways to connect with other members of society both in RL and SL (e.g. watching a concert [paradox; watching sound] or using Macintosh). Second Life has a benefit of

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[113] http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-consumer-society.htm (Retrieved on 2007-05-22, 3.20 p.m.)
[114] http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=16561&dict=CALD (Retrieved on 2007-05-22, 3.23 p.m.)

interacting privately in a public place (what you write can only be seen by the message receiver) and to comment on another's appearance is often an easy way to start a conversation with a stranger. Meeting people and building a relationship is less stressful in the SL where one is protected by his mask and has a log off button.

Are the members of the SL consumer society more evenly balanced than those of the real life? Naturally, if one has computer access he can become a Second Life resident, and he can spare $11 for purchasing his appearance (which our researched proved to be enough to create a socially accepted avatar), he has a genuine change of obtaining a good life as well. There is no discrimination for entering the virtual world and the inside world discrimination is mainly based on failed self-expression rather then race, class, occupation, gender and age – the unavoidably characteristics of any person in Real Life.

Constructing an online identity in SL, the residents can customize the above features to match their requirements. The manipulation of identity is significantly stronger in the virtual world and the SL society very much reminds of a social masquerade. If one feels more secure in SL due to the lack of crime and fraud there is, however, no certainty about how real and fixed identity of the other person is.

To summarise, the need to consume and to express oneself is typical for both - Real and Second Life - consumer societies. However, consumption in the virtual world is strictly based on self-realization through self-expression and interactions leaving the physical needs behind. Although the virtual relationships might be build on fictional characters there is still a strong feeling of belonging to society where members share same needs and have specific barriers set for new entrants. Just as in the Real Life.

5.2 Significant Themes
[See appendix 2 for photos of the interviewees referred to]

> *"HH: Sorry - got distracted in RL*
> *Janus Janus: Funny isn't it...*
> *HH: My daughter just going 2 bed*
> *Janus Janus: ... two worlds competing for our attention*
> *HH: Absolutely!"*
> **Interview Extract**

In order to answer our opening research question, following themes were found interesting and emphasises the importance based on direct quotes from the interviewed avatars.

5.2.1 Social Consumption
[Conspicuous consumption for a social purpose]

One of the primary findings when moving around, talking to SL residents was the need for differentiation and to be noticed, i.e. to project yourself through an eye-catching avatar. A vast part of SL is to be seen and hence, accepted as a serious 'participant'. If one utilizes a default avatar dressed in free clothes, one does not project a serious image and thus, others may exclude your company for that reason alone.

Another interesting aspect of consumption in SL is the fact that there are no reasons for consuming alone, i.e. why eat a pizza alone if ingestion is not required for survival? Why buy the 'cheap' goods if all they do is make you look less admirable? And if not purchasing anything at all, the consequence could be exclusion and less attention from the fellow habitants. The point is that nobody enters SL to be alone – the social or the interacting matter is crucial for the understanding.

With tangible material to support these assertions, following qualitative abstract examples were used:

Quote BT: *"Looks are a little cover of the real beauty inside"*

On one of his nightly quests Janus Janus encountered an exceedingly beautiful blond female avatar, which required questioning and most likely had an opinion about how to display oneself.
When directly asked why she apparently have spent quite some time on her SL avatar, the reply came promptly: "Because I want to be beautiful :-)" and she continued: "usually I wear dresses from designers and look in different shops for good skins and good shapes." Janus asked her how much she spent in total and whether she felt popular in SL, and to that she replied: "I have a lot of friends here and everyone wants to meet and talk" and "…my skin is about 3000, my hair between 200 and 500, makeup 1000 – In total? Oh I think 10000 (USD 40, edited) or more – But I also have more than 5 different kinds of makeup." When asked whether she believes her SL avatar is more the "true her" than her real life character, she replied: "yes maybe u are right." To conclude, she told Janus that she was online every night between 4 to 6 hours and even more in the weekends, that she was 32 years old and from Hamburg.

Another avatar, which admits to be a 47 Caucasian Scottish male, poses as a coloured and well-built youngster says about his choice of appearance: "Basically because I have a special friend at the moment in SL and like to look good for her - the visual aspect of SL adds a very strong issue over just IM (instant messaging, edited) in RL I mean." And continues: "…And there are some really hot avatars in SL - we are visual creatures... we judge the book by its cover at least at first sight." He goes on with "I have less hair as well, but thought I would use SL to give myself a tan. He also admitted to have bought some goods for his friend and a pair of sunglasses for himself. (We will return to him later on the construction theme)

However, a contribution from another interview sates very clearly: *"A cute avi (avatar, edited) without the right texts isn't worth my time."(Quote: BL)*

A German avatar that did not speak any English was asked about his colossal tattoo covering his entire shirtless back. He replied that he though it looked terrific and that he didn't have any in real life. Furthermore, he said he was 50 years old and that he has spent around 1100 Linden dollars in total on his looks.

