The wretched refuse of your teeming (virtual) shore:

Second Life as homeland to the socially isolated

By

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Abstract

This mixed methods research explores the attachment that individuals harbour for the virtual world of Second Life by comparing participants with strong feelings of attachment to Second Life with those with weak feelings of attachment. In order to identify these two groups of participants, this research employed an online questionnaire that included actual world national attachment scales and their virtual world counterparts. Based on the results of this questionnaire, these two groups of participants were identified and located and their further participation requested. Once individuals agreed to further participate in this research, the two groups of participants – the primary group comprised of those with strong, multi-dimensional attachment for Second life and the comparison group comprised of those with weak attachment for Second Life – were then interviewed using qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Based upon thematic analysis of the results of the qualitative interviews, it was found that participants who possess strong, multi-dimensional attachment for Second Life tended to be those who can be classified as Socially Isolated or, in other words, unable, for the most part, to experience social interaction in the actual world. Participants who possess weak attachment for Second Life tended to be those who can be classified as Socially Supported or, in other words, possessing, for the most part, the capacity for actual world social interaction. The results of the thematic analysis indicates that across six of seven identified themes, the Socially Isolated participants possessed a much more positive perception of Second Life while the Socially Supported possessed a much more dismissive perception of Second Life, one characterized by ambivalence, derision and/or embarrassment. The research concludes by suggesting that Socially Supported participants are put ill at ease by a virtual world that attempts to replicate

the actual world in which they already live while the Socially Isolated are not only untroubled by such a world but they exhibit deep appreciation and attachment for Second Life. In fact, Second Life seems to play a critical role in determining the very quality of their lives; it provides them with many things that the Socially Supported take for granted, including opportunities for socializing and friendship, workplace interaction, recreational activities, and even things as banal as walking down the street, sitting at a bar and dancing with a stranger.

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my

knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by

another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor

material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other

degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

_8/9/14_____

Signature   Date

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I dedicate this work to all of the many socially isolated individuals I encountered during my work in Second Life. I hope that they will always have a world like Second Life to call their home, their haven, their support. I also dedicate this work to my wife and children, Sue, Charlie and Sophie, who provide me with all of the love and support I need to get through the day. They are my haven.

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Chapter One: Introduction

…VWs (Virtual Worlds) offer something that is perhaps a bit more than a mere entertainment to which the players have become addicted. Rather, they offer an alternative reality, a different country in which one can live most of one's life if one so chooses…

Edward Castronova (2001, p. 10)

With the emergence of online virtual worlds (OVWs), users of the Internet have seen it go from a cyber-space in which the space in question exists only within the mind's eye (a two-dimensional, text-based space) to one in which users can now both see and inhabit the space represented on their computer screens. As online virtual worlds grew in popularity, rising from roughly 3 million total combined active subscribers in 2001 to more than 13 million in 2006 (Geel, 2012) many scholars were quick to proclaim that what we were witnessing was nothing short of the emergence of new forms of society (Castronova, 2001; Noveck, 2006; Yee, 2006a). More recently, as virtual worlds and their populations have matured, leveling off at the end of 2013 at a combined active subscriber base of roughly 18 million (Geel, 2013)[1], such proclamations have similarly matured with scholars now referring to virtual worlds in much more tempered terms. For example, Castronova, whose earlier proclamations suggested virtual worlds offered users "countries" in which to live, more recently pared back such a description in his work with Ross,

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[1] The figures listed within the text of the thesis are published by an independent, non-partisan researcher. Others claim the worldwide combined subscriber base is much larger. A virtual world research and marketing firm, KZero Worldwide, places the active virtual world user base at 1.9 billion (Gupta 2012). I am reluctant, however, to use this source as this company's livelihood is dependent upon more generous population estimates.

Wagner and Silva (2012), where they stated that virtual worlds are "an important form of social media and a new forum for human interaction" (see Abstract). As this example demonstrates, the loftiness of the language has been curtailed. That said, the earlier optimistic proclamations may yet prove true. With the recent rise of such virtual world games as Roblox (which touted some 65 million total hours logged in July 2014 alone) (see Haak, 2014) and Minecraft (which passed 100 million registered users by February 2014) (see Makuch, 2014) along with Facebook's recent multi-billion dollar acquisition of the virtual reality company Oculus VR (see R. King, 2014) , the future seems bright for the virtual world industry.

Research by Nicholas Yee and Edward Castronova do support some of the more dramatic claims of the past decade. In a large scale survey of several Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs), Yee (2006a) found that the average player spent 22 hours per week within these virtual worlds. Similarly, in a survey of the residents of Norrath (a fictional land within the popular MMORPG, Everquest), Castronova (2001) found that "some 20 percent of Norrath's citizens consider it their place of residence; they just commute to Earth and back" (p. 3). In addition, 22% of respondents indicated that if they could, they would spend all of their time in Norrath.

More recent scholarly work on virtual worlds has tended to narrow in scope with researchers now focusing on very specific virtual world issues and functions, such as educational uses (Allison et al., 2012; Duncan, Miller, & Jiang, 2012), business uses (Chandra & Leenders, 2012; Verhagen, Feldberg, van den Hooff, Meents, & Merikivi, 2012) and health industry uses (Morie et al., 2012; M. Taylor, Taylor, Kulendran, Gately, & Darzi, 2013). Yet there still is scholarly work that continues to wade into the dramatic. Consider Thimm's (2012) claim that Second

Life, an online virtual social world (OVSW), "is becoming a virtual community in which social structures increasingly exhibit traits of a civil society" (see Abstract). But is such a claim – that a virtual world could act as a civil society – so far-fetched?

It is difficult to dismiss the potentially powerful immersive qualities of virtual worlds – they are, after all, intended to represent three dimensional co-habitable space. In so doing, users may feel like they are "there" in that space [what researchers refer to as presence; please see (Biocca & Harms, 2002; Slater, Usoh, & Steed, 1994)], and, through the use of avatars (i.e. virtual characters), feel like they are there with other users in that space [what researchers refer to as co-presence; please see (Garau, Slater, Pertaub, & Razzaque, 2005; Schroeder, 2002)]. With varying degrees of success, film, television, the telephone, poetry, sculpture, text-only MUDs and MOOs, and OVSWs like Second Life are all capable of mediating the experience of presence in those who engage with them. Yet, as the body of research on virtual environments grows, there are those who note that it is this capacity to engender feelings of spatial and temporal immersion whilst furthermore allowing the user to become active participant in the virtual space in question that makes OVWs particularly unique. As Thomas and Brown (2009) suggest, an OVSW like SL[2], through "[t]he embodiment of the player in the form of an avatar" (p. 38) has the potential to represent an entity which "…ties together notions of community, technologically mediated collective action, and imagination, [where] players begin to act through joint investment in the pursuit of common ground" (p. 38).

Thus, as Thomas and Brown's analysis indicates, it may no longer be enough to claim that OVWs excite feelings of presence and co-presence in their users. After

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[2] Or as de Kort, Ijsselsteijn and Poels (2007) so aptly refer to it as a social presence technology.

more than 35 years of computer assisted virtual worlds of which Second Life is merely a contemporary manifestation (Damer, 2008), the more salient issue, in some ways, is the question of how to explain this phenomenon.

Let's consider the broad range of possible explanations for such behaviour. As Castronova suggests in the opening quotation to this thesis, OVW usage is often associated with addiction (For example, see Charlton & Danforth, 2004; Chiu, Lee, & Huang, 2004; Clarke & Duimering, 2006; Fisher, 1994; Kuss, Griffiths, & Binder, 2013; Kuss, Louws, & Wiers, 2012; Miller, 2013; Yee, 2006c). This is not surprising considering its very essence, that is, its virtual reality, could be taken to imply an escape from actual reality[3]. Yet, besides pathological explanations, what else could account for a robust attachment or sense of belonging that individuals may experience with regards to an OVW?

First of all, we might wish to consider any combination of the following theoretical constructs: brand loyalty (Knox & Walker, 2001), product attachment (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007)—though both of these reduce (rightly or wrongly) an OVW to a mere product such as a box of cereal—or social identity theory (Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1979), i.e. some of a person's self-identity is derived via their OVW membership(s) as well as their affiliation with various social groups within an OVW(s). At a more basic level, an OVW may simply fill the need for companionship (Mennecke, 2007) (for a counter argument, i.e. the notion of being alone together, see Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). On the other hand, perhaps there are individuals who are able to enjoy OVWs in ways they are unable to enjoy actual world (AW) societies. (For example, for the benefits of virtual reality

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[3] An oft cited reason for actual world addictions (such as substance abuse, compulsive gambling, etc.) is that they provide the addict with an escape from everyday problems (for example, see Kausch, 2003).

on shy people, see Hammick & Moon, 2014; for a discussion of the benefits of OVWs to children with cancer see Loving, 2006; and for a discussion on the ways in which virtual environments can improve the social lives of people with disabilities, see Stendal, Molka-Danielsen, Munkvold, & Balandin, 2013). We might also consider that individuals use OVWs to make money, either through the sale of virtual objects or through the provision of virtual services (e.g. virtual prostitution, virtual housing construction, virtual plastic surgery, etc…) (see the economic report on Second Life provided by Linden Lab, 2008; and for a discussion of avatar as commodity see Manninen, 2007). And there are many who note the way in which a virtual world like Second Life can both support and enable the creative process (Boellstorff, 2008; Fominykh, Prasolova-Forland, & Divitini, 2012; Lynch, 2012). However, the most straightforward reason for people spending significant time in OVWs is that they offer an entertaining way to pass some time, i.e. people participate in such sites because they are fun (Ardévol, Roig, Cornelio, Pagès, & Alsina, 2006; Kuss et al., 2012; Meikle, 2006).

But for those who choose to live most of their lives in an OVW (to paraphrase Castronova), many of the aforementioned explanations seem too narrow in focus to capture what has the potential anyway to be a multidimensional relationship between individual and virtual world. Of course, the character of such potential multidimensionality is contextually dependent—likely related at least in part to not only the individual in question but also the OVW in question. In other words, it seems plausible, if not likely, that different forms of OVWs will inspire different forms of attachment among their members (Bartle, 2003; Klastrup, 2003). These forms of OVW encompass a spectrum which ranges from those worlds that emphasize gameplay to those that emphasize social aspects.

For the purpose of this research, the focus is primarily directed at the non-game type of OVW. In particular, this research investigates online virtual social worlds (OVSWs) and specifically the OVSW known as Second Life (Sherman, 2010a). An OVSW, as the name suggests, emphasizes social interaction over gameplay and it is the general lack of goal-oriented objectives engendered by a non-gameplay world which makes such a world particularly attractive for this study. That is not to suggest that MMORPG attachment is necessarily straightforward, but it is to suggest that undoubtedly at least part of what draws most people to them are these gameplay elements (Billieux et al., 2013; Hellstrom, Nilsson, Leppert, & Aslund, 2012; McEwan, Gutwin, Mandryk, & Nacke, 2012), including, as Klastrup (2003) notes, the unfolding storyline that accompanies such gameplay. Human beings are a curious lot and we are compelled to know what might happen next—a curiosity alternately stoked and quenched by such forms of entertainment as literature and games (Juul, 2005). On the other hand, there are roleplaying and fantasy/adventure type games within SL (e.g. Tiny Empires, The Crack Den, etc.), but these SL subcategories are not the focus of this research for they share too many similarities with existing MMORPGs. That is not to suggest that such uses of SL were wholly ignored by this research—if only for the reason that such sharp distinctions are not so easily made, i.e. there are a number of uses of SL that while not strictly formalized multiplayer games have qualities similar in kind to roleplaying and guild strategy and thus an understanding and acknowledgement of such formal games can shed light on its more fuzzy manifestations. For example, is furrydom a roleplaying game or a subculture[4]? (see Bryant & Forsyth, 2012;

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[4] Note: furries are individuals who are interested in animal-type anthropomorphism, i.e. fictional animals which possess human characteristics (Furryfandom.info, 2010).

Morgan, 2008). Similarly, are Goreans role-players or members of a cultural group[5]? (see Bardzell & Odom, 2008; Sixma, 2009). Rather, the focus of this research is on those aspects and uses of SL that do not involve formalized roleplaying and fighting games. On the other hand, as Shakespeare suggests, life is a play and in that way, SL does cater to a more life-inspired storyline—as in, "I wonder what will happen to me today?" (see, for example, Babula, 1972).

So the issue here is what attracts people to those aspects of a virtual world where by and large there are not battles to be won, skill levels to be gained and gameplay strategy to be crafted. For as has already been suggested, SL is not merely a place to make friends--though it is, at least in part, that; it is not merely a place to have fun; nor merely a place to launch a new business, explore one's creativity, buy land, build a house and start a family; nor is it merely a place to hold a job, play games and have sex. For some, it is all of these things and more. The question of how to approach the attachment individuals might feel for such a multi-dimensional entity boils down to a question of lenses. In other words, through what lens should we view SL—i.e. what is it that people are attached to?

What is SL?
So is SL a social network? In part, yes. Making friends and maintaining friendships is a critical component of SL (See Boellstorff, 2008; Welles, Rousse, Merrill, & Contractor, 2014). But it is better understood as a series of social networks, of loose affiliations scattered hither and yon, some comprised of large groups exceeding more than 100 group members, others comprised of small groups of no more than two or three group members (Varvello, Picconi, Diot, & Biersack,

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[5] Note: Goreans are individuals who consider themselves members of the Gorean community, a community derived from the fantasy/adventure book series written by John Norman (please see Gorchronicles.com, 2010)

2008). Is SL a community? Yes, certainly it is—it is a community of avatars. But it is a community writ large. For it contains some 1000 island regions amounting to more than 1,100 square kilometres of virtual land (Linden Lab, 2013) and populated by some 800,000 active members (Geel, 2013) representing more than 100 AW nationalities (Linden Lab, 2008). Based on scale alone, then, terms such as social network or online community seem too particularistic to adequately capture the relative size of SL. Yet perhaps more to the point, it is what that scale portends which makes the use of social network and online community as descriptors of SL problematic. In other words, because SL is comprised of so many different people from so many different actual world (AW) countries, doing so many different things at any given time it seems too large, too fragmented and too heterogeneous to be sufficiently encapsulated by such constructs as social network or community. Rather, in order to properly address such vastness (in size, population demographics and content), a term is required with the capacity to support such scale. And perhaps the term we are looking for here is society.

But is *society* the right word? Put another way, is the term society specific enough to be instructive? While we might wish to refer to such actual world trappings as the product of AW *societies*, I take the Billigian (1995) view that the relatively non-descript term society conceals the true nature of the actual world in which we live as a world of *nation-states*. In fact, that the world is divided up among distinct nation-states and that people are citizens of one (or possibly more) of these distinct nation-states seems so obvious and natural that Ernest Gellner's (1983) oft-cited words still ring true today: an individual "must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears" (p. 6). Thus, from this perspective, these virtual objects and entities (e.g. houses and people, respectively) are not merely artefacts of

societies but more specifically, they are artefacts of nation-states, or to be even more specific, artefacts which issue from our *relationship* to nation-states. For as Billig convincingly argues, the nation-state, despite those forces which might diminish it, persists; it shapes and defines who we are as people in banal, every day, unnoticed ways. On the other hand, the impact of a media-saturated, globalized society upon the artefacts that we create, whether virtual or actual, makes the source of our inspiration more difficult to determine (Strinati, 1992). For example, is a virtual chair that I have created inspired by chairs with which I am familiar in the AW or is it inspired by any number of combinations of chairs of which the source is unknown, or perhaps even inspired, at least to a degree, by other virtual chairs which have their own disjointed origins? Yet, the pervasiveness of the nation-state means that even with such post-modern confusion, it is the cultural milieus of nation-states that is being played with, that is being "mashed-up" and reconfigured. The nation-state still retains supremacy in our lives and in the (popular) culture we create and consume (Edensor, 2002). As Anthony Smith (1991) claims, "Bound up, as they are, with the realities of state power and cultural communication…national discourses and their texts set limits to human imaginative construction…." (p. 160).

Thus, this research takes the novel approach of using actual world national attachment as "a way in," as a means to locating and further understanding Second Life attachment. Does such an approach suggest that SL *is* a nation or even *might be* a nation? No, only that SL offers characteristics which in some respects conjure notions of nation-statehood (in other respects do not). In other words, this approach suggests that SL is, at least in some ways, *like* a nation (see Sherman, 2010b for a discussion of the ways in which SL mimics a nation-state). That is to say that because there are, at least superficially, some features of SL which suggest national-

type comparisons could be made (at least insofar as certain very specific features are concerned), what matters is what can be learned and understood about the attachment people feel for Second Life using national attachment as the "divining rod" for locating such individuals.

Research Objectives

This exploratory research investigates individuals who are strongly attached to the online virtual world of Second Life by using actual world (AW) national attachment constructs as a means of locating such individuals. Furthermore, this interrogation does not focus solely on those who are strongly attached to SL, but rather uses a comparison group of participants who are not strongly attached to SL in order to better define and refine those who are by comparing to those who are not. In so doing, this research forms a picture of VW attachment by leveraging the feelings of attachment individuals hold for AW nations.

This study takes a ground-up approach to attachment, investigating VW attachment at the individual level. Specifically, this research is framed within the epistemological foundation of interpretivism. Cantrell (1995) describes those who follow the tenets of interpretivism as seeking "to understand phenomena and to interpret meaning within the social and cultural context of the natural setting" (para. 11). I maintain that such a perspective is essential for investigating the nature of attachment to a virtual world such as Second Life. For example, in order to assess whether and to what degree individuals were attached to SL across multiple dimensions, I had to interpret such meaning (Geertz, 1973) by attempting to see the VW through the eyes of (at least some of) those who "live" there (Myers, 1997). As this suggests, seeking the subjective perceptions of individuals is a key principle of interpretivism (Cantrell, 1995). Thus, to assess the degree to which an individual

possesses some form of virtual world attachment and the manner in which such attachment manifests, I attempted to see the world through the participants' eyes; understanding the world from the individuals' perspective was crucial. As Guibernau (2004) puts it, "…the most relevant quality of [national identity's] components is…whether they are felt as *real* by those sharing a common identity" (p. 135, emphasis in original). Such an understanding was achieved using a mixed methods approach, one in which survey data was used to target individuals for participation in semi-structured interviews to better understand feelings of OVSW attachment from the participants' perspective.

Research Question

More specifically, this mixed methods research aims to better understand VW attachment in the following way. First, five AW national attachment scales were rewritten to serve as five Second Life attachment scales which were subsequently incorporated into a quantitative questionnaire administered to some 373 Second Lifers. Based on the results of this questionnaire, participants who scored high across the five SL attachment scales were identified as the primary target of interest and were further studied using semi-structured interviews. In addition, individuals who scored low across the five SL attachment scales were identified as a comparison group and also interviewed as part of the qualitative phase of the research. This research attempted to answer one primary question: How can we describe and understand those participants who possess a robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life?

Research Findings

Ultimately, this research found that those participants who, for the most part, possess multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life are best described as socially

isolated due to some form of health-related, physical, emotional and/or psychological condition; those who may or may not feel as if they are citizens of their nation; those who may or may not hold deep feelings of attachment for their nation yet nevertheless who are in some way estranged from their neighborhoods, communities, and nations, whose day-to-day relationship with their nation is socially and societally stunted. For it is society's socially isolated people who were surfaced by this research, those who are often forgotten by communities, societies and nations, those who go unnoticed and unobserved. Yet those who apparently yearn for the same complex social and spatial connections for which we all yearn.

Future Implications

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Second Life (an entity which in many respects merely seems to reproduce the actual world in which we already live) has been the object of ridicule by some. For example, the now defunct website getafirstlife.com (Beale, 2007) parodied Second Life for doing nothing more than repeating life as we already know it, and it poked fun at those who would join such a world when such a world already exists, i.e. planet earth. "Go Outside," the site proclaimed. "Membership is Free." Yet while SL's apparent embrace of the familiar may be a letdown (or even object of ridicule) to those who might have expected more from a virtual world ostensibly limitless in its potential, for the purposes of this study the notion of familiarity is essential. That is to say that the focus of this paper is on the relationship between individuals and an entity that in many ways mimics nation-statehood (Sherman, 2010b). Thus, the significance of this research is that it offers some of the first empirical evidence that a virtual form of national-type attachment is possible. It also sheds further light on the types of people who might be willing to abandon the AW for a purely virtual form of existence (see also Castronova, 2001).

That is to say, it offers insight into the types of people who go unfulfilled by certain aspects of their AW lives (which unavoidably may include their AW nation-states). In the process, it builds upon not only theories of AW nationhood and national attachment, but also theories of virtuality and attachment more generally. Furthermore, it provides future researchers with a roadmap on how to approach what may be the coming phenomena of online virtual world nations and nationalities. So although this is not a research project bent on proving SL is a nation, its results suggest that what we might be witnessing with a virtual world like SL is, if not a contemporary manifestation of virtual nationhood, an example of an entity that at least has the capacity to develop into some type of virtual nation—perhaps, in fact, we are at the very early stages of virtual nationhood.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

This chapter explores four areas relevant to the literature on virtual worlds. First, in order to orient the research by providing some general information on Second Life, this chapter begins with a discussion of Second Life, describing its key features and functions. Second, it explores actual world national attachment in order to provide some background on the mechanism utilized to locate participants for this research. Third, this chapter examines the literature relevant to the feelings individuals hold for places and people in order to provide context to the social and place attachment findings which will be addressed in the Qualitative Results chapters of this thesis. Fourth, it reviews the literature relevant to the main findings of this research: namely the characteristic of social isolation as well as its relationship to virtual world attachment.