The major thing about SL consumption is that even though you only have a few US dollars on your bank account you can still achieve a relatively impressing guise in SL. And even without spending, you can join the consumption community by teleporting around searching for 'freebies' (free stuff, such as clothing, jewelleries, accessories etc.) So does consumption and annexation necessarily has to cost real money? NO! Is an effort expected and required? YES!

At this point Janus was very curious and had to invite some randomly picked avatars to a round table discussion, asking the inevitably question: **The creation process has to be individual, based on subconscious ideals, right?** Some of the answers that were reflected upon looks like following:

> *AK: "I'm adamant that the point of the Internet is to transcend the physical. I'm really peeved with the trend to use the virtual world as a substitute real world.*
> *Janus Janus: well, I totally understand - but admit it, you look at all these beautiful people - and you see beautiful people!*
> *BT: point is Janus, every body can be Barbie or Ken in here*
> *AK: Yes! <laughs> this is precisely virtual Barbie for me.*
> *AK: But as well, I was quite serious when I compare to playing Barbie as a child.*
> *BT: and because the media in rl is hyping those looks everybody fulfils the dream here*
> *AK: But, I also love that you can have furries and aliens and elves and so on.*
> *BT: that is the real point… You can be whatever, whoever, whenever you want to be*
> *AK: But I appreciate the point that that seems like most people don't imagine much beyond being lovely.*
> *AK: And it is alarming that everyone is similarly young and beautiful.*
> *SM: I wear tail and ears just because I find that fun and cute and I have tattoos here because I like that in real life but I don't have anyone.*
> *RB: I'm not that handsome in real life."*
> *AS: Well dunno but I'm female in RL, but I have a female avatar already*
> *Janus Janus: Ah, so you are building him exactly how you would like him to look in real life?*
> *AS: yes."*

To sum up, the critical success factor for a lot of people displaying themselves in SL, is the actual physical appearance in public, to seek acceptance and belonging.
When comparing to the temporary findings from '5 Hours Of Blue', Jan had some increasingly positive encounters with random avatars after his external identity was modernized to match the beauty ideals of SL. The experience emphasises the theme by following extract from the mentioned own findings:

> *"The primary aspect of the makeover is the obvious appreciation of hedonism – you automatically move up the hierarchy when the outfitting is not bewildering the eye, i.e. much like the discotheque culture of real life, to observe and be observed. Creating an identity through objectification is the key to SL – awareness and interest are spurred by this among the citizens, so although you are a nice eloquent person, your physique or anxiety for social rejection keeps you from interacting in public in RL – this aspect can be removed in SL."*

To conclude the theme about social, conspicuous consumption there was a secondary issue, which evoked curiosity: You are expected to pay compliments, and say thank you if you receive one. On the contrary, if you (by mistake) offence anybody it is taken very seriously. The next text bit is an extract from a conversation between Janus, being very confused in a freebie clothes store and a female avatar that misinterpreted his confusion for rudeness:

> *BC: that skirt matches your beard perfectly*
> *Janus Janus: Thanx a lot*
> *Janus Janus: I feel really comfortable. It's 100% cotton*

BC: wow
BC: Looking good!
Janus Janus: If you're looking for anything in particular, I can strongly recommend the box on your head
Janus Janus: well, it was on my head until 2 minutes ago
BC: a box on my head? I guess that means you think I'm not too pretty???
Janus Janus: Nononono…It just means I am wearing entire boxes of women's' clothing on my head these days
Janus Janus: well, doesn't make any sense now I can see
BC: yeah you have earrings!"

5.2.2 Construction

Another fascinating theme identified is the actual **building process** of an identity through conspicuous consumption. The whole construction issue is what turns SL into a game for adults – they have a chance of creating something tangible without worrying about the consequences or the budget:

> *"Janus Janus: …So you have built your avatar to assemble your real life appearance?*
> *JP: hmm the things I don't like at myself in real life my avatar hasn't got*
> *JP: its perfect for me*
> *JP: like I want to be in real life maybe"*

In connection a good-looking guy, hovering around on a small town square, building a bar, fascinated Janus and gave rise to a beneficial chat about the construction possibilities in SL. As this interview was conducted in Danish, the paraphrasing will be printed:

EE is 18 years old, but prefers to spend his time in SL, running his accessory shop and creating things with the purpose of resale. At this moment he is building a genuinely impressing bar, he though have no intention of tendering himself – as he says; he has spotted a need and tries to make an honest buck giving people what they want. He claims to be present in SL only do to the potential profit and hence, he has an oral agreement with the owner of the island in which he resides to start building a bowling center – this is where the real money is, he says, gambling and entertainment. When asked whether or not this was superior to his daily school attendance, he answered: *"Yes indeed, but it's not any easier – you have to remember that 4000 Linden Dollars is about the same as 85 DKK, so it would take some more incentive to keep spending all my time online."*

> **Supported by words of wisdom from AK:** ***"The possibilities here are almost limitless"***

Moreover, as experienced in the User Observation also, the revival of something lost comes into play when you get a change to construct your alter ego in any way you want to:

> *"Janus Janus: do you look like your avatar?*
> *AH: not any more but in my 20's it was pretty close, I'm 54 today.*
> *Janus Janus: Please don't take this the wrong way but you revive bygone days?*
> *AH: yes I think to some degree all people do, don't you agree? At least the older people*
> *AH: when I retired I was totally lost without responsibilities"*

> *AH: I believe... at least for me that I'm the same person as the one that sits at the keyboard*
> *AH: same morals & values"*
> **AH is the now editor of the earlier mentioned 'FOR the love of MEN' magazine, published in SL only.**

Also Norwegian EL also has a specific formation reason for being in SL:

> *"EL: I have got a job and purchased a spot here*
> *Janus Janus: You have a job in SL?*
> *EL: I will try to build something, but haven't decided what*
> *EL: Yes, I got a job at a club trying to recruit dancers*
> *EL: They have to look like someone that can work in a strip club. It's the same criteria here as in real life*
> *EL: But if you want to earn fast money sex and gambling is the thing"*

5.2.3 Interaction

As already mentioned the prime feature of SL is the easy interaction between avatars. The monitor shields against any potential defeats, and since money can buy the perfect look the only thing left to create (though might seem superficial) friendships is your eloquence, but which examples are applicable for emphasizing the point:

> **The avatar LD:** ***"In real life we saw a fatty woman dancing and we ignored her completely"***

Furthermore, deducted from the user observation, we witnessed how a muscle-showoff can work as initial icebreaker, and serve as a humor-indicator.

Some discover new interesting aspects of life when not having to worry about others:

> *"Janus Janus: Was this any intention of yours when entering SL and creating your avatar? To find interesting lady friends?*
> *HH: it wasn't actually the main drive when joining*
> *HH: ...but have found it an enjoyable aspect*
> *HH: like the music & also the dancing (Salsa)*
> *HH: can't really dance in RL*
> *HH: if you have a special friend - it can be remarkably enjoyable*
> *HH: plus everyone can dance well in SL*
> *HH: I find it is also good because you can concentrate on talking while still managing to dance and not step on toes."*

While others have felt the physical need for gender transformation to achieve the anticipated outcome from SL:

> *"AS: I used to have a little furry avatar they just walked past him*
> *AS: its better since there is so many clubs in SL*
> *AS: they assume I am a guy in real life*
> *AS: so girls just come up"*

And finally, the words of wisdom:

> *"AK: People are coming here to explore*
> *AK: People who use SL or chat as a dating service--a temporary measure to get to something "real" are missing the point, I think.*
> *AK: The key motivator designed into other games is some clear progression, getting to the next level, etc.*
> *AK: It's huge that that's not a factor here. It's about constructing a life and staying in it"*

5.2.4 Choices & Risks

As mentioned before, there are no physical risks connected with the SL life; if things get out of hand you always have the option to log off – or change your appearance so radically that you can only be recognized by the name hovering over your head. The monitor serves as a shield against unpleasantness.

SL is a crimeless society where purchase or consumption of a good automatically makes you the owner of that object, which status only can be changed by you – if you want to sell off some of the latest impulse buying to the second hand stores.

For example, Janus Janus was the curious type and very interested in the shiny Harley Davidson motorcycles scattered around the different regions – as he still had no intention of spending any money in SL, he decided to take the motorcycle for a quick joyride and put it right back 10 minutes after. However, when trying to mount the brawny, polished bike it was simply unattainable. He got physically thrown off with the politically correct text message: "You are not the rightful owner of this bike".