1. Online Virtual Social Worlds – An Overview

The following overview of Second Life is intended to situate this study by providing general information on SL specifically and virtual worlds more generally. In particular, this overview contextualizes Second Life as an online virtual social world (OVSW) and briefly discusses the characteristics inherent to such a classification.

An Internet-enabled phenomenon, online virtual worlds (OVWs) often employ computer generated imaging (CGI) to simulate three-dimensional environments populated by user-created avatars, which Yee (2006b) succinctly defines as "customizable characters". An OVW can take a number of different forms. Bartle (2003) (see pp. 38-60) delineates the various forms of virtual worlds from a largely technological standpoint, offering seven classifications: appearance

(e.g. text-based vs. graphics-based), genre (e.g. fantasy, science fiction and horror), codebase (e.g. software used and resultant physics such software enables—can users fly, for instance), age (or longevity of a particular world), player base (particularly, size of player base and amount of use), degree of change (to what degree can users alter the world) and degree of persistence (to what degree does the world continue to exist even when exited and to what degree do user changes to the world remain intact).

Klastrup (2003), for her part, lists three broad categories of OVWs, including social worlds, game worlds and commercial chat worlds. What is instructive about Klastrup's list is that it fills two gaps in Bartle's technologically-weighted categories—specifically, that there are persistent virtual worlds that are not strictly games and that virtual worlds are often platforms for social interaction of one kind or another. Furthermore, Klastrup does emphasize the potential multidimensionality of OVWs, suggesting that individuals experience OVWs from a number of overlapping perspectives. These include what she refers to as "levels of experience" (p. 105). The base level of experience, according to Klastrup, consists of the development of a "feel of the world" (p. 105) which includes familiarity with the user interface (i.e. the screen through which a user interacts with the world) and the language of the world which might include various lingo, technical jargon and emoticons. Subsequent levels of experience include experiencing a virtual world as a lived social space.

For this thesis, the focus is primarily on this notion of virtual world as lived social space, or what I refer to as an online virtual social world (OVSW) and specifically the focus is directed at the OVSW known as Second Life (Sherman, 2010a). An OVSW, for the most part, does not involve the character skill

development (e.g. improving one's swordplay) or strategy objectives (e.g. defeating an opposing army) more typically associated with online virtual world games (e.g. massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPGs) (Klastrup, 2003). Rather, the purpose or point of OVSWs is much more open to interpretation. For example, Second Life allows users (through their avatars) to buy and sell virtual property (and other virtual items), explore the world as they choose (though some areas are often private and access to them, therefore, blocked to some users), build and create items (e.g. vehicles, houses, clothing, etc…), and interact with other avatars through avatar gestures (Thoma, Haf, & Hitzges, 1999) (e.g. waving, thumbs up, smiling, frowning, laughing), virtual physical contact (e.g. virtual hugging, kissing, etc…), various text-based communication options (e.g. instant messaging that is either private or public) and a speech-based option as well. In addition, Second Life has its own currency known as Linden Dollars; users are even able to exchange Linden Dollars for AW currencies and vice versa. That said, unlike MMORPGs, in SL avatars cannot be killed (unless their owners choose to end their lives by discontinuing the use of them) nor do they progress to higher levels as they gain experience in-world. On the other hand, such clear distinctions obscure the fuzzy overlap that exists among the various forms of OVSWs. For example, Second Life members are able to play any of a number of multiplayer games within SL, including but not limited to combat/war games, urban crime games and fantasy/adventure games. For that matter, members of MMORPGs spend considerable in-game time just hanging out with friends, socializing (for example, see T. L. Taylor, 2006).

Nevertheless a core component of an online virtual social world such as Second Life is its capacity to facilitate social interaction. While one could certainly

approach SL, as Bartle might, from a purely technological standpoint, for the purposes of this research, SL, despite the technology which enables it to exist, is ultimately a human phenomenon; it enables the interactions and interrelationships of people. Therefore, it is a social phenomenon. And while critics of SL note what can appear to be the widespread absence of avatars from many places in SL (Collins, 2010), so much of what SL is seems geared towards socializing and friendship (Welles et al., 2014) . Houses are everywhere. Bars and dance clubs are hard to miss. Virtual sexual activity (or what some refer to as cybering), while perhaps overemphasized and overly discussed by the media and others, is nevertheless a prominent feature of SL—and at the very least, the perception of it is great enough that Linden Lab went to the trouble of creating a separate island they called Zindra for all such adult activity (Collins, 2010). Moreover, upon logging into SL, an individual's dashboard immediately shows how many of one's friends are online. While there are of course activities people perform alone including as previously mentioned, sitting alone, staring at the sunset, building, creating and shopping, all of these activities are just as likely to be carried out in concert with others. Even the many communication options all illustrate and demonstrate SL's social nature. While IM and voice chat may have interesting and varied implications to the anonymity of a user and their use may vary according to any of a number of factors, one thing they undoubtedly share in common is that they are used to communicate with others—they are tools which allow some form of social activity and contact to occur. Of course, while some of that contact and activity may be of a strictly professional nature, e.g. strictly business related (see Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009), it is nevertheless social. Thus, there is good reason to refer to SL as an Online Virtual Social World (Eastwick & Gardner, 2009; Sherman, 2010a), though that does not

mean to suggest that SL is always social, i.e. that some of the time in SL is spent alone in solitary ways (Ducheneaut et al., 2006), it is to suggest that an essential characteristic of SL is that it is a social world—it is designed to allow for human interaction via avatar representatives. Yet like a nation, it seems at least possible for there to exist some sort of "communion of avatars," a collective defined by a feeling of belonging with other avatars—or as with a nation-state, a deep-seated feeling of belonging among fellow co-Second Lifers (see Anderson, 1991 for a discussion of nation as an imagined community of fellow co-nationals). At the very least, such an imagined community of avatars seems within the realm of possibility (see Sherman, 2010a for a theoretical interrogation of SL as nation).

Having tackled the approach to Second Life as an OVSW, I will next turn my attention to a review of the national attachment literature in order to provide some context to the form of attachment that was utilized to locate participants for this study.

2. National Attachment Literature Review

 "Love has often been said to be the most powerful of human passions. But it seems that at least at times the passions that emerge from one's national identity come rather close to it" (Brockmeier, 2001).To be sure, the emotions engendered by nations are complex and deeply felt, what Anderson (1991) refers to as "profoundly self-sacrificing love" (p. 141). In large measure, the compelling nature of the relationship between people and nations has inspired intense scrutiny and debate among scholars of all stripes, from philosophers and historians to sociologists and psychologists. Ultimately, it was both the multi-dimensionality of national attachment and the profound and deep feelings of love that such attachment inspires which led me to select such a construct as the means of locating individuals for the

present study. As a result, further review of the literature surrounding national

attachment is warranted. In the subsequent section, I will discuss patriotism and

national identity, two forms of national attachment which are particularly relevant to

the research contained herein as these constructs were leveraged in order to develop

the mechanism for locating participants for this research.

2.1. Patriotism

Patriotism has been defined in a number of ways, occupying the discourse of

many of the world's great thinkers, from Socrates (Plato, 427?-347 B.C.) to

Durkheim (for a review, see Mitchell, 1931). Today, such a term still produces

considerable discussion, encompassing many differing perspectives. At the core of

most definitions is a notion of love for country (Primoratz, 2002). Yet as Primoratz

suggests, such an understanding is lacking in specificity and so to this he adds, "love

of one's country (and polity) motivated, in part, by the fact that it is one's country,

and expressed in a special concern for its welfare and that of compatriots" (p. 12).

Some have explored the relationship between patriotism and civic engagement, i.e.

the active participation in one's society—and in particular voting (Huddy & Khatib,

2007). Some discuss typologies of patriotism, further narrowing what they claim is

the broad category of patriotism into specific types, such as blind, symbolic and

constructive patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Li & Brewer, 2004; Schatz, Staub,

& Lavine, 1999). Yet others attempt to better define patriotism via a comparison

with the related construct of nationalism. Viroli (1995), for example, claims the key

distinction between the two is essentially a question of value, equating nationalism

with potentially destructive, even dangerous forces in society (leading perhaps to the

end of political freedom) and patriotism with more positive national characteristics

(such as devotion to the ideals of political freedom). Similarly, Li & Brewer (2004) argue that nationalism encompasses a type of national pride based often upon feelings of superiority over other nations, while patriotism is an expression of national pride based upon elements specific to one's own nation and generally devoid of feelings of hubris. Keller (2005), on the other hand, posits that such a distinction is misguided, that both can work to silence dissent and, by extension, erode freedom. That said, a literal interpretation of the two constructs has led some to make the point that nationalism is a form of attachment directed at nations while patriotism at states (see Miscevic, Fall 2008 Edition). Yet such a distinction perhaps puts too fine a point on it. Many scholars might argue that both forms of attachment are, in fact, directed at nations, but at nations of differing types. On the one hand, nationalism might be said to be a form of attachment directed at ethnic nations (A. D. Smith, 1991) and, on the other, patriotism at civic nations (A. D. Smith, 1991). Put concisely, patriotism describes our attachment for nations in terms of emotional feelings. National identity, on the other hand, describes our attachment for nations in terms of the degree to which we identify with certain nations, the degree to which our concept of self is defined by the nation to which we belong.

2.2. National Identity

National identity theory and research have focused on many different aspects of national identity, from the holistic (i.e. an attempt to account for everything all at once) (LiPuma, 1997) to the specific [e.g. the use of the Internet to strengthen feelings of Taiwanese national identity (Chung, 2002)]. As many scholars have noted, national identity is an evolving concept (Anderson, 1998; Brockmeier, 2001; Guibernau, 2004) and it is one in which there is little agreement as to its meaning (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Luedtke, 2005; Paasi, 1997). At its most basic level,

national identity refers to that sense one has of belonging to or being a part of a

nation (Billig, 1995; Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Luedtke, 2005) (e.g. New Zealand

national identity might be defined as feeling or being a New Zealander). However,

the circular reasoning inherent in such a definition warrants a more precise

conceptualisation. For example, some maintain that national identity is essentially a

form of patriotism (albeit, a non-ideological form) and is furthermore positively

linked to the degree of attachment one feels towards one's country (Huddy &

Khatib, 2007). For others, national identity helps us to retain a sense of significance

in an increasingly globalised world (Moore, 1978). Similarly, the importance of

"the other" in shaping national identity has been widely touted (Brockmeier, 2001;

Edensor, 2002; Paasi, 1997). Finally, many sociologists tend to emphasize the

collective nature of national identity (Castells, 2004), noting its "shared" qualities,

including a shared culture, a shared language and a shared territory (Guibernau,

2004; A. D. Smith, 1991). However, from a purely quantitative methodological

perspective, most research is arguably attitudinal/perception-based and is often

framed within the social psychological approach of social identity theory (SIT)

(Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1979)[6]. SIT stipulates that at least part of an individual's

identity or self-concept is based upon the social groups to which he or she belongs

"together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership"

(H. Tajfel, 1981, p. 251). Based on SIT, national identity scholars have developed

quantitative scales meant to measure certain aspects of the "value and emotional

significance attached" to an individual's membership within a nation. As a result,

quantitative research often focuses upon the attitudes and perceptions of individuals

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[6] Which is part of a larger approach sometimes referred to as the social identity approach and includes social categorisation theory (SCT) (Turner, 1985). SCT further defines the aspects of self-concept which are derived from the social categories to which an individual belongs (Turner, 1985). That is to say that SCT offers a roadmap, if you will, of how individuals manage their multiple group-based social identities.

(i.e. individuals' *feelings*) in order to enable generalisations via statistical means be made about the strength, character and composition of national attachment that is present within a particular nation[7]. For example, U.S.-based research that has looked at the factors associated with national identity has found that civic involvement (and, in particular, voting) correlates with national identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Other research has shown that ethnic identity is associated with feelings of national identity (Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997). The relationship between patriotism and dramatic events has also been studied (Li & Brewer, 2004), as well as the way in which national identity can impact support for public policy (Luedtke, 2005). Gaber (2003) looked at the age of a nation-state to determine if such a characteristic could contribute to the strength of national identity in a particular country and found that no such claim could be made—i.e. there does not appear to be a relationship between the age or relative newness of a nation-state and the level of feelings of national identity.

While there are those who debate the merit in a methodology that attempts to quantify something as complex and ever-evolving as national identity (see Billig, 1995; Jenkins, 2004; Mandler, 2006), such criticism seems misplaced. National identity is an identity, like most collective identities (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity), that is simultaneously expressed at the group/collective level by both group insiders (e.g. the United States is a beacon of freedom) and outsiders (e.g. the United States is a rogue nation) and *felt* at the individual level (e.g. I love my country). Such a distinction could, as Jenkins (2004) notes, be defined as the difference between a sociological perspective and a psychological one, or a social perspective and an

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[7] It might seem odd to think of a nation as a social group, yet if we are to accept Jenkins' premise that all human identities are by definition, social than surely we must include those of a national origin as well and by association must conclude that a nation is a social group of sorts (one of the larger, collective social categories, to be sure, but nevertheless made up of countless human (i.e. social) interactions).

individual one. As national identity scholar, Guibernau (2004) puts it, critical to

national identity is its psychological dimension, i.e. the degree to which individuals

feel a sense of national identity.   Fundamental to sound research is the notion that it

reflect the world of everyday things—that it make some intuitive sense. And while

we could reasonably debate the rationale for the existence of nations *a priori* any

national identity [e.g. is a nation an entity created and sustained to justify the

hegemonic control of one group over another? (for example, see Hobsbawm, 2012)],

such a debate, it seems to me, does not negate the fact that nations do exist (for

better or worse), that individuals live and die within nations, kill and are killed in the

name of national causes, and that as such, it seems reasonable to assume that people

would be able to express their feelings for nations and that these feelings could be

quantified, analysed and interpreted.   And although social identity theory was

developed in laboratory settings and has been criticized for this (see Jenkins, 2004;

Mandler, 2006), it has nevertheless proven effective at assessing the general

character of national attachment across a range of countries (see, for example,

Dowley & Silver, 2000; Sinnott, 2006; T. W. Smith & Kim, 2006) . Furthermore, it

is worth noting that the present research leveraged the years of national attachment

scholarship that preceded it. Five existing national attachment scales were selected

and then modified in order to locate the deeply attached Second Lifers for this study.

These attachment scales include: National Place Attachment (Kosterman &

Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997), National Identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007),

Constructive Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), Symbolic Patriotism (Huddy &

Khatib, 2007) and Uncritical Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Schatz et al., 1999)

(please see the Methodology Chapter for further discussion of these scales, their

Second Life counterparts and the use of these constructs to locate participants for the

semi-structured interviews upon which the findings of this research are based).

3. Virtual Attachment

    In this next section, I will review the characteristics of virtuality and virtual

worlds and the literature which provides some of the rationale for considering

Second Life as a platform capable of inspiring the aforementioned deeply felt, multi-

dimensional national-type feelings of attachment.

3.1. What Does it Mean to Be Virtual?

The key idea here is not that VR (virtual reality) worlds have the final claim on

reality, so much as that the RW (real world) has overstated its claim on reality.

                Maybe RW isn't the final arbiter of what's real after all.

                        -Peter Ludlow (2001, p. 4)

    I use the term virtual in the way that Rob Shields (2000, 2003) describes it,

as something real but not actualized, as a threshold between the abstract and the

material (also known as a liminal state). In other words, the "virtual is not merely an

incomplete imitation of the real, but another register or manifestation of the real"

(Shields, 2003, p. 46). Thus, with regards to a digital virtual world, the world is

real, the experiences real but "…everything is representational, a convenient fiction

by which participants 'meet' but only figuratively; elements interact 'in essence' but

not physically" (Shields, 2000, sec. 3, para. 6). To illustrate these points, consider

an entity like Second Life which mimics many of the characteristics of nationhood,

from territory to (masses of) people (Sherman, 2010b). And yet, the software which

enables SL does not possess any actual, tangible territory and is not comprised of

any actual, tangible people. In other words, the liminal nature of SL is one of the

characteristic which makes it an excellent candidate for the entity that I will later describe as virtual world nation—real but not actual. Also note that throughout the text of this thesis I use the words "actual" and "virtual" to distinguish between the actual world (i.e. planet earth) and the virtual world (i.e. Second Life). Some have used the term "real" to make this distinction (e.g. real world vs. virtual world) but this, in my view (and as supported by such scholars as Boellstorff, 2008), is a misuse of "real." Both entities, the actual planet earth and Second Life are real: they both exist within the realm of reality; what is different about them is that one—Earth—is tangible (i.e. actual) while the other—Second Life—is not (i.e. it is virtual).

Next I will review the ways in which a virtual world like Second Life, in spite of its virtuality, might inspire the type of multi-dimensional, deeply felt attachment typically reserved for actual world nations.

3.2. Aspects of SL that might inspire strong levels of attachment

At issue here is whether there are aspects of the virtual world of Second Life that might lead an individual to feel for it in the way he or she feels for an actual world nation [what Guibernau (2004) refers to as the psychological dimension of national identity; see also Tajfel and Turner's (1979) discussion of social identity theory]. From a purely visual perspective, much of SL looks and feels like a country (or series of countries), or in other words, SL possesses the territorial and societal trappings which define many if not all nations. Scattered across more than 1,100 square kilometres of virtual land (Linden Lab, 2013) are three-dimensional representations of familiar settings, including virtual villages, towns and cities. Such settings contain a wide array of virtual objects and life forms, including trees, roads, cars, houses, buildings, animals and, of course, people.

Further, such virtual representations are not merely there to be looked at, they are there to be interacted with and in some cases "inhabited," and as a result, have the potential to create the illusion (at least for some individuals) of actually "being there" [what virtual reality researchers refer to as presence (see, for example, Slater et al., 1994)]. Hypothetically, the immersive potential of SL might work to encourage the sort of emotional responses individuals feel when visiting actual world places (e.g. national landmarks) (see Williams & Vaske, 2003). There is certainly research on virtual environments to support such a claim (Biocca & Harms, 2002; Garau et al., 2005; Goel, Johnson, Junglas, & Ives, 2011; Mantymaki & Salo, 2013; McMahan & Tortell, 2004). That said, Second Life offers its members something beyond just virtual habitation; members are also able to create, design and build SL from the "ground up" [what the Second Life (2013) website refers to as "…a world imagined and created by people like you"]. This level of "people power" is something most actual world fellow nationals could only dream of achieving.

On a related note, there are many groups in SL which seem closely related to what could be termed AW civic groups. By civic groups I mean those groups which encourage civic engagement and thereby attempt to address specific concerns of society, or in this case, of Second Life. These SL groups include those that are humanitarian (e.g. those who help AW disabled people learn to use SL), educational (e.g. groups which teach members how to build and design in SL), political (e.g. groups which discuss AW or SL-specific political issues), business-related (e.g. groups which promote and encourage business activity in SL), etc. If research into the benefits of AW civic involvement is any indication (see Huddy & Khatib, 2007), virtual world civic-type groups may also facilitate the sort of involvement which

might lead to a more deeply felt emotional response to SL, generating, for example, the sort of patriotic love more typically associated with AW nations.

For some, such actual world mimicry can be a disappointment: in a virtual world where anything is possible, why do so many things look and feel so familiar? Yet, it is precisely this banality (see Billig, 1995), this reproduction of mundane actual world objects, settings, experiences and social connections which encourages me to ask the question of whether we can conceive of SL as a platform capable of inspiring the sort of deeply felt attachment typically associated with actual world nations in the first place. And if such an association seems reasonable, how might we take it one analytical step further. Specifically, what relationship might exist between an entity like Second Life that in some ways seems to mimic nation-statehood and the individual who lives there. What is the depth of the attachment which might exist between such an individual and SL? Might it rise to the level of attachment that exists between an individual and an actual world nation— what Anderson (1991) refers to as "profoundly self-sacrificing love" (p. 141)? As will be discussed in the Qualitative Results Chapters of this thesis, the answer to this question seems to be a qualified yes—for certain types of individuals, the virtual world of Second Life is every bit as meaningful and important as their own nation. Further, this research demonstrated that those individuals possessing the capacity for such strong feelings of attachment for a virtual world for the most part appear to share the characteristic of social isolation. In the next section, I will review the literature on social isolation in order to better understand the individuals unearthed by this research and to understand their relationship to virtual worlds.

4. Social Isolation

Having considered Second Life as a platform capable of inspiring a powerful pull on socially isolated individuals, let us now review the literature surrounding social isolation in order to better understand such individuals. In other words, it is worth considering not just the forms of attachment that nations inspire and not just the possibility that Second Life might inspire such deeply felt feelings of attachment, but *the individuals* who might experience such feelings of attachment in the first place.

Social isolation, as it turns out, is a construct that runs throughout this thesis. For based on the results of this research, isolation and its ancillary dimensions stand at the heart of this research, its significance feathers throughout the findings, entangled in nearly all that is unearthed. What does it mean for an individual to be socially isolated and what are the potential ramifications of such isolation? As Robert Putnam (1996/2000) has suggested in his seminal work, *Bowling Alone*, our ties to social groups specifically and communities more broadly are central to the human condition. As Putnam describes it, we are dependent on these ties, these feelings of belonging. Both our contribution to these groups and communities and the feelings of belonging and connectedness that such involvement engenders – these are what enable us to develop a strong sense of self which thereby allows us to thrive and protects us from adversity. Social inclusion and support, in other words, is essential in determining quality of life.