In addition, as witnessed in the user observation, Mads Papp feels absolutely comfortable about acting out of the everyday standardised framework and approaching anybody regardless – this emphasises the lack of risks connected to- and the freedom associated with the cornucopia civilization.

5.2.5 Escapistemology
[Neologism]

The last theme is the discovery of a novel scenario and interpretation of earlier labels, which we term Escapistemology. This notion stems from epistemology, in the sense of escapism knowledge (episte). Sometimes the best way to develop new ideas is through novel terminology, which we will aim to describe below:

The epistemological assumptions are as general: "assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world"[115], divided into three basic positions:

(i)   "Knowledge about the world is achieved only through sense data (perceptions). The external world gives itself to us, as it is.

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[115] Easterby-Smith M, et. Al. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction*, Sage Publications, London, 2nd Edition, p. 31

(ii)   Knowledge about the world is developed through thinking and reasoning. No examination of external reality is necessary.

(iii)   Knowledge about the world the outcome of our interpretations of sense data. We have to see something *as something* in order to perceive it at all."[116]

In connection, Escapism is a notion about "*mental diversion by means of entertainment or recreation, as as an "escape" from the perceived unpleasant aspects of daily stress. Some believe that this diversion is more inherent in today's urban, technological existence because it de-facto removes people from their biologically normal natures.*"[117]

These two notions could be merged into people trying to emancipate themselves from their biological nature and seeking another reality, which is believed to be true, yet still discussable (as all other epistemological allegations). The neologism 'Escapistemology' – should be perceived as escaping one reality to start a similar (perceived) one in a parallel society (believed to be better, though)

We have written a lot about escapism in form of the development from television to Internet involvement and these statements has been supported by the empirical findings and presence in SL as equally accepted citizen.

In relation to the stemming from epistemology, one has to dig into the fields of the notion in question, i.e. the similar notions as regards to beliefs in opposition to truth and justification thereof. A very physical example is following extract:

Following quote is an extract from a round table discussion between four avatars in SL on the subject 'what is real?'

> "*AK: Well, there's an interesting story. My relationship, 8 years RL, broke up because he met someone here. And he thought it wasn't a big deal because it wasn't "real" or physical; but I disagreed*
> *LD: I think the central point is whom you dedicate time and effort to*
> *LD: i mean if it is not real but it takes you 5 hours every night...*
> *AK: And what's not real about what we're saying here.*
> *AK: Yes, I don't know if any of you are actually men or women or black or white or whatever, but your opinions and your expression is real.*
> *LD: it's happening, so it's real*
> *AK: And that's all I care about in this context.*
> *AK: This conversation is real*
> *AK: And I know BT and LD have said some very insightful things that I agree with-- that's the reality for me, here.*
> *AK: That's all I need to know about them.*
> *AK: Well, again, you're getting people's pure intellect, imagination and personality-- what's missing to support a relationship?*
> *HH: great sex is mostly mental anyway*

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[116] Slide from lecture of Peter Svensson
[117] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escapism

> *BT: got red cheeks in real life... God I am totally open to the sex thing tonight*
> *AK: That's a great point too, BB-you have physical reactions to things happening*
> *here.*"

The above inhabitants KNOW this is reality to them, but does it qualify as 'real' reality? And is this a justified belief? (For something to actually count as *knowledge*, it must be true) I.e., do they know that if all 6 million residents shut of the computer at the same time, the world will still remain?

The theoretical knowledge associated with this is very fragile and extremely hard to reason for, i.e. if reality (as mentioned in chapter 3) is the state of things as they actually exist, what is SL then?

Our deduction from this acts more as an interpretation of the nature of things through the use of a neologism than as an actual answer:

SL residents live by the epistemological position that knowledge about the world is achieved only through sense data and thus, what is perceived as real is real and even though there is an external reality as well, they choose to multitask between them autonomously not distinguishing between the degree of reality involved. It makes absolute sense for people to interact, dance and date and through the visual understanding, the eloquence and the physical surroundings, they reason for this to actually take place and substitute their real life-presence in importance, i.e. one can choose to be alone at home, sitting in the dark in front of the computer OR dancing with an absolutely beautiful girl in one of the most popular discotheques in that world. Thus, this indicates the eccentric attitude towards both escapism and epistemology, which is why a theory merging is perfectly suitable for the circumstances.

The end of this neologism will encourage further research in the sense of applying and deconstructing actual theoretical notions to truly grasp the extraordinary nature of the online civilisation SL. This is not a common phenomenon, but the parallel position and ambience of the interface, confuses people into believing that this *something* is actually something, and this conviction overrules the unexciting idea about being a (maybe lonely) adult individual, spending his/her time escaping 'reality' through an online game!

The last actual finding we want to elaborate on is the perception of the online/offline phenomenon, as it is perceived in SL.

5.3 Additional Findings

5.3.1 The Online / Offline Phenomenon

It is a fascinating concept, the on-off terminology, in terms of metaphorical interpretation. In the present everyday routine society has accepted several conventional metaphors to make sense in the environment we inhabit. Though, even the metaphors develop through time and along with the new and more explorative and imaginary metaphors, a certain cultural background or membership of a generation is required to fully grasp the logic of otherwise fictional semantics; for example the comparison between an ancient concept such as love versus the later phenomena, electromagnetism: "I could feel the *electricity* between us. There

were *sparks*."[118] Unless a person was born after the 17th century this phrase would not make any sense.

A more recent invention is the 'on' switch on electronic devices, used to put the device into operation and when finished utilizing, the 'off' switch was flipped or pushed. In short, to get things started, press 'on', to finish, press 'off' – these are each others' antonyms in today's dictionaries[119], but would not have made any logical sense 30 years ago.

Metaphors and the derived jargon have redefined reality as we know it and continuously have an effect on the way people interact, i.e. to be 'On', means in technical terms that I am operational and in more recent jargon, also to have access to the Internet.

On the contrary, to be 'off', is often applied when having an 'off day' (i.e. bad day), having 'the day off' (are not forced to participate with any work-related tasks), to be 'turned off' by something (disliking anything) and so on. In short, the 'off' expression associates with not participating in a given creation process and hence, being unconstructive.

With logical reasoning based on the above discussion, the Internet should be termed offline, as this constitutes a virtual reality and by dedicating ones time to scrutinising a medium, pulls the person away from reality and the real on-the-life-line activities. Though, the phenomenon works the other way around; when you click on your browser icon, you go online – operational and functional.

> *"Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities metaphors may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies[120]."*

The metaphor ON versus OFF highlights an important aspect of the concept, which is the psychological state of mind when utilising the Internet: "Are you ONline? Yes I am." Whereas admitting to being OFFline could evoke real disparagement and a disapproving ambience.

In successful virtual reality (which is not longer virtual but merely online-reality) there is no such thing as theoretical, reflective consciousness, only practical reflexiveness: The actors constitute the reality itself.[121] So do the online /offline categories emphasise earlier assumptions about what is operational or do they confuse and relocate meaning? Was the online phenomenon initially intended to creating a virtual or online reality – a new real ON with no reflexive correlation to the conventional world?

This question will not be answered here, but simply left to float in space when we finish with a summary of above and a finishing, concluding section on the findings.

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[118] Lakoff, G & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, p. 10
[119] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Off
[120] Lakoff, G & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, p. 12
[121] Juel, H. (1997) *Multimedieteori – om de nye mediers teoriudfordringer,* Odense Universitetsforlag, p. 136

Chapter 6: Receding To Offline

This final chapter is divided into four parts. The first section will summarise what have been said in this thesis and in which order. The second part will draw a conclusion based on the findings from chapter 5 as well the theoretical framework, the third section will discuss some suggestions for future research and the fourth and finishing section will rationalize for the title of this thesis.

6.1 Summary

A lot of deductions have been made in the preceding fifty pages and it can be difficult to maintain the overview of this complex social phenomenon.

When summarising what has happened we will start with recreating the initial research question; **'As people construct parallel identities online, what kind of consumer society is being established inside Second Life?'**

The chosen procedural approach in the quest for answering the question were as follows:

We commenced the thesis with reasoning for the migration from offline to online through a chronological tour of the societal evolution and ended the section with defining Second Life as a place of consumption and identity creation. The outcome of this chapter should illuminate where the thesis should make contribution to preceding research.

Subsequently in chapter 2 we justified the choice of the applied empirical data collecting methods and argued for the qualitative approach to the problematic, which was linked to a thorough literature review, providing proof for us covering the field of earlier studies and open up for positioning within netnography research.

In chapter 3 secondary data was employed describing the boundary between being online and offline in the sense of similarities and overlapping. The main theme in this chapter was to provide a snapshot of the online scenario, as regards to the identity creation through a three-dimensional character, and how that correlates with the physical reality.