4.1. Social Isolation – An Overview

Let us first consider the concept of social isolation, its component parts and the ancillary characteristics encompassed by this construct. Social isolation is an overarching concept which Barry (1998) describes as "the phenomenon of non-participation (of an individual or group) in a society's mainstream institutions" (p.

iv). To this I would add that the socially isolated also do not participate in society's

activities, gatherings and events. Within this overarching concept, there are two

relevant (i.e. relevant to the present research) interrelated sub-phenomena: social

exclusion and social marginalization. Social exclusion is a particular form of social

isolation which occurs when the social isolation an individual or group experiences

is beyond their own control (Barry, 1998). For example, physically disabled

individuals are oftentimes prevented from participating in certain social activities for

reasons of accessibility (e.g. social gatherings may occur in buildings with limited or

no wheel chair access) (Elwan, 1999; O'grady, Pleasence, Balmer, Buck, & Genn,

2004; Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004). Another form of social isolation, social

marginalization, is closely related to the phenomena of social exclusion, for a

socially marginalized individual, like a socially excluded individual, will be

excluded from certain institutions and activities. However, rather than being

obstructed in a concrete, knowable way (e.g. via law, fence or accessibility

constraints), the marginalization often manifests via individuals being "stereotyped,

rendered voiceless, silenced, not taken seriously, peripheralized, homogenized,

ignored, dehumanized and ordered around" (Van Den Tillaart, Kurtz, & Cash, 2009,

p. 96). Thus, the individual who is marginalized often suffers some form of

stigmatization. As Corley & Goren (1997) suggest, the stigmatized individual is one

who is marked an "outsider" and it is this mark which discredits them,

"disqualifying [them] from full social acceptance" (p101) (See also Stevens & Hall,

1988). And in some cases social isolation may be due to reasons more difficult to

explain. For example, it could be that a person is socially isolated due to forms of

psychological disorders, physical disabilities and/or geographic obstacles which

make social interaction difficult, if not impossible. In other cases, it may be that

individuals simply prefer being alone. As will be shown in the Qualitative Results Chapters of this thesis, social isolation, as well as the sub-categories of social exclusion and social marginalization, plays a role in providing meaning to the results unearthed via this research.

However, in order to fully appreciate what social isolation is it is also important to consider what it is not. Social isolation's antithesis is best described as social inclusion or social support. Sidney Cobb (1976) describes social support as, "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations" (p. 300). This "information," as Cobb puts it, could also be described as knowledge gained directly—through contact with friends and family (Cobb, 1976; Colabianchi, 2004), and/or indirectly—through connections to places (Dam & Eyles, 2012; Williams & Vaske, 2003), groups and communities (Etzioni, 2003; Freenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Goodwin, 2006; Kemp, 1996; Otani, 1999; Putnam, 1996/2000; Wellman, 1999) and even nations (Anderson, 1991, 1998; Billig, 1995; Bos & Nell, 2006; Castells, 1996/2000; Cerwonka, 1997; Hall, 1992; Jones & Smith, 2005; Marks, 1999; A. D. Smith, 1991) .

Let us first consider this notion of connectedness to places which includes community and national attachment as well as the tangentially related construct of belongingness. As many have suggested, the places we visit, live in and the places we yearn for can have profound impacts on our sense of self (Dam & Eyles, 2012; Williams & Vaske, 2003). According to social identity theory (Jenkins, 2004; Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1979), our social identity is formed via a social comparison process in which persons who are similar to the self are categorized as in-group and those who differ as out-group (Turner, 1985). Thus, according to this theory, our sense of

self is very much linked to the groups to which we belong or aspire to belong (Cabiria, 2008; Turner, 1985). A sense of belonging, or what Hagery, Williams, Coyne and Early (1996) refer to as feeling "loved, needed and valued by others"(p. 237) as well as "sharing similar or complimentary characteristics that allows the individual to feel part of a group, system or environment" (p. 237), is important to supporting an individual's "mental health and social well being" (p. 235). For example, Anant (1969) posits that one possible explanation "for the lower incidence of mental illness in India as compared to Western societies like Canada and the USA…is the sense of belongingness we find [in India] in strong social ties in family, village community, and caste groups" (p. 393). Therefore, both the communities and nations in which we live can have profound impacts on our social identity and this in turn can have profound impacts on our feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Anant, 1969; Cabiria, 2008; Hagerty et al., 1996). Yet our social identity as related to the community or nation in which we belong cannot so easily be separated from the place that such a community or nation encompasses. As Dam and Eyles (2012) put it, "Belonging is discovered and experienced in places" (p. 421). And for those feelings of belonging to community and nation to be realized, there must be some connection to our homeland, for it is this homeland that gives us the sense of home and belonging which puts us at ease, protecting us from the potentially destabilizing outside world (Dam & Eyles, 2012; Vandemark, 2007). Insofar as displaced peoples are concerned, living outside the homeland can add both a "physical and psychological burden" (Dam & Eyles, 2012, p. 4) for such people must live in a place to which they do not belong. Taken further, homelessness, as Vandemark (2007) suggests, "is not simply the absence of a physical domicile; it is often and importantly absent or reduced social ties and the

resources that these represent and a diminished sense of connectedness or belonging" (p243). "When we lose our place in the world or our role in society," Vandemark contends, "the basic sense of self and belonging is diminished" (p 242). And as previously mentioned, a negative impact on self has a similarly negative impact on our feelings of self-worth and self-esteem which can result in "anxiety and depression" (Vandemark, 2007, p. 242).

4.2. Social Isolation and Life Satisfaction

Considered together, social isolation and the lack or absence of social support that social isolation necessarily portends may have a profound impact on individuals. For example, consider the vast and ongoing research on the topic of happiness and life satisfaction. Among other factors, social functions including social support, social relationships and social activities all positively contribute to the construct of individual happiness (Argyle, 2013; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Veenhoven, 2013). One study in particular measured the impact of social relationships on individual happiness and life satisfaction and found social relationships to have a far more positive effect on happiness than actual increases in monetary income (Powdthavee, 2008). Other studies have noted the protective properties of social support (for a review of social support studies, see Colabianchi, 2004). For example, Cobb (1976) found that social support can protect against a number of psychological and health-related issues, including low birth weight, alcoholism and depression and furthermore reduce the amount of recovery time needed after surgery and reduce the amount of medication needed for some ailments. Similarly, House (2001) notes the plethora of research which demonstrates the positive effect of social relationships on health, though he calls for more research investigating the reasons for such effects. But perhaps most strikingly, according to

Colobianchi (2004), many social support studies "have confirmed the association between the lack of social ties or social networks and mortality for almost every cause of death" (p. 1231). Colobianchi goes on to state that "social support provides a basic human need, namely, the need for companionship, intimacy, and reassurance of self-worth" (p. 1231). Social support, in other words, is a key component to the well-being of individuals from all walks of life.

And yet despite the positive impacts that social support and social inclusion can have upon individuals, many remain socially isolated. Again, some of this isolation may be due to any of a number of factors, including those put forth by such scholars as Putnam (1996/2000) who points to such things as the diminishing role that community plays in Western culture in particular and the dwindling participation in social and recreational groups and affiliations as well as the isolating impact of television. And while these types of factors surely do play a role in the social isolation of individuals living with various physical, health-related and/or psychological conditions, such factors, as Putnam indicates, are more broadly directed at the (United States) public at large.

4.3. The Relationship between Social Isolation and Health-Related, Physical and/or Psychological Conditions

However, as the present research ultimately surfaced socially isolated individuals who possess health-related, physical and/or psychological conditions of one type or another, it is worth reviewing the literature that explores the relationship between social isolation and such individuals. For example, Longman, Passey, Singer and Morgan's (2013) analysis of data from a previous study showed the negative impact of social isolation on patients suffering from chronic disease; social isolation was found to contribute to "frequent and/or avoidable" (p. 223) hospital admissions for such patients. Similarly, Blickem, et al. (2013) found that

community activities and social support improved the lives of individuals suffering from long term conditions (LCTs). Further, Viemerö and Krause (1998) found that the degree to which physically disabled individuals report satisfaction with their life is a function of three factors: their social integration, their "occupation or meaningful occupational activities…and [their] sense of the meaning of life" (p. 317). Social support and social inclusion, then, are critical in the lives of all people but no less important in the lives of those who possess health, physical and/or psychological conditions.

4.4. Virtual and Actual World Therapeutic Dimensions of Social Isolation

As the results of the present study will demonstrate, a therapeutic relationship was found to exist between the virtual world of Second Life and the socially isolated individuals who participated in this research. It is therefore worth reviewing the literature which explores the ways in which social isolation may be assuaged (or not), whether via actual world means or virtual means. A number of researchers and practitioners offer several interrelated suggestions. Firstly, Tilden and Weinert (1987) recommend that a nurse practitioner should include "social isolation and social impairment" (p. 613) as one possible diagnosis of those suffering from chronic illness. Moreover, nurses should use this diagnosis as a first step towards developing an intervention plan for implementing solutions and remedies to such isolation. Similarly, Hagerty et al. (1996) suggest that clinicians develop initiatives which enable patients to improve their "capacity and skills to augment their sense of belonging" (p. 244). As these suggestions demonstrate, the goal of such interventions is to improve the quality of life of those who experience social isolation. As Albrecht and Devlieger (1999) put it, those with disabilities "who have a high quality of life" among other things "engage in their social

networks and remain connected. They give to and receive from others in reciprocal relationships. These people re-create their social worlds in a balance with the different types of social glue that hold their lives together" (p. 986).

From a virtual world perspective, there is considerable research which demonstrates the benefits of online virtual worlds as a platform to ameliorate the lives of those living with various conditions, whether physical, health-related and/or psychological. For example, Gilbert et al. (2013) conducted research which found that the online virtual world of Second Life can provide psychological benefits to those living with physical disabilities. Similarly, Stendal et al. (2013) concluded that Second Life does provide opportunities for improving social inclusion, independence and well-being for those living with disabilities. And for certain stigmatized and marginalized populations, Cabiria (2008) found that Second Life "can reduce real world stigmatizing effects of loneliness, isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and pessimism" (p. 9). Furthermore, a group of cross-disciplinary researchers offer a framework for using Second Life as a virtual therapeutic community (Good, Gnanayutham, Sambhanthan, & Panjganj, 2013). And Best & Butler (2014) developed a centre in Second Life to accommodate people living with myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS). The researchers provided a follow-up report to this work finding that this centre within Second Life "allowed people who were socially isolated to forge social support systems across geographical distances" (p. 1). However, they also found that certain technical improvements needed to be made to the SL centre they had developed and recommend that such considerations should be made on future projects of a similar kind. Although research into the therapeutic capacity of virtual worlds is still in its infancy, the indication at present is that virtual worlds like Second Life can have a

profound impact on those who are socially isolated and living with various physical, psychological and/or health-related conditions.

In summary, the literature reviewed herein covers three broad areas of interest: (1) the complex and multi-dimensional attachment which individuals feel for nations, (2) the rationale for considering virtual worlds more generally and Second Life more specifically as a platform which might afford and inspire similar multi-dimensional feelings of attachment in their members; and (3) a review of the literature on the types of individuals surfaced by the present research, namely those individuals who could be classified as socially isolated and as having some form of health-related, physical and/or psychological condition. As the results of this research suggest, it is the socially isolated individual who seems to possess the capacity to experience such multi-dimensional feelings of attachment. From a national attachment perspective, the literature explored suggests that the attachment people feel for nations is strong and multi-dimensional, encompassing feelings of love for the homeland/geography, the people and the government; it is an attachment that ultimately influences individual identity and social identity. In terms of the rationale for considering Second Life as a platform capable of inspiring deep feelings of attachment in its users, Second Life's multi-dimensional characteristics seem capable of such inspiration. Lastly, the literature on socially isolated individuals (those unearthed by this research as having the capacity to experience such deep feelings of attachment for SL) indicates that they are at risk of being marginalized and stigmatized by society, they are more likely to possess feelings of low self-worth and their overall satisfaction with life tends to be on the low end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, virtual worlds like Second Life have been demonstrated to serve as places of belonging and as avenues for improving social support, thereby

reducing the negative effects of health-related, physical and/or psychological conditions on the socially isolated individual.

      In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology put in place in order to address the question of how to describe and understand those individuals who possess a multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

This chapter begins with an interrogation of the form of mixed methods research applied to this investigation. Next, it describes the exploratory nature of the research. After this, the chapter provides a more in depth discussion of the methodological process that was followed for this research project. Subsequent to this is an in-depth discussion of each step in this process, including the quantitative methodology sampling approach, participants, procedures, measures and descriptive results. Finally, there is a brief discussion of the AUTEC-approved Ethics guidelines which were adhered to and which guided this research.

Mixed Methods Overview

Overall Study Design and Purpose

I used a methodology that would help me answer the primary research question of this investigation, namely how can we describe and understand those participants who possess a robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life. But before I could describe and understand such individuals, I first had to find them. And in order to do that I devised a plan that would help me to locate those individuals that would be more likely to possess the capacity for robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life. This plan involved mixed methods—one that started with quantitative and ended with qualitative methodologies. I took a novel approach to this search for the multi-dimensionally attached Second Lifers. I believed that to locate those who were attached to SL in a robust, multi-dimensional way, I should ask questions of Second Lifers that were similar to those that researchers have asked individuals when studying actual world national attachment. The rationale for this approach is that actual world national attachment represents

the type of attachment for which I was seeking, i.e. robust and multi-dimensional

(see, for example, Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002; Hall, 1992; A. D.

Smith, 1991).

Thus, I leveraged years of scholarly work in the area of actual world national

attachment by selecting five existing national attachment quantitative scales (or

dimensions) which covered a broad range of such attachment to serve as the means

of locating relevant participants for this study. I then re-wrote the items which

comprised these national attachment scales so that they applied specifically to

Second Life (see below for specifics on the attachment scales and how this rewriting

was performed). And then I administered a quantitative survey containing these

scale items to 373 Second Lifers. Those participants who scored high levels of

multi-dimensional attachment for SL, I classified as nationally attached Second

Lifers—this group served as the primary participant sample for this research. Those

who scored low levels of multi-dimensional attachment to SL, I classified as weakly

attached Second Lifers. The weakly attached would serve as a comparison group to

the primary group, for as other researchers have suggested, it is through contrast and

comparison to "the other" that we develop a more complete understanding of the

subject of interest (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Silverman, 2004).

Component Mixed Methods Design

This study's methodological design generally follows Greene's (2007)

classification of the component design in mixed methods inquiry. Greene describes

a component design as one "in which the methods…are employed independent of

one another during the course of the study," (p. 125) as opposed to an integrated,

iterative design in which the two methods "interact with one another during the

course of the study" (p. 125). Specifically, the quantitative results were used in two

primary ways. First, they were used as a way to get a general sense of who the participants were via the use of descriptive statistics. Second, the quantitative results were used to purposively identify and target participants for the qualitative portion of the research. It should be noted that using quantitative results as a sampling strategy for subsequent qualitative research is a tested practice employed by a number of other researchers (see, for example, Christ, 2007; Elford, Bolding, Davis, Sherr, & Hart, 2004).

This mixed methods approach maps to the study design in the following manner: the quantitative research served as the research lens through which further qualitative research could then be used to explore and better understand the phenomena of robust, multi-dimensional attachment to a virtual world. In other words, the quantitative methodology framed the research by providing a filter through which participants were either classified as nationally attached Second Lifers or conversely as participants who were not attached to Second Life in this way. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were then used to compare and contrast those who were deemed to possess strong, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life and those who possessed weak attachment. Such comparisons were performed in order to answer the overarching research question: How can we describe and understand those participants who possess a robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life.

The Exploratory Nature of the Research

An interrogation of this concept of exploration is helpful in further defining the purpose and intent of this study. In order to further clarify this notion of exploratory research, Stebbins's (2001) discussion of a number of dictionary definitions of exploration is instructive, and in particular the two forms he labels

"limited exploration" and "exploration for discovery" (p. 2). Limited exploration involves the systematic search for some specific thing. By contrast, with exploration for discovery, a researcher explores "for the purposes of discovery and adventure" persisting "until everything of importance… has been discovered" (pp. 2-3). A discovery-based exploration, then, is one in which the approach to research is broad yet thorough. Thus, it might be useful to think of these two forms of exploratory research in two ways—limited exploration as a flashlight (or torch) approach in which one searches for some very specific thing; the other, a discovery-based exploration, as a floodlight approach to research, in which one attempts to study the site in question holistically in an open-minded manner without too many, or any, predispositions—what might also be termed a grounded theoretical approach to research (Glaser & Strauss, 1980).

The present investigation involved both of these forms of exploration, and each was linked to a specific methodological approach. That is to say that limited exploration describes the primary way in which quantitative research was deployed and exploration for discovery describes the primary way in which qualitative research was deployed. In other words, the main purpose of the quantitative research was to identify a specific type of individual, one who possessed a robust and multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life, similar in kind to the attachment individuals feel for AW nations. With the quantitative portion of this research, a limited exploration occurred, i.e. a systematic search for some specific thing. On the other hand, the main purpose of the qualitative research was to further explore the form of attachment uncovered in the first phase of this research. The qualitative research then was employed in order to arrive at a more thorough description and understanding of those who possessed such attachment. Thus, an exploration of

discovery occurred, i.e. an exploration of SL attachment was conducted until everything of importance was discovered. It could be argued, perhaps, that by framing discovery within the confines of SL attachment, such rigidity may seem at odds with the openness that the term discovery is meant to convey; nevertheless, a particular focus or use of boundaries should not disqualify the application of the term. In any case, in practice, such boundaries were employed as guiding principles rather than rigid rules. For example, the semi-structured nature of the qualitative interviews allowed for a number of off-topic discoveries to be made—some of which fed back into the thinking surrounding the research. In particular, the qualitative interviews often veered into very personal actual world revelations including, for example, health-related and psychological conditions, physical disabilities and/or abusive relationships. Because these types of discussions emerged in many of the interviews conducted, particularly among participants who possessed multi-dimensional attachment to SL, it became apparent that such issues were central to an understanding of multi-dimensional attachment to SL. The pilot phase of the qualitative research alerted me to the potential importance of such personal revelations, and as a result, I ensured that such discussions were given latitude to develop.

The Step by Step Methodological Process

In practice, the specific steps taken in operationalizing this mixed methods research were as follows:

(1) I first developed a quantitative questionnaire with a focus on five actual world national attachment measures as well as corresponding Second Life attachment measures;

(2) I next piloted the questionnaire to a sample of Second Lifers (n=30) in order to determine the effectiveness of the scales and make revisions to the survey based on these results;

(3) I then developed a participant sample for the main phase of the quantitative research using both purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques;

(4) I then administered the piloted and refined questionnaire to the main phase sample of Second Lifers (n=373);

(5) Once the questionnaire phase was complete, I ran preliminary analyses of the quantitative results in order to describe the participant sample and to locate those from this sample who fit the criteria of interest for inclusion in the qualitative phase of the research.

    a. The preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics of the sample and analyses of the attachment results, both Second Life and Actual World;

(6) I next developed the plan and procedures for targeting participants for the qualitative portion of the research;

    a. This included performing the quantitative analyses necessary to develop a sample of participants from which to select participants for the qualitative portion of the research;

    b. The two key filters for developing the primary sample included selecting those participants who believed Second Life was like a nation and scored high across the five dimensions of Second Life attachment;

    c. The two key filters for developing the comparison sample included selecting those participants who believed Second Life was not like a nation and scored low across the five dimensions of Second Life attachment;

(7) I next developed topics of discussion and specific questions to be used during

    the semi-structured interviews for the qualitative portion of the research;

(8) I then contacted potential participants from the quantitative-developed sample to

    serve as participants for the Pilot Phase of the qualitative portion of the research;

      a. I conducted a pilot phase for the qualitative portion of the research to

         include semi-structured interviews using questions and topics previously

         developed;

(9) I then refined and revised the interview procedures and interview topics and

    questions based on the results of the Pilot Phase;

(10)   Next, I contacted potential participants from the quantitative-developed

    sample to serve as Main Phase qualitative participants;

      a. I then began conducting semi-structured interviews with participants for

         the Main Phase qualitative research;

(11)   Next, I coded interview responses during the course of the Main Phase so

    that ongoing results were able to iteratively influence ongoing interviews,

    allowing for the refinement of questions and topics as the interviews continued;

      a. Once interviews were complete, I conducted final analyses of interview

         data, using a thematic funnel approach (see Marshall & Rossman, 2006;

         Ryan & Bernard, 2000) in which codes were grouped to form categories,

         and categories were grouped to form themes .

Methodological Process Details
The following will provide more details around each of the above steps taken.

Quantitative Methodology - Questionnaire Development

    As stated, the questionnaire was developed with an emphasis on attachment,

but not just any type of attachment. Rather, actual world national attachment was

drawn upon to develop the Second Life attachment scales used in this study. In order to capture the robust, multi-dimensionality of actual world national attachment, this study applied five existing Actual World national attachment constructs to the virtual world of Second Life. In particular, these constructs include: National Place Attachment (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997), National Identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), Constructive Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), Symbolic Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007) and Uncritical Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Schatz et al., 1999). National Place Attachment is a construct which measures the level of attachment individuals have for their nation based on feelings of closeness to it as the place in which they grew up. National Identity is a construct which measures the degree to which an individual's identity is defined by their nation and their relationship to their nation. Constructive Patriotism measures the degree to which an individual feels attachment for their nation based upon recognition of the importance of improving one's nation through efforts of positive change. Symbolic Patriotism measures the degree to which an individual feels attachment for their nation via the symbols of that nation (e.g. the national anthem and flag). Finally, Uncritical Patriotism measures the degree to which an individual harbours staunch, unwavering feelings of attachment for their nation (e.g. as expressed by the notion "my nation right or wrong").