Chapter 4 was dedicated to the primary data, commencing with a SL user observation, and continuing with an entrance into SL to conduct interviews and ending with following the researchers' avatar Janus Janus being transformed into the designer puppet Jan by a professional stylist.

In chapter 5 the different findings were divided into themes, and each theme supported by either rationale founded in the preceding writing or in practical examples from the interviews, the user observation or the authors' own experiences in SL.

6.2 Conclusion

We initiated this thesis with an assertion (**'as people construct parallel identities online'**) deemed from commonly agreed knowledge about the progression of the Internet throughout the last few decades. This has been developed though an identity-theoretical overview concerning why individuals as well as communities are migrating online. Our findings from the theoretical overview has shown that, the primary reason for resettlement inside the monitor was caused by the 'shield' provided by that particular monitor and the relative easiness locating kindred sprits and similar interest group across geographical locations. Furthermore, the findings was emphasised by the different themes from chapter 5, where different subject matters were descried as being the foremost important reasons for people's presence in SL. In short, the theory is scattered throughout the thesis and applied in chapter 5. It provides an effortless entrance to the identity question and dissects the underlying principles of social consciousness (which are found to be the subconscious motives for joining SL).

Moreover, we added a more specific question, enquiring about **'what kind of consumer society is being established inside Second Life?'** This question proved vastly ambiguous and complex to answer without profound insider knowledge and hence, the empirical data had to be revised and cross-validated several times, due to their intangible configuration. However, after a time-consuming month of residency in Second Life a deeper understanding has emerged as interaction, acceptance and friendships developed.

As regards to limitations, shortcomings and implications we must henceforward admit, that the time spent chasing around Second Life searching for interesting characters could have been reduced if one has had a resonant knowledge and general idea about what to expect inside the online civilization. Nevertheless, if the interviewees had not been chosen so randomly, the findings could have proved more monotonous. Our avatar Janus Janus conducted 15 valid interviews (and about the same amount of fruitless attempts) with everything from SL prostitutes to school pupils and chief editors and though the discoveries differed in motives for being present they were overall remarkably uniformed, as regards to favourable (for the research question) findings. As the interviews were all carried out with mundane Janus Janus as chairman, some 'beautiful' avatars chose to ignore his presence. Although this issue can be brought forward as a finding as well, it translates into the hours spent hunting down talkative characters, whereas the ones consuming most of their real life time looking their best, were actually engaged in doing so when Janus emerged.

Nonetheless, supported by the secondary data from chapter 3 and the above-mentioned interviews and personal interacting as Jan, we will complete this thesis by concluding following as the foremost important facets with regards to **'what kind of consumer society is being established inside Second Life?'**:

From the very beginning we have argued that SL is a contemporary category for universal escapism and a place of conspicuous consumption with immense buying power.

This has to be seen in connection to today's creation of identity, which is increasingly fluid and multiple and thus, makes it hard to really tell which one of the produced identities is the authentic one. For example to separate sitting alone, working in the office, being with your parents, being out with friends or interacting in a online gaming simulator.

The consumption whether of a specific product, brand or its mere meaning acts a tool for shaping one's identity. Furthermore, the constructed identity later helps to position oneself in society and thereby, communicates the "self" to others. The expected outcome should eventually assure a smooth entry to an otherwise closed society.

In regards to SL, the golden rule for acceptance is conspicuous hedonism, which is more the rule than the exception, which was evidently proven when Janus was turned into Jan. A peculiar discovery about SL was the autonomous behaviour towards to real life, i.e. the assumption of the authors as well as many multinational corporation was that SL was a projection of reality and hence, good will in SL would leave foot prints in real life. However, the consumption in SL is for SL only, so it has shifted the significance from buying via the Internet to buying IN the Internet FOR the Internet only… Every item purchased in SL is utilized in SL.

The primary reason for consumption in SL is induced by the notion 'to consume for somebody', i.e. very conspicuously. There are no reasons for eating at all and even less incentive to eat something alone – the consumption is all the time for others.

The greater understanding of SL considers how to create an identity through objectification, i.e. to create awareness and interest by building an eye-pleasing avatar – the key to SL is through a primary physical identity, much like the discotheques in RL – observe and be observed. In SL little money can buy perfection, thus if convinced to be an out-going and eloquent person, but your physique or anxiety for social rejection keeps you from interacting in real life public (prejudice, stutter, unattractive) SL could prove the solution to your social disabilities.