These Actual World constructs were used in two ways within the questionnaire. First, they were used as is (i.e. items were used unmodified from their original construction as developed by the scholars who originally constructed them) in order to measure the various feelings of attachment participants have for their actual world nations. Second, they were leveraged and re-worded in order to measure feelings of attachment participants have for Second Life. The re-wording

essentially entailed replacing the word "nation" or "country" with the words

"Second Life." As an example, the scale National Identity includes the item: "How

important is being a member of your country to you?" For the corresponding Second

Life scale, SL Identity, this item was changed to read: "How important is being a

member of Second Life to you?"

Quantitative Pilot Phase

The survey was piloted to 30 members of Second Life in order to refine the

survey instrument in advance of its official launch. The piloting phase verified that

most of the national attachment scales were producing reliable, valid results.

Reliability analyses indicated that only one scale was producing unreliable results.

The two-item scale, Nationalism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), produced α<.60, and as a

result, this scale was removed from the survey. Also, this round helped to improve

the wording of several of the items. See Table 1 below for a description of final

scales and final item wordings.

Table 1. Actual World National Attachment Scales and Their Second Life

Counterparts

Actual World Scales and Items	Second Life Scales and Items
National Identity (measured on a 3 point Likert Scale)	**Second Life Identity (measured on a 3 point Likert Scale)**
To what extent do you see yourself as a typical member of your country?	To what extent do you see yourself as a typical Second Lifer?
How important is being a member of your country to you?	How important is being a Second Lifer to you?
How close do you feel to your country?	How close do you feel to Second Life?
How well does the name of your country describe you? (e.g. American, Canadian, Japanese, etc.)	How well does the term Second Lifer describe you?
When talking about your homeland country, how often do you say "we" instead of "they"?	When talking about Second Lifers, how often do you say "we" instead of "they"?
Symbolic Patriotism (measured on a 3 point Likert Scale)	**Second Life Symbolic Patriotism (measured on a 3 point Likert Scale)**
How good does it make you feel when you hear your country's national anthem?	How good does it make you feel when you hear the background sounds of Second Life (e.g. wind, footsteps, the sound of typing, etc.)?

How good does it make you feel when you see your country's flag flying?	How good does it make you feel when you see the Second Life insignia/logo?
Uncritical Patriotism (measured on a 7 point Likert Scale)	**Second Life Uncritical Patriotism (measured on a 7 point Likert Scale)**
People who do not wholeheartedly support my nation should live somewhere else.	Individuals who do not wholeheartedly support Second Life should leave Second Life.
My nation is almost always right.	[note: this item was deleted due to its poor construction]
For the most part, people who protest and demonstrate against my nation are good, upstanding, intelligent people. [note: this item was reverse coded]	For the most part, Second Lifers who protest or demonstrate against Second Life are good, upstanding and intelligent individuals. [note: this item was reverse coded]
I believe that the policies of my nation are almost always the morally correct ones.	I believe that Second Life policies are almost always the morally correct ones.
There is too much criticism of my nation in the world, and we its citizens, should not criticize it.	There is too much criticism of Second Life in the world, and we its members, should not criticize it.
I support my country's leaders even if I disagree with their actions.	I support the owners and administrators of Second Life even if I disagree with their actions.
I support my country's policies for the very reason that they are the policies of my country.	I support Second Life policies for the very reason that they are the policies of Second Life.
Constructive Patriotism (measured on a 7 point Likert Scale)	**Second Life Constructive Patriotism (measured on a 7 point Likert Scale)**
People should work hard to move my nation in a positive direction.	Second Lifers should work hard to move Second Life in a positive direction.
If I criticize my nation, I do so out of love for my country.	If I criticize Second Life, I do so out of love for Second Life.
I oppose some of the policies of my nation because I care about my nation and want to improve it.	I oppose some Second Life policies because I care about Second Life and want to improve it.
I express my attachment to my nation by supporting efforts at positive change within my nation.	I express my attachment to Second Life by supporting efforts at positive change within Second Life.
National Place Attachment (measured on a 7 point Likert Scale)	**Second Life Place Attachment (measured on a 7 point Likert Scale)**
I would really not want to move to another country.	I would not want to leave Second Life for another online virtual world.
I have warm feelings for the place where I grew up.	I have warm feelings for Second Life.
I feel no differently about the place I grew up than any other place. [Note: this item was reverse coded]	I feel no differently about Second Life than any other online virtual world. [Note: this item was reverse coded]
I would be willing to leave my country for good. [Note: this item was reverse coded]	I would be willing to leave Second Life for good. [Note: this item was reverse coded]
No actual world equivalent	**Second Life Nation Perception (single item measured on a 7 point Likert scale)**
No actual world equivalent	To what degree do you agree with the following statement: Second Life is like a real world nation.

Once the survey was refined, the quantitative participant sample was

developed. The development of the participant sample included the following

procedures.

Quantitative Sampling Procedures

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a broad sampling strategy was employed, one which relied upon both purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Although a purposive sampling approach (and to a lesser degree, a convenient sampling approach) is more typically associated with qualitative research, quantitative research also relies upon such strategies (see Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003), particularly with respect to research that is novel and exploratory in nature—as is the case with this study. That is to say that because it was unclear whether a meaningful number of Second Life members might experience a multi-dimensional and deeply felt attachment to SL, a more targeted approach seemed justified and necessary.

Furthermore, the nature of the research aside, the rationale for a purposive sampling strategy was also due to some of the more problematic SL demographics. For example, whilst SL boasted a population of some 4 million residents, only 24,000 were online concurrently, or less than 1% of all members (Fetscherin & Lang, 2007). Locating any participants, let alone ones possessing the sort of deeply felt SL attachment of interest here, would likely be difficult and time consuming. This problem was confirmed by discussions with other researchers who had conducted survey-based studies in SL (Krotoski, 2007; Zwiers, 2007)—and, in fact, these researchers also recommended a much more targeted sampling approach. Therefore, random sampling was ruled out for both practical and substantive reasons. Instead, both purposive and convenient sampling strategies were employed.

Purposive Criterion Sampling

Criteria used to locate SLers who might possess multi-dimensional attachment to SL were based on an actual world association that exists between a

desire to improve society (or what might be loosely termed civic involvement) and strong feelings of national identity/attachment (Brockmeier, 2001; Castells, 2004; Golden, 2001; Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Khazaleh, 2005; Parker, 2004; Thompson, 2001). Thus, the criteria focused on SL groups devoted to improving SL through civic, cultural, humanitarian, technical, educational or social means[8]. Based upon these dimensions, groups were located via the Second Life search engine using such keywords as "education," "art", "theatre", "improve," "activism," "business", and "economy." Initially, approximately 1,500 groups were identified. In order to narrow this list of groups down to a more manageable number, content analysis was performed to determine the potential relevance of each of these groups to the pre-defined criteria. I followed the directive qualitative content analysis approach outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) in which the analysis starts with a theory (in this case a civil society construct) which is used to guide the application of codes. In practice, this involved the hand coding of each identified SL group's public profile using a three point scale representing the degree to which each group profile fit within the construct of virtual civic-type involvement (1=acceptable relevance; 2=uncertain relevance; 3=low relevance). Eventually, a total of 225 groups were identified as potentially fulfilling the requirements of virtual civic type involvement (those groups which were coded as 1). Each of these 225 groups was invited to participate in the research via contact made to group owners and/or officers, i.e. I asked these individuals if they would be willing to take my survey. I also asked

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[8] These are dimensions of civil society as specified by the Commission on Global Governance (1999). However, the use of such dimensions in this research should not be misinterpreted as an indication that SL represents a civil society in some way. It may very well (see, for example, Holmberg & Huvila, 2008), but that is not the intention of such use here. These dimensions have been employed only as a guide toward eliciting some form of civic "type" involvement in SL.

these group leaders to post a message to their groups requesting participation in my survey from all of the members of their groups.

Convenient Sampling Procedures

In an effort to challenge my own assumptions about what type of Second Lifer might be inclined to possess multi-dimensional attachment to SL, I expanded the sampling strategy to include a more traditional convenient sampling approach. Ultimately, I hoped that such an approach would challenge my criteria assumptions by corralling individuals whom might have been excluded via the group purposive sampling approach.

Using this strategy, owners of some of the largest groups in SL (irrespective of the degree to which these groups exhibited signs of civic involvement) were approached and asked to post messages to their groups requesting participation in the survey. Though clearly not a purely impartial, unbiased sample as would be generated using random sampling, a convenient sampling approach did serve to remove much of the control I placed on sampling using the previously mentioned criteria purposive sampling approach.

Administer Questionnaire to Sample of Second Lifers

Once the sample was determined, the next step was to administer the questionnaire to this population. The questionnaire was administered in the following ways—note: one approach did not precede another rather I utilized each approach whenever and wherever the opportunity arose. Approach 1 (purposive criterion sampling): Leaders of constructively patriotic groups were contacted and asked to post a message to their groups notifying their members that a researcher would like them to participate in an online survey. Approach 2 (convenient sampling): Leaders of populous groups (regardless of the degree to which they were

constructively patriotic) were contacted and asked to post the same message to their

groups. Both of these messages included a link to the online survey. As a result of

these messages being posted, participants would then visit the online survey and

complete it. These two approaches continued until the number of participants

reached n=373. At that point, the administration of the questionnaire was

concluded.

In the next section, I will discuss the quantitative descriptive findings.

Quantitative Descriptive Findings

In this section, the relevant quantitative descriptive findings are discussed.

First, the preliminary procedures are outlined followed by a discussion of the

descriptive characteristics of the participants, including AW, VW and mixed

AW/VW characteristics. These descriptive statistics are provided in order to give a

sense of the types of individuals who participated in the quantitative phase of the

research. Next, the primary study attachment scales are discussed, and, in particular,

the AW and SL attachment scales. Descriptive attachment scale results are then

provided followed by the validity analyses which were performed on these scales,

both substantive and statistical validity analyses.

Data Clean-Up

The following preliminary analyses were conducted on the full sample. First,

the data was examined for outliers, missing data, the conforming and re-coding of

short answers and other problems. Simple univariate analyses (e.g., skewness,

mean, standard deviation) were performed to ensure that the data met statistical

assumptions for subsequent tests. For variables formed from several items (e.g.

scales such as Uncritical Patriotism), mean scores of these scales were calculated to

create a summary score. Correlations and univariate analysis of variance were

performed to look at patterns of bivariate associations in the data. Descriptive statistics were computed in order to characterize the sample.

Descriptive Statistics - Participants

Participants were 373 Second Life members. A description of the participant sample includes both AW characteristics and SL virtual world characteristics.

Descriptive Statistics - AW Characteristics

Participants were evenly divided between males and females (50.3% and 49.7%, respectively) and were at least 16 years of age (mean age=36; SD=12.25). Additionally, most participants were employed full time (60%), nearly half had completed a university degree or higher, and 34% were married. As this study is decidedly focused upon national type identity/attachment, the AW nationality of the participants is of potential relevance. Although SL is ostensibly available to anyone in the actual world, the research sample had a pronounced U.S., New Zealand and United Kingdom bias. Sixty percent of participants claimed U.S. as their homeland (*n*=223), 9% New Zealand (*n*=35), 9% United Kingdom (*n*=34) and 22% other (*n*=81, typically Australia and Canada).

It is also worth noting that the vast majority of study participants (88%) have lived their entire lives in their respective nations. Thus, we are for the most part discussing people with allegiance to a single nation (ignoring, of course, the profound impact that ethnicity, for example, can play on one's national leanings) (see Gaber, 2003; Liu, Lawrence, & Ward, 2002; Salaita, 2005; Sidanius et al., 1997; Wald & Williams, 2005). Moreover, people may feel attachments for certain nations for reasons not entirely clear and such "concentric circles of loyalty and belonging [are] in fact, quite common, and very much what one would expect in a

world of multiple ties and identities…" according to Anthony D. Smith (1991, p. 175).

Descriptive Statistics - Second Life Characteristics

In addition to the aforementioned AW characteristics, each participant also possessed characteristics specific to their Second Life membership. For example, participants spent an average of 30 hours per week in SL (Median Hours= 24; SD=23); this is an important statistic to note as this along with the notion that *SL is like a nation* were used to filter participants for inclusion in the qualitative phase of the research.

Other characteristics of note: 46% paid for their membership, while 54% opted for a basic/free membership. Moreover, 43% used only one avatar, while 19% used five or more. Sixty eight percent of participants earned money in SL, and of that number, 7% earned enough in SL to account for more than half of their total (AW+SL) income. More participants (27%) listed socializing as their most common activity in SL than any other.   However, also ranking high as most common activity were building (19%), exploring (16%), role-playing (15%) and business-related activities (14%). Sixty three percent claimed to have an avatar that was single (i.e. not married or partnered), 27% claimed to have some type of SL-specific family members (i.e. Second Lifers who they consider to be "like" family) and 84% used human-based avatars (as opposed to animal, alien, insect or some other non-human form).

Descriptive Statistics - AW/SL Characteristics Comparisons

Some characteristics warrant direct AW/SL comparisons. For example, of the participants who are married or partnered in both AW and SL (n=73), 37% are married/partnered to the same person across both domains while 55% are not (i.e.

their AW spouse/partner is not the same person to whom they are married/partnered

in SL). 97% of female participants' most frequently used avatar is also a female.

Male participants, on the other hand, are more likely than females to use an avatar

that does not share their AW gender, with 11% using female avatars and 5% some

other "gender" (e.g. robot, dragon, transgender, etc.) Still, a clear majority of males

(83%) do use male avatars.

In addition to the above descriptive statistics, several measures were also

recorded and analysed at the conclusion of the quantitative portion of the research.

The following describes the measures which were analysed and following that are

statistics which describe these measures across the sample.

Measures

All participants indicated AW demographic information such as *age*, *gender*,

0=female, 1=male, *marital status*, 1=single, 2=married, 3=living with partner,

4=divorced, 5=widower/ed, and *nationality*. For nationality, participants typed-in the

country that was their homeland and then nationality was coded based on those

responses to 1=US, 2=New Zealand, 3=United Kingdom (i.e. England, Wales,

Scotland and North and South Ireland) and 4=all others (typically Canada and

Australia). These particular nationalities and supra-nationality (in the case of the

UK) were selected because they included enough participants to form statistically

meaningful groups (albeit borderline in the case of New Zealand and the UK and

admittedly possessing unequal sample sizes when compared with the US sample).

For some analyses, these were recoded as 1=US, 0=other. They also provided

employment status, 0=employed and 1=not employed. They also indicated whether

or not they had a *chronic health problem*, 0=no and 1=yes.

Further, participants also included information on SL use, including *number of hours* spent in SL per week, whether or not they *earned money* in SL, the amount of *money earned* in SL (in Linden Dollars), and whether or not they had any SL-specific *family members*.

Moreover, one SL-specific measure was used to assess the perception that SL is like a nation. The degree to which SL is *like a nation* was measured on a 1-item, 7-point scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. This item was developed for this study and is an important one to note for it was used, along with median hours spent in SL per week as a filter for targeting participants for the qualitative portion of the research..

C*ivic involvement* was measured for both the virtual and actual world. In this measure, participants provided the number of hours per week they spent engaged in a number of civic-type activities, both in SL and in their AW nations (note: AW hours are non-paid hours), including educational, social and cultural activities. [These dimensions were derived from the Commission on Global Governance's (1999) discussion of what constitutes a civil society.] Total weekly hours were summed for all activities for each participant.

AW and SL Attachment Scales

In order to target participants for the later phase qualitative portion of the research, five existing national attachment scales were selected and employed within the online survey. Due to the novel and exploratory nature of this research, the following five scales cover a broad spectrum of attitudes in order to cast as wide an "attachment net" as possible: Symbolic Patriotism, Constructive Patriotism, Uncritical Patriotism, National Place Attachment and National Identity.

In addition to the above AW national attachment scales, corresponding scales were developed to measure the level of attachment participants felt for Second Life; these scales include: SL Symbolic Patriotism, SL Constructive Patriotism, SL Uncritical Patriotism, SL Place Attachment, and SL Identity. The SL attachment scales were developed based upon the AW attachment scales and were only slightly modified in order to appropriately contextualize the items (e.g. for many of the items, the slight modification simply involved changing the word "nation" to "Second Life", see Table 1 above for all scale items). The constructs measured by these scales are similar in kind to those described above with one obvious, though noteworthy, difference—the SL scales measured attachment to SL whilst the AW scales measure attachment to nations. Also, identical numbers of items and Likert scales were used as above with one exception, SL Uncritical Patriotism is a 6-item rather than 7-item scale (i.e. the item "Second Life is almost always right" was removed due to its poor construction).

AW National and SL Symbolic Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), the level of feelings of attachment for AW nation/SL based upon AW national/SL symbols, were measured on 2-item, 3-point scales, including 1 = Not at all, 2 = Somewhat, and 3 = Very much so. A sample item from the AW nation scale is, "How good does it make you feel when you hear your country's national anthem?" and the SL scale is, "How good does it make you feel when you see the Second Life insignia/logo?" Both scales had good internal reliability (AW α=.83; SL α=.78).

AW National and SL Constructive Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), the level of feelings of attachment to AW nation/SL based upon a recognition of the importance of working towards positive change in AW nation/SL, were measured on 4-item, 7-point scales, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A sample

item from the AW nation scale is, "People should work hard to move my nation in a positive direction" and from the SL scale is, "Second Lifers should work hard to move Second Life in a positive direction". Both scales had adequate internal reliability (AW nation α=.79; SL α=.79).

AW National and SL Uncritical Patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Schatz et al., 1999), the level of staunch, unwavering feelings of devotion to AW nation/SL, were measured on 7-item scales with the same 7-points, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A sample item from the AW nation scale is, "People who do not wholeheartedly support my nation should live somewhere else" and from the SL scale is, "Individuals who do not wholeheartedly support Second Life should leave Second Life". Both scales had good internal reliability (AW nation α=.84; SL α=.83).

AW National and SL Place Attachment (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997), level of feelings of closeness to AW nation/SL as a place, such as the place in which an individual grew up, were measured by 4-items also on the same 7-point scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A sample item from the RW nation scale is, "I would really not want to move to another country" and from the SL scale is, "I would not want to leave Second Life for another online virtual world." Both scales had adequate internal reliability (AW nation α=.69; SL α=.79).

Finally, *AW National Identity and SL Identity* (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), the level of identification with AW nation/SL, was measured by two scales with 5-items on the same 3-point scale, including 1 = Not at all, 2 = Somewhat, and 3 = Very much so. A sample item from the AW nation scale is "How important is being a member of your country to you?" and from the SL scale is, "How important is being

a Second Lifer to you?" Both scale had good internal reliability (AW nation α=.83;
SL α=.85).

Finally, I also coded participants for the type of *sampling approach* that was
used to recruit them. Purposive sampling was coded as a 0; convenient sampling
was coded as a 1.

Descriptive Scale Results

The following provides descriptive statistical results for the major Second
Life attachment scales contained within this study.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics – SL Attachment Scales

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SL Like a Nation	360	1.00	7.00	3.43	1.959
SL Identity	362	1.00	3.00	2.26	.558
SL Symbolic Patriotism	362	1.00	3.00	1.98	.686
SL Place Attachment	360	1.50	7.00	5.39	1.138
SL Uncritical Patriotism	360	1.00	6.33	3.52	1.041
SL Constructive Patriotism	360	1.00	7.00	5.26	1.154

The above Table 3 indicates that the mean score for SL Like a Nation was
3.43 (on a 7-point Likert scale); in other words, on average participants slightly
disagreed with the statement: "SL is like a nation." For SL Identity the mean score
was 2.26 (on a 3-point Likert scale) which indicates that on average participants
possessed a somewhat strong level of SL Identity. For SL Symbolic Patriotism the
mean score was 1.98 (on a 3-point Likert scale) which indicates that on average
participants possessed a somewhat strong level of SL Symbolic Patriotism. For SL
Place Attachment the mean score was 5.39 which indicates that on average
participants possessed a slightly strong level of such attachment. For SL Uncritical
Patriotism the mean score was 3.52 which indicates that on average participants
possessed a slightly weak level of such attachment. For SL Constructive Patriotism

the mean score was 5.26 which indicates that on average participants possessed a slightly strong level of such attachment.

SL Like a Nation

Because the scale *SL Like a Nation* was used (along with the median number of hours spent in SL) as a filter in locating participants for the qualitative phase of the research, a more thorough understanding of the results of this scale is worth noting. In order to assess the number of participants who considered Second Life to be like a nation, the following descriptive analysis was performed on the scale: *SL Like a Nation.*

Table 3: *SL Like a Nation* Descriptive Statistics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	90	24.1	25.0	25.0
	2.00	59	15.8	16.4	41.4
	3.00	30	8.0	8.3	49.7
	4.00	50	13.4	13.9	63.6
	5.00	67	17.9	18.6	82.2
	6.00	45	12.0	12.5	94.7
	7.00	19	5.1	5.3	100.0
	Total	360	96.3	100.0	
Missing	System	14	3.7		
Total		374	100.0		

What the above table indicates is that roughly 35% of participants consider SL to be like a nation, at least to some degree (i.e. the combined total of those who responded with either an answer of 5, 6 or 7).

Validity Analyses of Major Study Scales

In order to test the validity of the scales, a two-prong approach was taken, one involving substantive validity, the other involving statistical validity.

Substantive validity in this case has to do with the question of what these attachment

scales are in fact measuring. A primary intention of this thesis is to attempt to locate

the presence of attachment for Second Life that is as robust and multi-dimensional

as actual world national type attachment. As such and as described above, the SL

scales used in this research were derivatives of existing AW national attachment

scales. In most cases only a few words were changed in order to reconfigure these

scales from AW attachment instruments into SL attachment instruments. However,

once applied to Second Life, it becomes difficult to say that someone who scores

high on an SL national-type attachment scale actually perceives their attachment to

SL to be of a national flavour. In other words, although it is reasonable to infer that

someone who scores high on the AW National Identity scale does in fact have strong

attachment to their nation (if for no other reason than the word nation or the actual

name of the individual's nation appears within the items), the same cannot be said of

someone who scores high on the similarly worded SL Identity scale. The reason for

this is that SL is not a recognized nation, in either actual world or virtual world

terms, and it is therefore arguable whether an individual would read the items in

such a manner. For example, while a person who scores high on the SL scales may

be strongly attached to Second Life, it would be questionable to say that they are

strongly attached to the *nation* of Second Life.

Substantive Validity

Substantively, there are two arguments to be made that lend credence to the

notion that what the SL attachment scales are potentially measuring is a form of

national-type attachment, one argument based on the content of the scale items, the

other based on the scales' association with the perception that SL is like a nation.

Firstly, from a content perspective, the aspects of SL attachment measured by the

five scales form a multi-dimensionality that, when considered in their entirety, would suggest an attachment that rises above mere product type attachment, for example. To wit, the scale items assess a range of attitudes and opinions, including: (1) the degree to which an individual's self-concept is based upon SL (i.e. via the SL Identity scale); (2) the degree to which an individual feels close to SL as a place (i.e. via SL Place Attachment); (3) the degree to which an individual feels loyalty and love for SL based upon wanting to improve SL (i.e. via SL Constructive Patriotism); (4) the degree to which an individual feels unwavering loyalty and love for SL (i.e. via SL Uncritical Patriotism); and (5) the degree to which an individual feels love for SL based upon symbolic representations of SL (i.e. via SL Symbolic Patriotism).[9]   Thus, when considered en-masse, such constructs do suggest a form of attachment that seems to at least convey the sorts of emotional and intellectual responses engendered by actual world nations. On the other hand, there are likely other entities that might inspire such feelings, including but not limited to more particularistic, localized communities, families, ethnicities and online virtual worlds more generally. In other words, the spectrum of activities, relationships and involvement enabled by online virtual worlds certainly could inspire the sort of emotional attachment measured by these scales—without them rising to the level of nationhood. Nevertheless, one could reasonably argue that en-masse these constructs do suggest a national-type attachment.

Secondly, from an associative perspective, the relationship between the SL attachment scales and the degree to which individuals perceive SL to be like a nation

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[9] However, it is also worth noting that one of the constructs, SL Uncritical Patriotism, might reasonably be expected to produce results opposite to at least one of the other constructs, namely SL Constructive Patriotism, that is, if the actual world scale counterparts are any indication. In studies in which Uncritical Patriotism and Constructive Patriotism have been included, results suggest there is a negative correlation between the two scales. Namely, individuals who possess strong feelings of uncritical patriotism also possess weak feelings of constructive patriotism, and vice versa (Huddy 2007)

will also assist in the assessment of the scales' ability to measure a national-type attachment. In other words, assuming the SL attachment scales are able to measure a national-type attachment, one would expect there to be a correlation between these scales and the variable *SL like a nation*. That is to say that, on average, participants who strongly believe SL is like a nation should similarly possess strong attachment to SL across the five scales.

In order to determine the relationship between the two variables, the following analysis was performed. Bivariate correlations were run between the single, 7-point Likert item *SL is Like a Nation* (i.e. to what degree do you agree/disagree with the following statement: Second Life is like a nation) and each of the five SL attachment scales, Pearson's correlation between *SL is like a nation* with SL Symbolic Patriotism ($r=.41$), SL Constructive Patriotism ($r=.28$), SL Uncritical Patriotism ($r=.38$), SL Place Attachment ($r=.33$), and SL Identity ($r=.34$). Results of this analysis indicate that in fact perceptions of SL being like a nation increase with increased feelings of attachment for SL across all five SL attachment scales. That is to say that all five SL attachment scales are significantly correlated with the single item scale, SL is like a Nation, which supports the claim that these scales are in fact measuring some form of virtual national-type attachment.

Statistical Validity

From a statistical standpoint, the results of factor analysis testing indicate that the scales are valid. For the scale, SL Identity, results of factor analysis indicate that first of all, the five SL Identity items express a single relationship. Secondly, these five items account for 63.53% of the total variance. For the scale, SL Place Attachment, results of factor analysis indicate that the four attachment items express a single relationship and that these items account for 60.96% of the variance. For

the scale, SL Constructive Patriotism, results indicate that the four constructive

patriotism items express a single relationship and that these items account for 69.8%

of the total variance. For the scale, SL Uncritical Patriotism, results indicate that the

four scale items express a single relationship and account for 59.38% of the

variance. Note: Factor analysis is not possible on SL Symbolic Patriotism because it

is only a two-item scale.

In the next section, I briefly discuss the ethical procedures that were

followed and adhered to for this research as dictated by the guidelines set forth by

the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee.

Research Ethics

As part of the process of conducting research, I applied for and

received approval to conduct research in Second Life from the Auckland University

of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). As part of my application for approval,

I developed a Questionnaire Information Sheet which provided potential

questionnaire participants with information on myself and the research I wished to

conduct. A small incentive was offered to participants who agreed to take the survey

in that five participants were to be drawn at random to win $50 US (which was paid

out in Linden Dollars). After I identified the participants for inclusion in the

qualitative semi-structured interviews, both a Participant Observation Information

Sheet and a Participant Interview Information Sheet was provided to these potential

participants which described the research I wished to conduct as well as provided

some information on myself. A small incentive of $30 US (paid in Linden Dollars)

was offered to all participants who agreed to participate in the semi-structured

interviews. In addition, I developed a Consent Form which provided participants

identified for inclusion in the qualitative portion of the research with a summary of

the research and a space for them to sign the form. All participants who agreed to participate in the qualitative portion of the research were provided with a Consent Form. In order to provide their consent to participate in this research, participants were required to sign the form using their real world names and email this form back to me before the interview could begin. In order to protect the privacy of the qualitative research participants all participant avatar names have been changed and no images of the participants' avatars have been included in this research paper. All AUTEC approved ethics forms are included at the end of this document as Appendix 1.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the qualitative approach as well as the analytics process which was employed.

Chapter Four: The Qualitative Approach

In this chapter, I will discuss the qualitative research approach which was employed for this study. First, I will discuss the qualitative sampling plan and procedures, including the quantitative purposive targeting methodology which was used. Next, I discuss the development of the questions which were used in the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Following this is a discussion of the qualitative pilot phase of the study along with the learnings which were derived from this phase. Next is a discussion of the main phase participant recruitment procedures. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the thematic analysis approach which was employed in analysing the data.

As outlined above, the quantitative portion of this research relies heavily upon a number of existing actual world national attachment scales. And while such scales are well suited to measuring the attitudes and opinions of individuals, they are admittedly less effective at assessing the deeper context of these attitudes and opinions (Mandler, 2006). Mandler argues that this deficit is an opportunity for the historian to contribute to the meaning behind the feelings, as it were, by introducing a contextual historical backdrop to such discussions. While I agree with him in principle that further work is required to develop such context, I would argue that this is not just an opportunity for historical input but an opportunity for the practical application of any of a number of qualitative methodologies; for providing context to research is arguably a primary strength of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Thus, in order to better understand the context of/meaning behind such attitudes and opinions, I have employed qualitative methods. Specifically, such context has been assessed through the implementation of in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative Sampling Plan and Procedures

Qualitative participants were selected from the pool of participants who completed the survey (n=373). In sampling participants for the qualitative portion of the research, I employed what I will refer to as purposive survey targeting. Such a strategy is an off-shoot of criterion purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and for my purposes involved the following procedures: First, in order to ensure I was clear on the type of participants I was targeting, I first had to ensure that the individuals I targeted would contribute towards the goal of answering the qualitative research question. Again, that question was: How can we describe and understand those participants who possess a robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life?

With this question as my guide, I then set about generating the potential pool of individuals from which participants would be selected for both the pilot phase and the ensuing main phase of interviews. The research question made clear that the central concern of this study is in developing an understanding of those individuals who possess a robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life. In my approach to answering this question I determined that the research would best be served by the development of two groups of participants, one in which multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life was strong and one in which attachment was weak.

In addition to the SL attachment scale results, I also used one filter in pre-screening for participants: the number of (self-reported) *Hours spent in SL per week*. *Hours spent in SL per week* was included as a filter for two main reasons: 1) The quantitative results indicated that there was an association between hours spent in SL and level of SL attachment and 2) Almost intuitively, there would seem to be merit in the notion that people who are most attached to SL would inevitably spend

more than just a few hours per week in SL—otherwise, from whence does their

attachment to SL arise? Is it merely a theoretical attachment—a sort of academic

attachment—i.e. someone in love with the *idea* of virtual existence but not someone

who actually participates in it? Thus, I decided to exclude those individuals who

spent less than the entire sample's median number of hours per week in SL (i.e. 24

hours). However, part of the design included the capacity for a small number of

individuals who spent much fewer hours in SL. These individuals would potentially

serve as a check of sorts in order to help consider whether a person could be

legitimately attached to SL without spending much time there.

In order to locate (1) individuals with strong attachment to SL and (2)

individuals with weak attachment to SL, I created a composite variable which

combined scores from all five attachment scales and produced an overall mean score

for all participants. Once that was done, I then cross-tabulated the list of composite

mean scores with *Hours spent in SL per week*. At the conclusion of this step, I then

had two lists, one list containing those with strong multi-dimensional attachment to

SL, and one list containing those with weak attachment to SL. Also, as mentioned

in the previous paragraph, only included in these lists were those who spent at least

24 hours per week in SL which was the median hours per week across the entire

participant pool. I then ranked each of these lists according to the composite

attachment mean score.

Specific Scale-Combining Procedures

Because two of the groups of scales were 3-point Likert scales (Virtual

Identity and National Identity and Virtual Symbolic Patriotism and AW Symbolic

Patriotism) and three of the groups of scales were 7-point Likert scales, in order to

generate a composite score of all scales I had to normalize the scores by creating a z

score for all scales. I then calculated a total score by adding up the five scores. As I

mentioned, I then ranked these scores across all participants and cross referenced

these scores with the number of hours spent in SL. With these scores as my guide, I

sorted the one list of participants according to how strong their multi-dimensional

attachment was to Second Life and the other list of participants according to how

weak their multi-dimensional attachment was to Second Life. I then began

contacting participants from each list to request that they participate in the

qualitative portion of my research. By the end of the qualitative research phase, 23

had agreed to participate: 15 Second Lifers with strong multi-dimensional

attachment to SL (the Primary Group) and 8 Second Lifers with weak multi-

dimensional attachment to SL (the Comparison Group).

The following table represents all participants used in the qualitative portion

of the research. Also indicated in this table is whether the participant was used in the

Qualitative Pilot Phase of the research or in the Qualitative Main Phase. Lastly, this

table also indicates whether the participant was classified as Strongly Attached (SA)

or Weakly Attached (WA). Please also note that names of participant avatars have

been changed to protect their privacy.

Table 4. Qualitative Participants, Strongly Attached (Primary Group) and

Weakly Attached (Comparison Group)

Avatar Name	Pilot Phase/ Main Phase	Strongly Attached (SA) Weakly Attached (WA)
Spartan	Pilot	WA
Brodie	Pilot	WA
Amanda	Main	WA
Candice	Main	WA
Kianna	Main	WA
Scarlet	Main	WA
Ender	Main	SA
Galen	Main	WA
Esther	Pilot	SA
Sanguine	Main	WA
Expot	Main	SA
Jessie	Main	SA
Margo	Main	SA
Harmony	Main	SA
Astoria	Main	SA
Dylan	Main	SA
Chip	Main	SA
Springer	Main	SA
Athena	Main	SA
Belinda	Main	SA
Daphne	Main	SA
Eirene	Main	SA
Barbie	Main	SA

Develop questions for the semi-structured qualitative interviews

At the end of this document is Appendix 2 which lists all of the questions I

developed to assist in the Pilot Phase of the qualitative interviews. The list was used

to frame the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted in

SL using SL Instant Messaging (IM) tools. This is a synchronous text-based

communication tool. All IM or chat text is automatically copied to a file and so no

transcription was required.

The questions are organised according to three classifications: (1) SL-specific questions; (2) AW-specific questions; and (3) SL/AW interrelationship questions. Moreover, within each classification there are further subcategories and within each subcategory there is a list of main questions and secondary questions. An effort would be made to ask most (if not all) of the main questions of all participants. The secondary questions were intended to be asked when appropriate or when needed. In general, the list of questions was intended to guide the interviews and frame them according to the stated interest in multi-dimensional, national-type attachment. However, the list was not shown to participants--as this is a study based on interpretivism, the interviews were meant to unearth the participants' perspective on the phenomenon of SL. As such, this list was not conceived as a rigid questionnaire. Rather, it was merely meant to frame the interviews--ultimately, the participants themselves would determine the direction of the interviews. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, "the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)" (p. 101).

Based upon the Interview Questions listed in Appendix 2, the original list of interview questions was quite ambitious in terms of its length. However, as would later be discovered, it was not possible to cover so many questions during the qualitative interviews. Moreover, such a long list of questions became burdensome to the process and a much shorter list of questions was then later devised to allow for a more flexible and open dialogue with the participants.

Qualitative Pilot Phase

Once the qualitative interview questions were better defined, I then proceeded to conduct a pilot phase of the qualitative research in which I not only

hoped to explore these interview questions in depth but also to familiarize myself with virtual interviewing more generally. After spending considerable time in Second Life, observing, chatting and researching, I did begin to form ideas as to how the interviews might proceed in practice. But I did not know for certain how they would proceed—what technical issues might arise: for example, would some participants prefer IM to open chat? How the back and forth of an interview might actually proceed when no actual eye contact was possible (if I asked a question and no response was forthcoming would there be cues to tell me if a participant was just thinking through his or her answer or whether they were just busy doing something else or whether there was a technical issue of some sort, etc?), and other formalities that might arise (would there be issues relating to where the interviews could be conducted, how close to place my avatar relative to the interviewee? etc?) Therefore, as was the case in the quantitative portion of the research, I felt it was important to conduct a pilot phase not only to further refine the qualitative interview questions but also to become more adept at conducting virtual interviews more generally. Furthermore, by reducing the likelihood that the mechanics of the interview might interfere with the interview itself, I would help to ensure that a participant could address my questions more fully and uninhibitedly. As other qualitative researchers have suggested, becoming familiar and immersed within a culture (even a virtual one) can help to smooth the path to a more culturally informed investigative process (Boellstorff, 2008; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, & Marcus, 2012).

In the qualitative pilot phase, three participants were selected: Esther, Brodie and Spartan. Based upon the results of the quantitative portion of the research (i.e. via the questionnaire), Brodie and Spartan were categorized as Weakly Attached and Esther as Strongly Attached. I contacted these three participants within Second Life

and asked via IM if they would be willing to participate in the qualitative portion of my research. Once they indicated they would be interested, I then emailed them the Participant Interview Information Sheet (PIIS) and the Participant Observation Information Sheet (POIS) which described the boundaries of the research and listed the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee requirements for such research. I also provided them with the Consent Form which the participants were required to complete and email me back the completed form indicating their agreement to participate. In this form, a primary requirement of AUTEC was that participants provide me with their Actual World name (see Ethics discussion in Methodology Section).

Refinement of Interview Procedures Based on Pilot Phase

The initial three pilot phase participant interviews provided me with valuable insight into both the research itself and the mechanics of virtual world interviewing more generally and it is this experience which enabled me to refine and improve the procedures that were to be employed during the main phase interviews. As a result of the pilot phase, several key methodological decisions were obtained which ultimately ended up impacting upon the main phase of the qualitative interviews.

Key Determination #1: First of all, it was determined that all participants should be interviewed in an SL setting of their choosing. Rationale for Key Determination #1: I conducted two of the three pilot interviews in my own home in SL, but in both cases the interviews seemed to proceed in an awkward manner. One of the two participants even commented that my "house felt a little cold and uncomfortable." Furthermore, complicated by the poor seating arrangement of my house, there was no comfortable way to conduct an interview—since I had no

furniture in my house, my avatar and the participant's avatar were forced to either stand or sit on the floor. By conducting research only in locations chosen by the participants, I would help to ensure that not only the participants would feel at ease and as comfortable as possible but also that *I would*—for some of that awkwardness was surely due to my own feelings of inadequacy over the state of my house. (See Figure 1. Archmunster Toll's House in Second Life)

Figure 1. Archmunster Toll's House in Second Life   **Image by Kevin Sherman**

Key Determination #2: Second of all, it became clear over the course of the pilot phase, that these interviews could take as long as four hours to complete. Such a discovery is in keeping with what other researchers have found with regards to online, synchronous interviews taking about twice as long as face to face interviews (Markham, 2004). Thus, as a result of this, I was able to better prepare the main

phase participants for the fact that I would likely need two, three or more separate

sessions with each participant.

Key Determination #3: Third of all, during the pilot phase, I changed the

appearance of my avatar, archmunster Toll, with each new interview (see Figure 2:

The Three Faces of archmunster Toll). Specifically, I changed my hair, face and

clothing. During the quantitative portion of the research, I found that most avatars

who I encountered would often have different clothes, hair, fashion accessories,

potentially even skin colour changes upon seeing them a second time. Thus, I felt I

wanted to try to conform to this apparent standard by changing my avatar's clothes

and hair colour/style at each interview during the pilot phase. However, the

changing of my appearance proved to be more of a distraction than such conformity

to an apparent norm was worth. While on the one hand, the changing appearance of

my avatar helped to break the ice by providing the participants with something

funny/trivial to discuss, on the other hand there often was considerable discussion
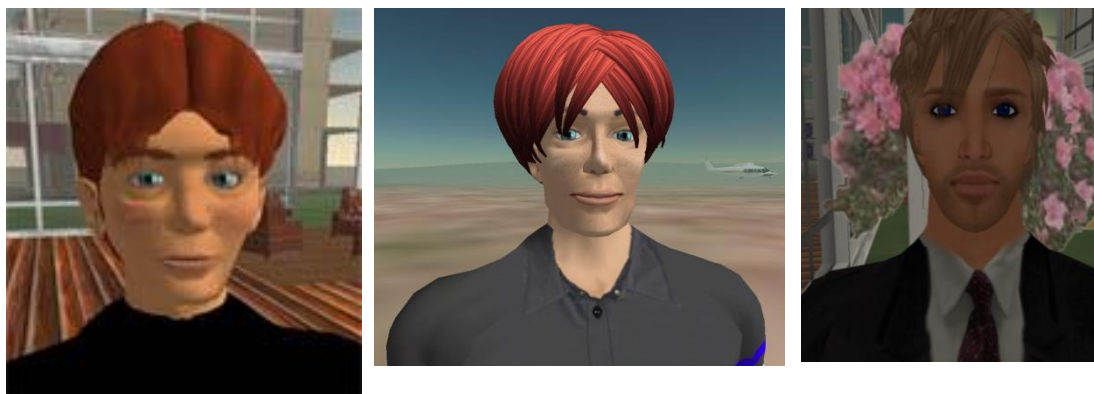
Figure 2. The Three Faces of archmunster Toll   Images by Kevin Sherman

just around the appearance of my avatar and it often took several minutes before we

could actually begin the interview in earnest. I therefore decided to maintain one

look for my avatar during all future interviews in order to reduce the number of

distractions. (That said, I did occasionally change my hair colour…but the overall

look of my avatar remained the same). Note: The avatar on the far right in Figure 2
(above) was the version I decided to use for most of the interviews.

<u>Secondary Determinations</u>: There were other, more particularistic learnings, too.
For one thing, the pilot phase did help me to become more comfortable with the
actual interviews themselves.

<u>Private IM versus Open Chat</u>: The pilot phase helped to determine that the
instant message function (which is private in SL) was superior to open chat (which
is not private) for conducting the interviews. I realized the importance of using IM
based on one interview from the pilot phase where we spoke in open chat and other
Second Lifers were able to hear what we said. I thought we were alone at the time
but apparently others could "hear" us outside the walls of my house. In this case,
"hearing" means other individuals were able to see the words of our chat on their
screens. I therefore decided to encourage participants to use IM rather than open
chat during the interviews—though I didn't force participants to use IM. One
participant in the main phase, for example, asked (and I agreed) that we use open
chat after assuring me that the island we were on was completely private and no one
would be able to hear us. However, generally speaking I did ask that interviews be
conducted using IM rather than chat and except for this one case, participants agreed
to such an arrangement.

<u>Avatar Positioning</u>: I also learned to follow the lead of the participant in
terms of where to position my avatar—if the participant chose to stand, I also stood
but at a distance that was neither too close nor too far; if the participant chose to sit,
I would also sit.