People feel absolutely safe when acting in SL due to the physical distance from real life. The monitor provides a shield that buffers initiatives and freedom (i.e. -Everybody can dance – be normal – be accepted – prejudices diminishing) – and everybody is free to log off if things get too private.

In SL you KNOW you look good; the present societal norms (shops, fellow inhabitants, magazines) set the standard for beauty ideals. However, RL ideals are still valid in transferred, cartoonised form, that is, spending Linden dollars or not – it's the visible effort that is valued. Some places are more physically active than others, i.e. there are definitely places to be seen and display your latest adjustments (construction), purchases

In short, presence in SL demands involvement to benefit fully from the civilization– superficial short-term relationships are not anticipated there so sincerity weighs high on the list of dues.

These people are establishing their second life, so be serious about it and thus, take the time to customize your avatar and be friendly, open and approachable. However, the balance for seriousness is razor sharp as one avatar said during an interview: *"Leave the hassle to RL – we are here to have fun"* (In this context, fun was referred to as = dance, interact, date, dress up, display latest purchases, etc.).

The metaphor ON versus OFF highlights an important aspect of the concept, which is the psychological state of mind when utilising the Internet. With logical reasoning based on the above discussion, the Internet should be termed offline, as this constitutes a virtual reality and

by dedicating ones time to scrutinising a medium, pulls the person away from reality and the real on-the-life-line activities.

So when relating the above to the meticulous definition of a consumer society and what the main differences are, it can be summed up as follows:

Consumption in SL is strictly based on self-realization through self-expression and interactions leaving the physical needs behind. The SL consumer society holds a different view than the real life scenario, i.e., in SL residents have much bigger purchasing power, which boosts leisure consumption significantly, and although SL residents also devour on-site hamburgers or pizzas (virtual ones) the intended function of the product has nothing to do with taking the edge off one's hunger, but acts merely as a social buffer.

This is analogous to other attributes of the SL ethos; as consumption is not physically required, but socially demanded the consumer society in question undertakes a pleasure-seeking status among its citizens and thus, an Utopian society or Shangri-La-like online paradise (compared to the real world) is what drives people to stay and consume.

As the physical 'real life' is constructed by restraints, bills, expectations and normalities Second Life acts as a relieving sanctuary with the real life conventions as guidelines, more than enforced rules, and hence a free-floating culture is being established. The residents are well aware of their divided existence, but choose to isolate Second Life as being a place for happy thoughts and low-priced leisure consumption.

6.3 Directions For Future Research

Quite a few potential researches areas could be deducted from the explored phenomenon and hence, we believe that fairly every theme of our findings is interesting for future research. We regard our thesis as a first step to explore the nature and culture of Second Life not only by observing, but interviewing and participating as well to expose our main subject matter: How does one construct his/her identity through online consumption.

However, with this thesis we have far from covered every sociological or netnographic aspect of the civilization, and even a smaller amount of marketing related matters.

The study should be seen as an introductory to future research, i.e. we have aimed to cover a certain theoretical field (identity through consumption), but the various occurrences and happenings in SL leaves much research to be desired.

We hence present following opportunities for future, elaborative research to be carried out within the SL phenomenon:

1. What are the prospects for all the multinational corporations, which have joined SL in regards to marketing to a virtual character with an expected REAL outcome? I.e. can marketing in SL have influences in RL, in regards to sales, goodwill and personal consumer-product relationship? (We realise that this was the original intention for building huge headquarters there, but after the above findings and the exposing of the autonomously behaviour, we doubt the efforts are favourable.)

2. Is SL being hyped out of proportions and when does it peak? What are the prospects for its existence in 2 years?

3. From a sociological perspective: How is the residents' everyday life affected by inhabiting a parallel identity in a virtual world in regards to stability of identity, real life circumstances, shaping of relationships, development of new needs, etc.

Secondary recommendations for areas of future research:

- *Are avatars a new market of consumers and how can a company target them?*
- *How are the products and services perceived in a virtual world comparing to the physical one?*
- *What are the prospective for companies to take advantage of the virtual world as a place for letting customers try virtual models of new products and interact with other members of online community through personalized avatars.*

Evidently, there are many diverse directions to choose for future research within SL. The phenomenon we have explored in our thesis proved particularly captivating in the way that by answering one the questions raised, it automatically lead to the rise of many others.

6.4 Second Life: Second Chance

There are no prerequisites for joining Second Life, besides a compatible PC with a decent amount of RAM's and an adequate graphics card. This renders into everybody being offered a second chance for adding an extra circle of friends, opening a business or merely seizing some of the other various opportunities in SL (as mentioned in the themes in chapter 5).