AW Distractions: I also learned to make sure that I was not distracted by any AW noises or activities to ensure my attention was fully placed upon the participant. I furthermore learned to keep my computer screen pointed away from anyone else in my AW environment who might accidentally see what was being typed between myself and the participant in order to protect the privacy of my participants.

The Importance of Hours Spent in SL: Also, I came to understand the importance of including the variable of *Hours spent in SL* as a main phase selection criterion. The reason that this criterion was important, however, was not necessarily what I originally thought it might be. Originally, I felt that it was important to include a filter of time spent in SL, sourcing only those participants who spent at least the median hours (of all participants) in SL, because otherwise, a participant's basis for being attached or not attached to SL would be suspect or at least less interesting—i.e. the less time in SL, the more theoretical would be their attachment (or lack thereof) rather than being based on actual Second Life experience. However, the pilot phase neither confirmed nor disproved that hypothesis. Rather, what the pilot phase revealed was a much more practical consideration--individuals who spend only a few hours in SL per week are difficult to contact and meet in Second Life. That is to say, because they are so rarely in SL, it was very difficult to arrange and then follow through on interview times with such individuals. For example, one individual who spent on average only 4 hours per week in SL, after initially agreeing to participate in the research and then confirming a day/time to meet in SL for the interview, never actually showed up and did not respond to subsequent follow-up requests. A second individual who spent only 8 hours per week in SL, after taking a few weeks to respond to my request, did agree to meet but subsequent requests for interviews were not responded to. A third individual who

claimed to spend 8 hours per week in SL, also finally met for an interview but also was in a rush to leave and so the interview essentially involved me asking one question and the participant then texting back several paragraphs as a response at which point he said he had to leave and would try to find time to continue at some point in the future. Needless to say, I was unable to locate this person for a follow up interview. As a result of these experiences, it became a practical necessity to include time spent in SL as a selection criterion; as such, the original determination, i.e. the median weekly hours spent in SL across all participants (24 hours per week), was deemed a reasonable cut-off point.

Interview Structure: However, there is one thing I learned as a result of the pilot phase that was perhaps more significant than all the other determinations. Specifically, during the course of the pilot phase, I came to realize the folly in both the amount of structure I had placed upon the interviews as well as the large number of questions I had developed. As the interviews unfolded, I came to realize how much more fruitful the interviews were the less control I placed upon them. When I tried to control the interviews and steer the participants back to questions that were included on the Interview Question Sheet, I inevitably closed down the freewheeling nature intrinsic to the discussions. As such, the interviews took on a much more sterile tone, following a pre-determined path rather than a participant-directed path, i.e. a meandering path in which new discoveries might lurk around every corner. While some structure was needed to touch upon topics of interest, I realized that a much more open ended, loose structure would complement the exploratory nature of the research on the one hand but more importantly the interpretivist paradigm on the other. First and foremost, I felt the qualitative research needed to follow the tenants of interpretivism in order to more richly capture the nature of the attachment

participants felt for Second Life. In order to accomplish this, the participants needed

to be able to take the questions in any direction they wanted.

Number of Questions: Such a free-wheeling approach also made it clear that

I had developed far too many questions for the interviews. The sheer quantity of

questions I had developed added to the stress level of the interviews because I would

sometimes rush through questions in order to get through as many as possible rather

than taking the time to ensure I listened carefully and responded appropriately with

relevant follow-ups based on each participant's answers. As such, I trimmed down

the number of interview questions, keeping them focused on only the most

important concepts. Please see Appendix 3 for the revised and truncated list of

questions.

Main Phase Participant Recruitment

Once the Pilot Phase was complete, I then developed the Main Phase

participant pool from which to select the main phase participants. The sample

included some 150 potential participants with varying degrees of attachment across

the five attachment scales. Ultimately, a total of 20 participants (not including the

three used in the Pilot Phase) were purposively selected using the results from the

survey to target individuals who could be categorized within one of two groups: the

strongly attached (the Primary Group) and the weakly attached (the Comparison

Group). The primary group included those individuals whose survey results

indicated strong attachment to SL. The second group, the comparison group,

included those whose results indicated relative weak attachment to SL. Once

potential participants were selected and identified, consent forms signed and

returned, the next step involved conducting the actual interviews. The interviews

were semi-structured in nature and were meant to better understand those who had

strong multi-dimensional attachment to SL, including the rationale for such

attachment. In order to frame and guide the interviews, a list of potential questions

was employed which were a trimmed-down version of the list used during the Pilot

Phase (see Revised Qualitative Interview Questions in Appendix 3). The questions

contained in this list encompassed a number of constructs across the domains of the

physical (aka actual life) and the virtual (aka Second Life), such as place attachment,

place identity, degree of closeness to others, national/virtual world

identity/attachment, socializing behaviour, feelings of familial attachment, civic

involvement, escapism, addiction and overall meaning of SL.

Summary of Qualitative Analysis Process

In order to analyse the data I used a process of thematic analysis which relied

heavily upon inductive analysis (Patton, 2002). Such a method involves discovering

patterns, themes and categories in the data to identify meanings held by the

participants. Such a methodology is in keeping with the philosophy of

interpretivism which underpins and guides the qualitative portion of the study. I

used a funnel approach in this process of searching for themes and patterns in the

data and thus the search began broadly and eventually arrived at finer and finer

patterns and themes (see Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). In

order to facilitate this process, I used the software NVivo. Via this software

package, I was able to create and apply codes to the interviews. Once these codes

were created and applied, it was then possible to search for particular codes and their

accompanying interview text in an attempt to find patterns in the data. Ultimately,

NVivo is merely a tool that can help to facilitate the process of analysing vast

quantities of textual data. Rather than sifting through a large quantity of paper and

physically highlighting sections of text within each interview, all of that type of

work is done digitally using NVivo. Thus, codes are created and applied to sections of text, memos are created to record ideas and areas of emerging interest with regards to specific interviews and particular sections of text are linked to other sections of text either in the same interview or across other interviews.

Ultimately, the goal of such an exercise is the development of patterns and themes. In other words, it is through this whittling down of the data that patterns emerge which in turn leads to the discovery of themes (i.e. patterns grouped around various concepts). These themes were then grouped together where possible in an effort to generate an understanding of virtual world attachment and the rationale for such attachment.

Initially, through careful reading and re-reading of the interviews, I was able to identify some 298 categories or codes. After further reading and re-reading of the interviews as well as further thinking through and regrouping of categories, this list of 298 expanded to more than 400. I then applied these codes on a passage by passage basis to each of the 23 participants' interview data (this included the 20 main phase and 3 pilot phase participants). As I applied codes I began to make links between and among participants in order to form patterns in the data. Once these patterns were more carefully considered, I was able to group certain patterns together in order to form themes. The combination of relevant patterns initially totaled to roughly 49 themes. Through further combination and reduction I was able to generate a final list of seven themes which form the basis for the qualitative discussion which follows in the subsequent chapter.

Detailed Description of Analytic Approach

The analytic process began by simply reading through all of the interviews to get a good feel for the overall ideas being expressed. From there, I then read each

interview more carefully, coding categories as they revealed themselves to me in the data. Following the funnel approach, the initial categories were fairly broad conceptually. For instance, the category of SL Meaning (i.e. what does SL means to you) was one developed at the early stages of analysis. As I read and re-read the texts, further delineation of such a category was possible. For example, closer inspection of the data revealed that when participants discuss what SL means to them they often refer to those characteristics of SL that have salience for them. Thus, more refined categories within the umbrella category of SL Meaning were able to emerge. These SL-related characteristic-focused categories included: community aspects; creativity aspects; cultural aspects; exploration; freedom; human interactivity; and religious aspects. In other words, for some participants, the meaning that SL provided was due to its capacity to support communities of interest to the participant: for example roleplaying communities, political activist communities and educational communities; its capacity to support creativity via the building of objects and art and the creation and dressing up of avatars; its capacity to support cultures of interest to participants, including more fantastical cultures such as furry and Gorean cultures and also sports culture (e.g. fans of particular teams), Irish culture, and the fine arts; its capacity to support exploration via the ever-expanding vastness of the virtual world and the opportunity for exploring the seemingly endless lands that such vastness promises; similarly its capacity to support freedom and specifically the freedom to express oneself in whatever way one chooses, e.g. a man can appear in SL as a woman, a woman a man, a person can appear as a bug or a dragon or a robot, and furthermore, SL allows participants to experience the potentially freeing feeling of flight—i.e. avatars can fly in SL; its capacity to support human interactivity by enabling written and spoken

communication among Second Lifers who represent some 100 nations worldwide; and its capacity to support religious expression via Second Life in-world religious gatherings and groups.

Other categories also emerged which seemed related less to SL per say and more to characteristics associated with the participants themselves. These participant-focused categories included: escapism and altruism. For example, some participants indicated that for them the meaning that SL provided was that it allowed them to escape from the busy demands, or conversely boredom, of their actual lives. For other participants, SL allowed them to fulfill their altruistic needs by helping others overcome problems in their actual world life and/or by helping others learn and understand how to use Second Life either by showing them how to build things or how to find their way around the large and seemingly unfathomable world. Finally, there were a few categories that emerged that seemed to straddle the two, offering a mix between SL-focused characteristics and participant-focused characteristics. In other words, for some participants, SL's meaning was wrapped up in those things that interest them and also made possible by SL. These SL/participant-focused categories included: SL as a collaboration space; the importance of place vs. people; identity/appearance rationale; SL vs. AW more broadly; and social aspects. For example, SL provides the capacity for collaboration with respect to a number of different activities, including building, education, politics, and support groups. Oftentimes, whether or not a participant joined in these activities would be dependent on their personal interests and preferences. Further, SL offers both spaces and people with which to interact in those spaces. For some participants, it is one (or a combination of both) of these aspects that provides the most meaning for them—i.e. either the people who they meet in SL or the places

that they experience. The identity/appearance rationale speaks to the opportunities that SL affords an individual participant to experiment with their identity and their appearance as well as that individual's interest in exploring such a thing in the first place. More broadly, some participants found meaning from SL via those things in SL that surpass and/or improve upon the AW. For example, SL's capacity to enable avatar flight, SL's capacity to allow people to converse with one another without being constrained by one's appearance and/or disability (etc.) and SL's capacity to allow people from different AW countries to quickly meet and gather are all ways in which individuals consider SL to be an improvement upon the AW. Lastly, there are social aspects specific to SL which are important to some participants. For example, SL's unique capacity to allow for safe socializing with a broad range of individuals from around the world is one characteristic that some participants found particular meaningful.

Thus, as new categories emerged, these categories informed previous ones and vice versa and refinement and re-refinement of categories occurred. It is also worth noting that more than one category could be applied to each passage of text—in other words, the codes were not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, in the categories discussed above, some participants found meaning in SL across a range of categories and were not necessarily tied to only one or another category. In the following exchange, the participant discussed an example of how SL for her is about helping others:

> *archmunster Toll: Did you help others while here [in SL]?*
>
> *Harmony: As much as I could, yes*
>
> *archmunster Toll: You did the charity work...*
>
> *Harmony: I've had a few all-nighters :)*

Harmony: *Yes, but more than that was the moral support... we were family*

Thus, the above was coded to (1) SL Meaning/Helping Others and also to (2) Family/Family Bond/SL Family. This particular example also illustrates the way in which categories can inform one another. In certain analytical contexts, this particular passage could be viewed as an indication of the degree to which helping others plays a role in defining SL for some (or at least this one) participants. In other contexts, such a passage indicated the degree to which a participant(s) felt as if part of a family when in SL. Yet, upon further reflection, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the two categories be combined. Thus, the new category of SL Meaning/SL Family emerges in which the meaning of SL is tied to the notion of familial support.

The process continued in this manner and eventually as passages of texts from one interview were linked to passages of texts in others (via the searching and comparison of categories), patterns were identified and from these patterns themes began to emerge. Through the identification and interpretation of these themes, an overall analysis formed.

Chapter Five: Qualitative Results Overview

In this section, I will discuss the main findings which emerged as a result of the qualitative analyses performed. As previously discussed, I employed thematic analysis on the qualitative data. In performing this type of analysis, I first began the process of grouping responses together under what were initially deemed categories of interest. These categories were then grouped together forming themes. The following represents the findings which emerged after considerable back and forth between the data and the categories.

In the next chapters, I will interrogate the qualitative data, comparing the responses of two groups of participants, namely those whose quantitative results indicate they possess strong multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life and those whose results indicate they possess weak attachment to SL. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, assessing the results of each group according to the themes which emerged from the data and then interpreting the different ways in which each of the two groups fit within those themes.

In analysing the data during the course of the interview phase and then even after the interviews were complete, it gradually became apparent that the way in which I pre-categorized the participants needed to shift slightly. Separating participants according to their level of multi-dimensional attachment proved important but a further refinement of this grouping became necessary for one characteristic that presented itself to me during the course of the interviews became unavoidably salient and possibly even central to an understanding of virtual world attachment. As the interviews progressed, the more salient feature seemed to be the notion of social isolation. By social isolation I mean to suggest that some participants were, for a number of reasons which will be later explored in this

chapter, isolated or cut off from the day to day socializing that so many people enjoy and take for granted (Barry, 1998; House, 2001; Longman et al., 2013). And so while not outright abandoning my original grouping based on multi-dimensional attachment, I restructured the participants during the analysis phase to include the factor of social isolation. In considering these participants anew, free of the constraints of the two original groupings of strong multi-dimensional attachment versus weak attachment, I did begin to realize that there were differences in the way the participants spoke about their relationship to Second Life across six of the seven main themes (not including the theme Second Life as Nation). Tonally, it became evident that there were indeed two distinct camps of participants. However, these camps were not divided strictly in the way I had originally thought.

Thus, free of the shackles of these groupings, I was able to pinpoint a further criterion for grouping the participants. I noticed that tonally there was a sharp distinction between certain participants—those who were unreservedly approving and appreciative of Second Life and those who were more ambivalent, even embarrassed by their association with Second Life. When I lined up the unapologetic from the ambivalent, one defining characteristic became clear. Those who were unapologetic about Second Life could almost all be categorized as socially isolated and those who were more ambivalent towards Second Life did not, for the most part, fit within this category. As a result of this discovery, I realigned the groups—rather than separating them according to their level of multi-dimensional attachment, I separated the participants based upon whether or not they could be classified as socially isolated. This new alignment resulted in the original comparison groups being redrawn in the following way:

Table 5. Qualitative Participants, Socially Isolated vs Socially Supported

Avatar Name	Pilot/Main	Socially Isolated or Socially Supported?	Strongly Attached vs Weakly Attached?	Grouping Change?
Brodie	Pilot	SS	WA	No
Amanda	Main	SS	WA	No
Candice	Main	SS	SA	Yes
Kianna	Main	SS	WA	No
Scarlet	Main	SS	WA	No
Ender	Main	SS	WA	No
Spartan	Pilot	SI	WA	Yes
Esther	Pilot	SI	SA	No
Galen	Main	SI	WA	Yes
Expot	Main	SI	SA	No
Sanguine	Main	SI	SA	No
Jessie	Main	SI	SA	No
Margo	Main	SI	SA	No
Harmony	Main	SI	SA	No
Astoria	Main	SI	SA	No
Dylan	Main	SI	SA	No
Chip	Main	SI	SA	No
Springer	Main	SI	SA	No
Athena	Main	SI	SA	No
Belinda	Main	SI	SA	No
Daphne	Main	SI	SA	No
Eirene	Main	SI	SA	No
Barbie	Main	SI	SA	No

Note however, that the new groupings were not radically different from before, only slightly. In all, this new structure resulted in only three participants being cast in a new group (i.e. Candice, though possessing strong attachment to SL, is now listed within the Socially Supported group, Spartan and Galen, though possessing weak attachment to SL, are listed within the Socially Isolated group). In discussing the original grouping it is therefore probably better understood as an important though incomplete grouping schema. The additional characteristic of social isolation helped

to further clarify and specify the original characteristic of strong multi-dimensional attachment vs. weak attachment.

That said, in analysing the qualitative data with these two new comparison groups: the socially isolated vs. the socially supported (see Cobb, 1976), the findings became much more enlightening. The subsequent chapters, then, which serve as the final act in this thesis, where all the discussion, procedures and methodology all come together to answer the research question laid out at the beginning, these final chapters will be structured in the following manner. First, I will interrogate the theme of Social Isolation

This theme also serves as the central organizing construct of this research, distinguishing the newly revised groups of the Socially Isolated participants from the Socially Supported participants. From there I will show the ways in which these two groups diverge, by degrees, across the six remaining data-derived themes, ultimately culminating with a discussion on national attachment and the way in which the two groups diverge and converge insofar as national attachment is concerned. The remaining six themes that emerged from the data include the following: Second Life as Remedy; Immersion (and the subtheme of Immersion vs. Reality); Degree of Importance of SL; SL Place Attachment; Identity Construction; and Second Life as Nation.

Chapter Six: Qualitative Results - Themes One and Two

Theme One: Social Isolation, the Central Organizing Construct

As previously discussed, it is apparent that several of the qualitative phase participants were, to some degree, isolated from society. Furthermore, this societal isolation could also be viewed as social isolation—for those who are isolated from society are also, for all intents and purposes, isolated from social contact. On the other hand, there was also a contingent of participants who did not fit within the classification of social isolation. To the contrary, several participants were quite capable of social interaction and were willing participants in various forms of actual world socializing activity. That said, some of these so-called Socially Supported participants, while capable of socializing activity, did find themselves limited in terms of the degree to which they participated in actual world social activity. This limitation, however, was not because they were unwilling participants in such activity nor otherwise prevented from such activity but rather due to what I will term Circumstantial Situations. For example, Scarlet (a socially supported participant) was too busy to find the time to socialize in the actual world while Candice (also a socially supported participant) found it easier to log on to Second Life than to make the effort to meet up with friends in the actual world. Such circumstantial situations stand in stark contrast to the issues faced by the socially isolated sample. The Socially Isolated sample did not experience social isolation due to inconvenience or lack of effort but rather for matters that fall under the rubric of social exclusion in which individuals are blocked from social participation for reasons beyond their own control (Barry, 1998) and social marginalization in which individuals are prevented from social participation for less concrete reasons such as stereotyping, bullying, dehumanization or some other form of stigmatization (Van Den Tillaart et

al., 2009). These are people who lack the opportunity for social success not due to circumstantial situations but rather due to conditions that are by degrees difficult, if not impossible, to overcome. It might even be better to say that the socially supported are (at most) not prevented so much as inconvenienced or logistically constrained, while the socially isolated are (by degrees) obstructed, segregated and/or forcibly removed from society and the social interactions that society affords.

Thus, in analysing the interview data, two new categories of participants emerged. There were those who were to varying degrees limited in their capacity to participate in the actual world and there were those who were not. This incapacity to experience the actual world includes conditions which fall along an isolation spectrum, that is, a spectrum based upon the degree to which an individual was physically separated from social activity. Such a spectrum runs along a continuum of physical and psychological conditions from extreme shyness to health related problems so severe as to confine participants, at least in some cases, to their beds.

As this study approaches research from an ettic perspective or from the perspective of the participants themselves, I distinguish the two groups using the words and opinions of the participants themselves. In general, the participants tended to associate Social Isolation with heavy use of Second Life. When asked to identify characteristics which heavy users of SL share in common, both Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants alike offered characteristics that are quite similar. The most common way in which such people were described centres around notions of socialization and specifically those issues which prevent people from having healthy AW social lives. Participants described this characteristic in the following ways: Candice: "loneliness"; Jessie: "many are just lonely"; Harmony: "a lot of lonely people"; Astoria: "social phobias"; Sanguine:

"lack of social success"; Daphne: "some sort of social dysfunction"; Barbie: "lack[ing] socialization skills"; Ender: "socially inept"; Spartan: "the need for social interaction"; and Galen: "looking for a place to…hav[e] friends".

Furthermore, both a Socially Supported participant and a Socially Isolated participant described this notion of social isolation in quite moving terms. Candice, a Socially Supported participant, said that "everyone here has a hole. I believe this. Everyone is looking for something to fill it". Jessie, a Socially Isolated participant, admitted that "in the years I have spent here, a very large percentage of the people I have met and interacted with are . . . well, hiding from something."

Further inspection of the various conditions which prevent social participation among the socially isolated group indicates the wide variety of issues that people are "hiding from" or needing to "fill in." These conditions include disabilities, health-related issues and psychological or emotional issues. Other issues related to this stunting of actual world social interaction include being stuck in bad marriages and obstructive family relationships, i.e. family relationships which obstruct an individual from enjoying a healthy social life. It is also worth noting that many participants experienced multiple, overlapping issues, whereby an individual with health conditions, for example, might also possess psychological conditions such as depression and shyness.

While Socially Isolated and Socially Supported participants alike both agreed that a lack of social contact was the "problem" and the cause was related to some condition, one of the key differences between Socially Isolated and Socially Supported participants is the degree to which these conditions inhibit their social lives. Specifically, all of the Socially Supported participants were neither restricted nor prevented from engaging with others socially. That is not to say that the

Socially Supported were somehow perfectly healthy, psychologically adjusted people but rather that on the issue of social skills and experience, these were people both capable of and relatively unhindered from socializing. Of course, that is not to suggest that these individuals did not possess self-doubt or degrees of shyness or domineering romantic partners, etc...only that any of these potential issues did not rise to the level of restriction and/or prevention. Certainly, Socially Supported participants will likely not always engage socially with others for any of a number of reasons but as they self-report, there were no serious or unavoidable restrictions placed on them from engaging socially with others. That is also not to suggest that they were satisfied with the amount and/or quality of socialization that they experienced but again only that they were, relatively speaking, capable of and unhindered from socializing if they so chose.

When considered individually, any factors in the lives of the Socially Supported participants which impede their ability to socialize are only minor annoyances in comparison to the very severe restrictions which Socially Isolated participants face. For example, consider the following descriptions provided by the Socially Supported. Ender, a Socially Supported participant, indicated that he led what he considered to be a perfectly healthy social life. Candice, too, indicated that she was a very social person, with many friends at Church and elsewhere. Scarlet too claimed to be perfectly happy and healthy. That said, Candice did admit that her partner was morbidly shy and his shyness seemed to limit the amount of socializing they could do as a couple—though she didn't suggest that he prevented or forcibly stopped her from enjoying social activities on her own and based on the wide array of social activities she claimed to participate in, there was nothing to indicate he did. Similarly, as a result of a change Scarlet made from working in an office to working

at home, she found it more difficult finding time to meet and talk with other people. Her busy family life and the now solitary work she did from home, did not allow for the everyday chatting and flirtations that she would have been able to fulfill in the past while working at an office surrounded by co-workers.

> *Scarlet: I work alone…in both my writing and my law practice. very isolated. so logging onto sl a few hours a day give me a chance to meet people and socialize without the commitment rl would require. I don't have to leave my desk and drive downtown to a luncheon or a bar…not that I don't HAVE rl friends*
>
> *archmunster Toll: :)*
>
> *Scarlet: but here, it is okay to just take a break, a virtual water cooler in some respects. When I worked in an office.. we used to call it rfing - rat fucking, though I'll be darned if I ever understood that. we'd walk to one another's office, chat for a bit, flirt of course, then go back to work. if the call we were waiting for came in, we took it. that practice doesn't suit my lifestyle now, but I still need to rf :)*

Thus, SL made it possible for her to engage in such social activities without leaving home—so she was able to avoid traffic, crowds and all the other annoyances surrounding socialization that are time consuming and logistically difficult for someone in her situation who has family and work responsibilities to fulfill. Yet on the other hand, if she really wanted to see other people socially, she could have but the effort involved became problematic, tiresome for her—but, importantly, neither impossible nor unachievable.

From a Socially Isolated participant's perspective, Barbie serves as one example of one of the more mildly restricted Socially Isolated participants, for as

previously mentioned, the degree to which the Socially Isolated are in fact socially

isolated runs across a spectrum from mild to severe. Barbie indicated that she had

been "painfully" shy most of her life and had very few friends outside of SL. In

addition, her financial situation also limited her ability to get out and see people.

*Barbie: in RL, my main focus is survival for myself. I don't have the money
to travel to the places that mean most to me.... I have very few friends where I live
and certainly I don't go out other than shopping, even*

archmunster Toll: and the reason for all that is due to money issues?

*Barbie: yes. I'm recently out of a bad marriage situation.. I'm on my own
now*

*archmunster Toll: right...so if money wasn't an issue, you'd be travelling
and going out more?*

*Barbie: I would travel, for sure. I have really no desire to do the bar scene.
and there's not a whole lot to do...I'm also a home body. I don't long to be
surrounded by people all the time.*

archmunster Toll: are you shy?

Barbie: not as much as I used to be. SL has helped with that

archmunster Toll: so you used to be shy?

*Barbie: extremely. after being in SL I'm much more comfortable with ANY
social situation... RL or SL*

archmunster Toll: have you always been shy?

*Barbie: yes, painfully so. I didn't grow up with a lot of other kids around me,
and those who were, were quite mean to me... rude*

Thus, Scarlet and Barbie, while superficially similar insofar as their situations are concerned -- both working from home, both limited in the amount of face to face social contact they have -- nevertheless are also quite different from one another. And these differences help to further distinguish Socially Isolated participants from Socially Supported participants. For one thing, Scarlet works from home out of choice and convenience; Barbie works from home because she is "a home body" who has been "painfully shy" in the past though less shy now than ever before. She also is restricted due to finances—she cannot afford to go out and meet up with people. Scarlet, then, is a person who is quite comfortable hanging out with people, flirting with people in group, social settings and even seems to crave such social contact while Barbie is a person who prefers to stay at home, is shy (though less than before) and is economically restricted in the amount of time she can spend outside the home due to her limited financial resources. In summary, though currently physically isolated from others, Scarlet is a Socially Supported participant while Barbie's isolation from others fits more nicely within (though as a more mild manifestation of) the characteristics which define the Socially Isolated participants.

Socially Isolated Spectrum of Conditions

At this point, a more thorough discussion is warranted pertaining to the spectrum of conditions which comprise the category of Social Isolation. The subclassifications which encompass the category of Socially Isolated include: Health Conditions, Psychological Conditions, Abuse Conditions, Familial Conditions and Financial Conditions. As Barbie exemplifies, the socially isolated participants do not necessarily fall neatly within one or another subclassification. Rather, they often straddle subclassifications, possessing characteristics of more than one. See Table 6 below for a representation of the Socially Isolated participants and their many

overlapping characteristics:

Table 6. Social Isolation Classifications and Characteristics

SI Participant Name	Social Isolation Subclassifications					
	Health	Psycho-logical	Abuse	Familial	Economic	Societal
Spartan	Disabled, uses wheelchair stays at home most of the time				Not employed	
Esther		Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; severe social anxiety	Stalking/ dangerous ex-boyfriend			
Galen	High blood pressure, low blood sugar, asthma	Schizophrenia; Generalized Anxiety Disorder), Depression, PTSD (Post traumatic stress disorder), ADHD				Cultural Outcast due to being a Furry
Expot	Acid Reflux Disease	Bi-Polar, Autistic				
Sanguine		Shy				
Jessie			Physically and Mentally Abusive husbands			
Margo		Panic Attacks; Social Anxiety Disorder				
Harmony		Very shy	Abusive, violent ex-husband			Cultural Outcast due to being a Furry
Astoria	Bedridden, immobile for a year due to knee injury		Depression resulting from husband infidelity			
Dylan	Asthma, several surgeries in the past but	Co-worker's did not accept her				Co-workers did not accept her

SI Participant Name	Social Isolation Subclassifications					
	Health	Psycho-logical	Abuse	Familial	Economic	Societal
	nothing major anymore	which brought on depression				for her over-confidence
Chip	Multiple Sclerosis					
Springer		Extreme shyness				
Athena	Bowel Cancer				Escort work left her isolated and depressed	
Belinda				Autistic Son keeps her isolated		
Daphne	Under-developed pituitary gland = far behind in growth	Social anxiety; Extreme Shyness; depression				
Eirene	Recently mute					
Barbie		Shy			Poor	

Falling within the Social Isolation subclassification of Health Conditions include:

(1) Eirene who lost her ability to speak:

Eirene: I think its perm...but I lost my voice about 1.5 years ago. My NEW doc as of last Saturday…thinks it was because of a bacterial problem. Whatever that means. but anyways…my RL kinda became closed after that.

(2) Athena who contracted cancer:

Athena represents a form of social exclusion at the severe end of the spectrum—she was diagnosed with bowel cancer and has been getting treatment for it ever since. As a result of this cancer and the treatment and surgeries she has received, she is bedridden and extremely weak—she needs to take naps and rest often during the day. Yet even for her, the health condition is only one characteristic

that comprised the particular form of social isolation that she experiences. Rather, there are other aspects as well:

> *archmunster Toll: ah...so you have cancer?*
>
> *Athena: I had, yes. so far, I am clean*
>
> *archmunster Toll: that's terrific*
>
> *Athena: I had an op 4 years ago. bowel*
>
> *archmunster Toll: ah...*
>
> *Athena: I won't show how I look now*
>
> *archmunster Toll: before the cancer--had you experienced the sort of caring, friendliness, interest in you--in RL?*
>
> *Athena: not really, no. an escort's life is not that nice*
>
> *archmunster Toll: how so?*
>
> *Athena: well, imagine*
>
> *archmunster Toll: :)*
>
> *Athena: letting strangers enter your body*
>
> *archmunster Toll: ah...*
>
> *Athena: I was a whore!*

Thus, for Athena prior to being diagnosed with cancer, she also experienced isolation due to her difficult work as an escort and the stigma associated with such work. In the case of Athena's status as an escort, this type of social isolation falls more accurately within the construct of marginalization.

(3) Astoria represents those who straddle more than one condition. In her case, she straddles both the health-related and the familial conditions:

For Astoria it was a bit more complicated still. The main issue that provided the opportunity for her to join SL was an injury she sustained to her knee which kept

her bed ridden for over a month and limited her mobility for more than a year. In addition, she also was going through marital problems which made her depressed and caused her to seek out something "to take her mind off of things" as she put it.

archmunster Toll: so during the worst part of the injury, do you think you were in SL more?

Astoria: oh wow, i was in SL nearly the entire day at times. once i got the hang of it and started making friends it was way better than tv!

archmunster Toll: :) do you think you would have gotten involved in SL were it not for your injury?

Astoria: good question - maybe so. there were other things goin on in my life at the time which made me gravitate to SL also. plus I'm very artistically driven and was interested in it from that point of view anyway so, i think i would have found it regardless. but having all that free time made it easier

archmunster Toll: what other things were going on in your life?

Astoria: my marriage was collapsing - and I knew it, so i was unhappy and looking for something to take my mind off of that. this, was a good way to ignore it

Once her AW relationships and life improved, her need for SL diminished, partly as a result of people she met in SL—she met her current boyfriend in SL, and this relationship, she says, more than any other has helped to improve the overall quality of her AW life. Though she admits that she would never want to completely leave SL, she does indicate that the physical, psychological and emotional state of her AW life is the primary contributing factor to the level and intensity of her SL involvement:

archmunster Toll:...do you still come here a lot? hasn't it dropped or am i mistaken...?

Astoria: It had dropped off very substantially in recent months due to personal reasons, I had moved in RL and was very busy getting things settled there. In the past couple of weeks, I've been on a bit more now. but, still have found that I'm not on as much as I used to be

archmunster Toll: because of your recovery from the injury and your bf not being on as much?

Astoria: well, both yes. life has settled down and i guess being happy in my personal life has a lot to do with it. not needing to retreat here as much. however, I do still enjoy meeting up with my friends here a lot, and doing other things here too, so I have no intention of discarding this anytime soon, in fact was looking for new land today lol

archmunster Toll: cool :)

Astoria: i feel this is a rather permanent situation, for the long haul

archmunster Toll: ah...

Astoria: like a vacation home :)

It is interesting to note that Astoria compares SL to an AW entity—a vacation home. For her, SL now seems to serve as a refuge from her busy AW life and hence she perceives it as a vacation home. It is both a place to relax and something she clearly looks forward to. It serves the purpose of giving her the escape she needs from the AW much in the same way a vacation home might serve that purpose in the AW. With her knee on the mend, her ex-husband a distant memory and her new boyfriend something to look forward to, Astoria is likely

moving away from social isolation and back to social support. While Astoria is normally quite social and normally not prevented from engaging in social activity, during the time she spent rehabilitating from her knee injury, she was in fact socially excluded, i.e. physically prevented from engaging in Actual World social activity, a prevention that was further exacerbated by her crumbling marriage and the depression brought on by this dissolution. Thus, Astoria's situation may suggest that social isolation need not be a permanent condition for it to engender robust attachment to Second Life. Rather, it may in fact be the case that deep, multi-dimensional attachment to SL is possible even after such conditions are reduced and/or eliminated, even as one's actual participation in SL may decrease as a result of such social impediments being removed.

Falling within the Familial Conditions include:
(1) Belinda who must care for her autistic son:

Belinda serves as an example of a participant with a familial condition which prevents face to face social interaction: Belinda's son is autistic and she is a single mother. This makes it impossible for her to have much, if any, of an actual world social life:

Belinda: My son is autistic, so I needed a break from him

archmunster Toll: gottcha...I've worked with autistic children before...so i have some little idea of what it might be like (very little idea)....anyway....

Belinda: He's a handful and a half

archmunster Toll: :) do you have help?

Belinda: No. my aunt watches him while i work

archmunster Toll: ah...Sounds hard...

Belinda: it is, but I manage

(2) Jessie who experienced long-term suffering from two abusive marriages:

Jessie represents the social isolation that can occur as a result of ongoing spousal abuse—for she was in a psychologically abusive relationship/marriage for almost twenty years, one that marginalized her from experiencing healthy social activity. And before that marriage she was in a physically abusive marriage. SL became her refuge, her hiding place, a place to get better and to learn from her past—she looked to SL as a place to help her figure out how not to repeat the mistakes of her past and to grow more confident. So in some ways SL was intimately tied to the issues which drove her to SL—it was both the hiding place and the place from which she could develop the strength to stop hiding:

archmunster Toll: so was your husband abusive just at the end...or throughout your marriage?

Jessie: looking back now Sir, i would say the first 7 years he was not. after that, he turned on the mental and emotional blows. i didn't want to fail, i didn't want to break my vows, so i stayed, and over the next 12 years, it got worse

archmunster Toll: oh wow...

Jessie: and at the end, he turned mean and ugly with it Sir

archmunster Toll: so he ended it?

Jessie: my mistake was staying. and yes he did Sir, as soon as our daughter turned 18

archmunster Toll: i was just about to ask...do you have only one child?

Jessie: with him yes Sir. i have 2 from my first marriage (the physically abusive one). see the pattern ? i didn't, not until after the 2nd and now i know why it happened that way, what mistakes i made. i now know how to NOT get into an

abusive relationship. and have a wonderful Man that i adore and have some hopes

of a future again Sir

> *archmunster Toll: that's so good...*
>
> *Jessie: and all thanks to the things i learned right here in SL*
>
> *archmunster Toll: and you always have sl when you need it...no?*
>
> *Jessie: always Sir. i can't see giving it up completely. i am moving as many*

of my friends here to real life contact for those weeks when i just can't get in here.

but no, i have no desire to give it up

Jessie, like Astoria, also appears to be in the process of moving from Social Isolation to Social Support. And like Astoria, Jessie also indicates that this transition will likely result in less time spent in SL. The medicine, as it were, will not be needed as much. Yet, like Astoria, what matters here is that social isolation occurred for an extended period of time though it turned out to be temporary. Also like Astoria, the attachment for SL developed during her period of social isolation will likely remain even once that social isolation is remedied. Thus, germane to a participant's capacity to develop a robust attachment to Second Life is this condition of social isolation; not germane, however, is whether or not such a condition is temporary or permanent.

(3) Harmony straddles both the familial and the psychological conditions:

In Harmony, we find a participant driven to social isolation for two reasons: first, she had been kept a prisoner in her own home by her husband who was both physically and mentally abusive towards her. In addition to that, she is also a very shy person and so these two things combined made SL a very attractive and important place for her:

archmunster Toll: Were you able to be free in SL?

Harmony: No... but not because of SL

archmunster Toll: Because of...?

Harmony: My husband chat logged my computer so I couldn't do anything he didn't like :) That's a different issue.... in normal circumstances SL is a very free place.

archmunster Toll: Why do you think you haven't found the support system in RL...?

Harmony: I am very very shy for one thing... and on top of that for years my husband didn't like me having any friends. I wasn't allowed to speak to anyone alone, even my mom.

archmunster Toll: He really had you under his thumb in both worlds then?

Harmony: Very much so.... and it seemed there was no way out. I couldn't drive and didn't have access to a single penny of his money. How do you leave with three kids and .... nothing? Until he is arrested and you are forced to just do it

Falling within the subclassification of Psychological Constraints include:
(1) Sanguine who is an extremely shy person:

For Sanguine, his main issue is that he is extremely shy. This shyness has prevented him from having much of a social life—he describes himself as being socially dysfunctional. And while he acts the same way at an SL party as he does in the Actual World, he does believe he has been able to develop far more friends in SL than he was ever able to in the actual world:

archmunster Toll: so as far as social relationships go..not much difference between sl and rl?

Sanguine: well.. the phrase "social relationships" is quite broad

archmunster Toll: true :)

Sanguine: so i wouldn't make that statement. there's a huge difference... in general

archmunster Toll: well do you have more social success isl then irl?

Sanguine: yes. i have many more close relationships here. than in RL. i cannot tell you how much the effective "mask" of SL has opened my eyes. we are all safe here

Falling within the societal conditions, include:
(1) Dylan who feels she was ostracized due to her self-confidence:

Dylan provides an example of a participant marginalized socially as a result of societal issues. Specifically, she believes that her isolation was precipitated in large part due to her strong self-confidence – it is her opinion that society (i.e. United States society) is not accepting of strong, self-confident women. In her case, she believes that such confidence led to her being stigmatized by fellow co-workers, and, as a result, she withdrew from society and became somewhat of a recluse:

archmunster Toll: so prior to finding out who you were, prior to coming to SL, how did you deal with feeling different

Dylan: I hid. :). behind a computer

archmunster Toll: i see...

Dylan: I read a lot. Movies. etc...I don't hide anymore :)

archmunster Toll: so your hiding wasn't due to lack of confidence or shyness, it was due, in a way, to being too confident...?

Dylan: yes. most people cannot understand a woman who is sure of herself

archmunster Toll: ah...

Dylan: so it was easier to not put my self out there. now I don't give a damn who thinks what. I do what I want when i want. :)

Kianna, while classified as a Socially Supported participant, does present one characteristic which may be worth considering. She claims to have a healthy AW social life and is not inflicted with any physical, psychological or emotional disorder (though she does say she has bouts of depression "but no more than anyone else"). Yet it may be worth mentioning that she is the daughter of immigrants, immigrants who speak very little English and as she says are not accustomed to the ways of England where she lives. Her family members, then, are outsiders in England and it may affect her ability to integrate into English society as easily as she might like. Therefore, SL may provide her with a much easier and even straightforward platform for friend making, one without the cultural stigmatizing issues she is confronted with on a daily basis in England and at home. This however is speculative as the data is fairly silent on this matter. That said, this notion of immigrant outsider-ness is a condition similar to another shared by a number of participants, something I will refer to as cultural stigmatization.

Falling within the condition of Cultural Stigmatization includes:
(1) Galen who represents both psychological conditions and cultural ones:

While Galen possesses multiple psychological and health related issues which place him in the category of the Socially Isolated, Galen is unlike the other Socially Isolated in that he seems unable to connect with people anywhere—neither in the actual world nor in SL. Certainly this failure to connect with others is likely related to the fact that he has been diagnosed with schizophrenia. However, it is also worth considering another influencing factor. Namely, Galen cites his affiliation with furrydom as a major source of his inability to have meaningful social relationships in either the actual world or the virtual. He suggests that furries are marginalized by being belittled in virtual world games like World of Warcraft and as

a result he is unable to embrace what he considers to be an important aspect of his identity in such games for fear of being ridiculed by fellow gamers. That said, he does feel as if he is able to be far more open about this aspect of his personality in Second Life than he is in WoW or the AW for that matter:

archmunster Toll: so why do you bother with a place like SL if you do as well if not better in WoW...?

Galen: hehe that's a good question, I've asked myself that quite a bit, I guess it's because 1) in wow [World of Warcraft], Furries are totally trashed, and no one i play wow with knows i am one 2) while I'm not very good when dealing with people, i do sometimes yearn for companionship, and wow is not the place to look for that at all, I've been in several relationships here in sl, most of which ended bad though, so I'm really cautious about who i open up to…I'm a very closed person in my rl, i rarely talk about my feelings at all, and i wish i could do that a bit more often, i also wish when i go out that i felt like i belonged among others, i really don't most of the times, it's sort of why i hide myself away…

archmunster Toll: do people in rl know you are a furry?

Galen: ummm, only one friend

archmunster Toll: has SL helped you in being able to express yourself more fully--do you express yourself more fully here?

Galen: i believe i do and that's why i still come here

That said, although Galen does seem to achieve greater social success in SL than in either the AW or WoW, this success is limited. His social anxieties still manifest in SL and still limit the degree to which he is able to form meaningful

relationships. Nevertheless, meaningful relationships are very important to Galen for as he puts it, "while I'm not very good when dealing with people, I do sometimes yearn for companionship… I also wish when I go out that I felt like I belonged among others, I really don't most of the times, it's sort of why I hide myself away…" Ultimately, Galen offers a fairly astute and self-aware explanation for SL not providing the social solution for him that it does perhaps provide for others like Jessie, Dylan, Margo etc.:

> *archmunster Toll: so is most of your RL day spent in your room at home?*
>
> *Galen: yeah unfortunately =/ i spend alot of time with my dog*
>
> *archmunster Toll: so overall, sl hasn't been much better than rl in that regard? or it has?*
>
> *Galen: hmmm, to be honest, not really*
>
> *archmunster Toll: were you hoping that sl would be different ? would make things different for you?*
>
> *Galen: to be honest, i don't know. i think alot of it has to do with me. not with sl.*

As Galen's account of furrydom suggests, it is interesting to note that a form of cultural jingoism occurs in SL. Specifically, there is some animus directed at those individuals who identify themselves as furries. Furries, as defined by Gerbasi et al. (2008), "often identify with, and/or assume, characteristics of a special/totem species of nonhuman animal" (see Abstract). There are some furries for whom furrydom is merely a passing fancy, a lark, an amusement. For others, dressing up as animals, even in animal costumes, is a very important and meaningful aspect of their everyday routine. These are people who strongly identify with animals and

believe that certain aspects of their physical and/or psychological being are closely associated with the animal kingdom and often one or more particular families of animals—e.g. feline, equine, canine, etc.