The reflection behind the title **Second Life: Second chance** can be rationalised for and elaborated in a few paragraphs:

Whoever decides to enter Second Life for whichever reason one may have, is being offered the same opportunities that might have encouraged others to enter in the first place; and these same prospects which demand a great deal of unchangeable factors and efforts to bring into being in real life.

The fact is that we are stuck in a given outline in real life, shaped by the society and personal features, for example looks, financial status, social skills etc. – these aspects are incredibly hard to alter or change, however, in Second Life everybody starts with a blank piece of paper without any social history or physical record; a second change for realising all that which has been impossible in reality.

To some the interface is a game, to others dead serious, but the common denominator is the choice of involvement. The potential is present and it is up to the user to determine the degree and necessity for participation.

So our closing statement will raise following hypothetical questions:
Are you happy in your life? Are you satisfied with the way you look? Do you have friends? Do you go to clubs without worrying about what other people think of you? If yes, you are a fortunate being, if no you might want to re-read this thesis.

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Appendix 1
[Article for the magazine, 'FOR the love of MEN', June issue 2007]

Background
"Janus, two-headed god of gates, doors, beginnings and endings in Roman mythology."
This was what inspired the name of Janus Janus. The forward-looking face representing the side of a researcher scrutinizing a contemporary parallel society, whereas the backward one was his RL ego indicating the individual behind every avatar's chosen identity in SL."

Behind Janus Janus is a 25 year-old scholar from Lund University in Sweden, writing his thesis on the subject of 'the use of conspicuous consumption to create an identity in SL'. He will graduate as Master of International Marketing & Brand Management in June 2007.

Janus' creator lives his everyday-life in Copenhagen Denmark, enjoying the various social aspects of RL springtime with his friends, family and special lady friend.

He has never indulged in any virtual sims or other computer gaming opportunities. In fact, his computer is predominantly used for word-processing, music storage and Google searches (in fact it did not have the sufficient power to run SL and an up-to-date silvery laptop had to be borrowed before login was accomplished).

Janus X 2
Janus Janus emerged from a sustained fascination of Second Life as a potential avant-garde marketing platform – his creator continuously encountered newspaper articles about the apparent utopian society, which he cut out and stored in a folder for later user. He was not sure exactly for what though. When the last semester was coming to an end he met with his colleague to discuss potential themes for the final thesis, it took him less than 5 minutes and a minor stack of press cuttings to convince her that this was the right way to go.

However, without ever having seen the inside of Second Life he nevertheless insisted on following a hands-off approach to expose the real interaction and social norms seen through the eyes of an active user. He was afraid of contaminating the culture and manipulate the findings. Nonetheless, taking into consideration that he only knew one truly active SL user observation alone was not an empirical option and hence, Janus' two faces were born.

Experiences so far
As mentioned before Janus' self is neither a technical wizard nor a wealthy man, so Janus Janus took the identity of a real life master student, with nothing to offer except honesty, genuine interest and the linguistic capability to communicate across languages (English, German, Spanish and Danish). However the default 'city chic' avatar wearing the default clothes did not attract or maintain any noteworthy attention or insight whatsoever, and Janus interpreted this to be a direct consequence of his penny-pinching and lack of direct involvement. He did not merely want to settle with conducting interviews with talkative, sympathetic characters, he wanted to truly interact on the given premises without the disturbance of an anonymous default physique.
After a quick search for Freebies and some moderate indifferent bodily modifications he ran into the editor of this magazine and the rest if history.

Appendix 2
[Photo album]

MP doing his famous muscle flex

EL, landowner

AH, magazine editor, 54

AS, female from GB, 15
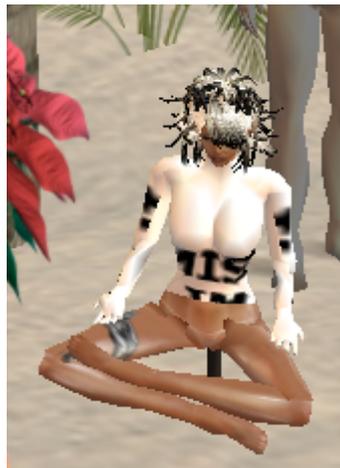
SM with ears and tail

Bling bling homeboy

German tattoo guy, 50

From left: BT, HH, AK, LB (Janus Janus in the foreground)

EE, bar owner, entrepreneur, 18

Too cool to talk

JP, 32, Hamburg