In SL, an affiliation with furrydom is typically represented by the avatar an individual creates and uses. Several participants from the quantitative portion of the research indicated that their most frequently used avatar was a furry. It is also worth noting that furries had a significantly higher mean level of avatar identity than did their human avatar counterparts. Moreover, furries had a significantly lower mean level of AW ethnic identity than did their human avatar counterparts. Further, among furries, mean levels of avatar identity were significantly higher than mean levels of AW ethnic identity. Conversely, among human avatars, mean levels of avatar identity were significantly lower than mean levels of AW ethnic identity.

Thus, it could be claimed that relatively speaking, furries tend to more strongly identify with the identities represented by their avatars than do those who have human avatars. This might just be another way of saying, furry avatars are more meaningful to people who consider themselves furries than are human avatars to the humans who create them. That said, all SL participants are human after all and so there is nothing particularly revelatory/significant about a person choosing a human avatar representative. There is, however, something potentially revelatory about a person choosing a furry avatar for it may in some cases be a public coming-out party for such an individual, revealing publically (perhaps for the first time) something that represents an important part of that person's identity. That said, based on a number of factors, not least of which is the evidence from the current research, furries do tend to be an ostracized group within SL (see, for example, Brookey & Cannon, 2009). In fact, some argue that furrydom is a marginalized

group both in the AW and in other online virtual worlds (Forsyth & Bryant, 2011).

The marginalization of furries is of relevance to the present research for it perhaps

offers a further explanation, at least for those who at some level connect with furry

culture, as to the rationale for seeking out the social relationships made possible in

SL. In SL at least some furries feel it possible to more openly express their

furriness, something made more difficult and an activity more marginalized in the

AW. Several Socially Isolated participants indicate as much.

Daphne indicates that her rationale for choosing a fur avatar had less to do

with the fur community more generally and more to do with how she feels about

animals. So in this regard it is interesting that her furry selection is not due to an

affiliation with furrydom (as she clearly indicates she doesn't consider herself a

furry) but rather it is a much more personal connection for her. In fact, she even

seems to accept the stereotypes applied to furs by those who belittle them:

archmunster Toll: so you were a fur before you knew much about it?

Daphne: no - I knew about fur, It's just that a lot of the fur community is

very.. well my personality doesn't mesh well with the majority of theirs. Not to over

generalize - it's just that the ones I have known have been drama loving people who

easily dispose of relationships and are quick to get naked.

archmunster Toll: so why'd you become a fur then if you didn't really fit

with the community much?

Daphne: I love animals and enjoy having animal traits

Yet interestingly her personal connection to animals runs even deeper than

mere enjoyment. When probed further on this point she reveals, perhaps even at

some surprise to herself, that she feels close to felines not only because she loves animals but because she herself feels "like a cat" in some respects:

archmunster Toll: so do you feel like part of you is a four-legged animal?

Daphne: in real life?

archmunster Toll: yeah

Daphne: Ive never really gave it much thought. I don't think I'm part animal

archmunster Toll: so it's more that you just like/appreciate animals...?

Daphne: I guess I identify with them. especially cats. i know their actions and the way they are. i guess I do identify as feline in some ways.

Another Socially Isolated participant, Esther, an admitted non-fur who sometimes dresses up as a fur, also suggests that there are at least some furs who are "not normal" in that they are "not like everyone else". She says she does not have a problem being around Furries "not at all" but there are certain furs who make her uncomfortable because as Daphne also suggests, they are too affectionate and sexual. She too, then, does accept and even helps to disseminate some of the stereotypes about furs.

archmunster Toll: ...so furries aren't a problem for you? for example...

Esther: Oh, absolutely not. I have a few furry avatars, myself, in fact, and many of my closest friends are furries.

archmunster Toll: Do furries seem different to you in any way (i mean besides their appearance)...?

Esther: Well, there definitely is a furry culture that's different from modern-day human cultures, and I've met many furries who behave so overtly with the furry stereotype that I don't enjoy their company very much, but most of the furries I know are just like anyone else, only in an animal persona.

In discussing furries, Esther uses the phrase "some of my closest friends are furries" which in my mind conjures a similar phrase used in relation to homosexuals and African Americans: "some of my best friends are gay" and "some of my best friends are black". While she may have meant this ironically, whether or not it was intended as an ironic statement is, for the most part, irrelevant. That such a phrase could be applied to furries and those who associate with the furry culture is the important point here. In other words, furries are sufficiently marginalized that a non-fur might feel the need to emphasize the point that (believe it or not) yes, I have furry friends. She furthermore suggests that most furries "are just like anyone else," which suggests two things. First, it indicates that there is at the very least a perception "out there" widespread enough that furries are "different enough from non-furs" that it becomes necessary to emphasize the point that furries are just like anyone else. In other words, a form of reassurance is necessary, i.e. "any stories you may have heard about furries are simply that, just stories, and we can all rest assured that most furries really are normal just like us" (Author, pontificating). Second, by saying furries are just like anyone else, there is also a somewhat more sinister interpretation: that for a furry to be accepted by the wider community, it should be taken for granted that they act normal like the "rest of us." Furries are, in other words, nothing to fear, they are not deviants and they shouldn't be ostracized—"I can tell you from experience, they just want to be like everyone else"—they aren't out to cause trouble.

On the one hand, it is understandable that people would consider furries to be odd, strange and outside of the norm—they are after all assuming the characteristics of animals. Yet what *is* perhaps surprising is that people who consider themselves to be fairly open minded (as Esther does) would express such open displeasure for

those who act "like stereotypical furries". And not just from open minded individuals who are friends with furries but also from open minded individuals who themselves in fact feel a deep connection with animals and represent themselves via an animal identity in SL (as Daphne does). Thus, it is not simply those with open disdain for furries who express such animus towards them but in more subtle manifestations, even those who one might consider to be fur-friendly.

To further illustrate just how abnormal some individuals perceive furries to be, consider what Ender, a Socially Supported participant, has to say on the topic. Interestingly, Ender is someone who regularly uses a furry avatar yet does not believe he "fits in" with the average furry: "I'd have to show some interest in inane youtube videos, gesture spamming, or dog penii to fit in with the average 'furry' on here" Ender claims. Furthermore, Ender makes his SL income via the creation and sale of furry avatars, yet he is nevertheless quite disdainful of them—a clear example of someone biting the hand that feeds him.

As previously discussed, for Galen, being able to openly express himself as a furry is very important to him. In fact, he feels compelled to keep his furry-ness secret in World of Warcraft out of fear that he will be ostracized by his WoW groups for this aspect of his personality. As he suggests, WoWers are not kind to the furry culture:

Galen: "in wow, Furries are totally trashed, and no one i play wow with knows i am one "

He goes on to say that Furries are called derogatory names in WoW:

Galen: furfags. alot of gay remarks, that kind of thing

archmunster Toll: what do you think they think of furries? if I were to ask a hardcore WoWer what a furry is, what would he say?

Galen: I'd say about 50% would say i don't know

archmunster Toll: :)

Galen: and the other 50% would say a freak who dresses up in a suit

Yet in SL he is able to be much more open about his furriness as evidenced by the fact that his avatar is a fur, something he would never do in WoW. And despite his strong passion for gaming and WoW he feels much more comfortable around other furs in SL than he does in WoW.

Theme Two: SL as Isolation Remedy

In this next section, I will discuss the second theme of SL as Isolation Remedy. For the Socially Isolated, SL can provide a remedy to the issues that are responsible for their particular form of isolation. For example, one Socially Isolated, Eirene, expresses her attachment for Second Life in quite striking terms.

archmunster Toll: are you proud of your home here?

Eirene: very. I love it or I would not have lived here for 1.5years. I take a lot of pride in this place.

archmunster Toll: are there other places in SL that make you proud?

Eirene: well yeas. all of it. SL is, in my opinion, and along with the concept of virtual worlds, one of the greatest inventions of my life.

I then asked Eirene, who lost her voice in the AW due to an illness, to describe what it feels like "to be" in SL?

Eirene: I feel alive....I feel like this world is the greatest medicine for me. things I can do here I will never be able to do in RL.

As Eirene's comments suggest, Second Life, for those participants limited in how much they are able to engage and participate in everyday AW activities, serves as much more than just a casual form of entertainment. It offers a conduit to activities and social contact not available or even possible due to current issues related to health, personal circumstances and/or psychological conditions. It is, as she suggests, like a form of medicine for what ails the Socially Isolated. It is also worth highlighting this notion that SL affords the opportunity to do and experience things not possible in the Actual World. Of course, the more obvious types of things that SL enables which are not possible in the AW are such things as flying, teleportation, walking through fire and consorting with demons and dragons. Yet for many of the Socially Isolated what SL affords is much more mundane than that. Rather, for many of the socially isolated what SL allows that is not possible in the AW are such things as walking down the street, going to a party, and hanging out at a café chatting with friends.

One Socially Supported participant demonstrated the potential therapeutic properties of Second Life by describing the activities of the Heron Society, a philanthropic SL group:

Candice: I belong to the heron society which is a group that helps integrate people with disabilities into sl. They bring in .... let's use a person with CP [cerebral palsy] for an example. they bring them in, get them clothing, show them how to move around, to dance and they have islands where they can hang with others if they don't feel comfortable venturing into the real world yet

Similarly, a Socially Isolated participant linked the rationale for SL involvement to loneliness and it can be inferred from what she says that SL can help to assuage that loneliness:

Harmony: But I think there are a lot of very lonely people in SL. Like me :D

Another Socially Isolated participant explained her rationale for staying in SL thusly,

Esther: [SL is] a place where I can socialize with people and not have to deal with real life contact, which would trigger my social anxiety terribly.

She continued by stating "Originally, it was just another game. I was too scared to actually talk to people for the first six months, but it was fun to fly around and see the brilliant things people would come up with. Then, when I did start to talk to people, it became my social outlet. It was surprising to me how much I was craving even just simple conversation, and I got completely engrossed in that side of SL in a very short period of time when I finally opened up. Nowadays, it's very much a part of my life. I've got friends on SL who I spend time with on a daily basis, much like a RL family would. So, I suppose in the context of the question, it has become very much a virtual life for me, to replace what I was missing in my real life."

Similarly, another Socially Isolated participant associates heavy SL use with some form of social dysfunction:

archmunster Toll: so you no longer feel like you can say that heavy users of SL have some sort of social dysfunction...

Daphne: heavy users? yeah, they probably do. whether it's some sort of social dysfunction or an inability to deal with the real world.

archmunster Toll: would you put yourself in that category?

Daphne: yeah

Yet another Socially Isolated, Athena, who spends a great deal of her time in bed due to cancer, had this to say about the importance of SL in her life:

archmunster Toll: do you think it's [SL] a game?

Athena: it is people living together. No. I am not a gamer myself

archmunster Toll: but you know people who think it is a game?

Athena: yes, I met several

archmunster Toll: what do you think is different about you and them...why do you see it as real and they see it as a game?

Athena: well, I never asked them, so, I am not sure about their motivation ... but it struck me that most of them just vanished after a time .. maybe bored with the "game"

archmunster Toll: and why don't you get bored with it?

Athena: because I am among people

archmunster Toll: ah....

Athena: to me, those people are real .. I have made friends here and those friends do feel real

In summary, this theme helps to shed light on the very important role that Second Life plays in the lives of the Socially Isolated. It is much more than a mere pastime or diversion. Second Life for the Socially Isolated is critical to their

wellbeing. It provides not only opportunities to socialize with other people and "feel normal" but also to experience the everyday, almost mundane things that many of us take for granted—from hanging out with a small group of friends and/or family to walking along a street to hanging out at a bar.

Chapter Seven: Qualitative Results - Themes Three, Four, Five and Six

Theme Three: Immersion vs. Realism

Insofar as immersion is concerned, there are some general ways in which the two groups, the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported, seem to differ. And these differences further help to distinguish the Socially Isolated from the Socially Supported. And this further distinguishing helps to more precisely define the essence of Social Isolation and what it portends for such individuals.

Immersion, it should first be stated, is a concept which refers to the degree to which an individual feels present within a virtual environment (Bracken & Skalski, 2009; Clarke & Duimering, 2006; Doyle, 2010; G. King & Krzywinska, 2003). While there are noteworthy differences in the way in which immersion affects Socially Isolated participants vs. Socially Supported participants, there does not appear to be any discernible difference in terms of whether or not the two groups of participants are able to experience some form of immersion. In other words, whether or not they are Socially Isolated participants or Socially Supported participants, both sets seem to have the capacity to feel present within SL. For example, among the Socially Isolated participants, the following is representative of the ways in which such individuals experience immersion:

Archmunster Toll: how important is the visual part of SL to you?

Chip: oh very important - without it Second Life would just be chat room

archmunster Toll: so how is this more than a chat room (or different from a chat room)?

Chip: because of the visuals you can lose yourself in it - create the illusion that you're actually in a kind of world. it's not just the visuals, it's the moving around in it

archmunster Toll:...so can you describe what it feels like to be "here"?

Chip: I think it varies now from when I first started. back then I was fully immersed in the visuals and I really felt "there" - kind of magical

And this is an example of the way in which a Socially Supported individual experiences SL immersion:

archmunster Toll: What's it like to feel that immersed...can you describe it?

Ender: It's usually not that deep of an immersion, but I don't think I ever get as immersed as many other people do. The closest I get is feeling like the world I'm looking at is real, but I'm watching it through an artificial point of view.. like seeing from a camera on a robot.

Both individuals express the capacity to feel immersed/feel present within Second Life. Yet the Socially Isolated participant, Chip, expressed a much more positive view of immersion, even describing the feeling as magical. Ender, the Socially Supported, on the other hand, described his experience of immersion in much more clinical/technical terms (e.g. "like seeing from a camera on a robot"), expressing no particular interest or passion for such a feeling.

Another way in which the two groups differ in terms of immersion has to do with the necessity of immersion, specifically how necessary immersion is to the participant in question. At least for some Socially Isolated participants, feeling immersed is essential. For example, one Socially Isolated had this to say: "Well, it feels like I'm wandering through my world, really. I mean, we've got walking and running and flying, even dancing, and every day, things get a little more realistic. I feel closer to normal when I'm walking around in a store in SL than I do when I'm

walking through a store in RL" (participant: Esther). So it is important to note that for this participant it's not just a matter of the physical sensation that occurs but the *feeling of normalcy* that an immersive SL experience enables. That is not to suggest that all Socially Isolated participants made similar comments but that when such comments were made they inevitably came from Socially Isolated participants and not from Socially Supported participants. If Socially Supported participants commented on immersion at all it was usually descriptive, i.e. to describe the sensation, not to offer or suggest any deeper significance of such a sensation.

In fact, Ender (a Socially Supported participant) went even further than merely suggesting that feeling immersed in SL was not of great importance to him; he indicated that even *wanting* to feel immersed in SL might be a sign of serious emotional and/or psychological disorders:

archmunster Toll: Cool...do you wish you were able to feel more immersed than you do?

Ender: Sometimes, but I'd actually be horrified to be fully immersed in some places on SL, and I actually value my connection to reality. The people who seem to be very into immersing themselves completely and ignoring their real lives tend to creep me out.

Thus, immersion can be a nice addition for most Socially Supported participants but at most it merely seems to enhance the overall user experience. In fact, for at least some Socially Supported participants, as Ender demonstrates, this notion of full immersion is unsettling suggesting to him abnormality on the part of the individual wanting to achieve such immersion. It is interesting to note that many of the Socially Isolated participants, those who do seek out immersion, could be classified as having social and/or psychological disorders (as Ender suggests). Yet, I

would argue that their need to feel immersed in SL does not indicate that they have psychological and/or emotional disorders (i.e. that they are crazy) but rather that their conditions are what precipitates this need for SL immersion in the first place. In other words, immersion in Second Life helps those who are socially isolated feel connected to others and the world (in this case, virtual world), grounding them, perhaps even brining a touch of sanity to their lives.

It is also worth noting that much of the research on immersion in virtual environments sidesteps or completely ignores this issue of necessity, and implicitly assumes that for most users immersion is a priority. At the very least, immersion is considered the holy grail for virtual environments—in other words, a virtual environment's success and popularity are deemed to be directly linked to the degree to which individuals are able to feel immersed in said environment. For example, as Farley and Steel (2009) indicate, the holy grail of MMORPG play is an MMORPG's capacity to create a world in which people feel fully immersed. It is the very thing that can increase popularity, increase street cred and ultimately and most importantly drive revenue growth (Bracken 2009). Yet despite the apparent business value of immersion, there are nevertheless disagreements among certain users as to just how important immersion really is to them. To put it succinctly, as the participants of this research suggest, for people who have good social and familial connections in the AW, immersion though perhaps fanciful and unique, is in some ways problematic and unsettling—it creates uncomfortable friction between their AW experience/life and their VW experience/life. It casts doubt upon which realm is more important, more salient to them and they seem acutely aware of what they consider to be the dangers of immersion, i.e. if I become fully immersed in a VW what then becomes of my AW life? How do I navigate this discomfort? Surely, there

must be something wrong with me if immersion were that important to me? etc. At the very least, this notion of immersion tends to produce feelings of AW vs. VW conflict, AW vs. VW tension and AW vs. VW feelings of discomfort. On the other hand, for those who have few, if any, connections to AW friends and family, there is much less tension and conflict in feeling immersed in a virtual environment[10]. I would postulate that the reason certain participants felt little or no discomfort in feeling immersed in SL is the obvious one: there is little or nothing in their AW life about which to feel conflicted for leaving behind. For them, the answer to the question: what then becomes of my AW life might be: who cares? There is little to look forward to in my AW life anyway, so why wouldn't I want to become immersed in a VW environment if it meant potentially developing the sorts of interests, connections and experiential complexity that so eludes me in the AW? In fact, as the results of this research suggests, most such people (i.e. the Socially Isolated) are not only not conflicted about the possibility of VW immersion (let alone outright antagonistic towards such a possibility) but are welcoming of it, placing high value upon it (almost to the degree of sheer bafflement at the question itself: e.g. why else would I be here if not to feel immersed?) As Chip puts it, "without [the visual component] Second Life would just be a chat room."

Sub-Theme: Immersion vs. Realism

It is worth discussing, at this point, the notion of realism and the way in which these two concepts, immersion and realism, intersect and diverge, for, it is

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[10] Daphne, a Socially Isolated participant, offers a divergent case as she does express guilt over her involvement in Second Life despite the fact that she is a Socially Isolated participant. In many ways it seems that her mother's influence is the cause of much of this guilt. Since she lives with her mother and since her mother objects to her use of Second Life, it may be that she is unable to ignore such a powerful influence on her life. That said, while Daphne does acknowledge the fissure that Second Life causes in her life, she also is not embarrassed by it and does not think she is crazy for participating in it. See the section entitled "SubTheme: Depth of AW National Attachment vs. SL Attachment" for a further analysis of Daphne's apparent ambivalence for Second Life.

important to not confuse the two terms. Also, a further interrogation of these terms and the relationship of these terms to Socially Supported participants and Socially Isolated participants, respectively, can shed further light on the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported. Realism, while perhaps related to immersion, is defined in the context of Second Life as the degree to which Second Life looks and feels like the actual world—i.e. how closely do the sights and sounds match what we see in the actual world. Immersion, on the other hand, is a concept which expresses the feeling of being present within a virtual environment. Thus, one of the computer generated settings in Second Life, such as the Eifel Tower, may look very realistic— that is, it may look very similar to the actual tower, however, just because it is realistic does not then mean that we are also immersed in that setting. Conversely, we may become immersed in a setting within Second Life, such as an artistic setting like Rust (Ghost, 2013) and 3D Mandelbrot Fractal Art (Kanashimi, 2013), both of which bear little resemblance to anything we could know in the actual world, yet still feel immersed in those settings, still feel as if we were there in those settings, moving through the space of those settings.

There are of course other related ways in which we can use this term realism, particularly in the context of a virtual world. For one thing, realism essentially has to do with the salience of feeling, emotion or visual representation in a virtual world. So the more salient a feeling or emotion the more real it seems; the more it represents feelings we are accustomed to in the actual world, the more real it seems. The more a virtual space seems to reflect the space of the actual world, the more real it seems—the more it reflects our understanding of the space from which it is derived, the more real it seems. Furthermore, it is not necessary that we have experienced the actual setting to perceive a virtual recreation of that setting as real or

not real—what matters is what Green (2004) refers to as *perceived* realism. For example, a virtual moon that caused avatars to walk with great leaps and bounds and mimic the sort of experience we imagine would occur on the actual moon, the more real such a setting would seem. And in SL, the more accurately an environment reflects the actual environment it was meant to mimic, the more real it will seem— this doesn't necessarily have to be an actual environment with which we are familiar—what matters is whether it reflects what we perceive to be true about the actual environment via direct experience or via books or movies or any other source of information which shapes our understanding, beliefs and opinions, even if we have never been there nor are likely to ever go there; it could even be a fantastical environment like Gor which only really exists in books.

Nevertheless, on the point of realism, there were mixed results among the participants, with Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants having varied opinions—some claiming that too much realism would be too scary (as Ender puts it), others claiming that the more realistic the better. Yet on the point of presence/immersion, the picture is much more clear and the difference between Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants much more distinct. For Socially Isolated participants, immersion is essential, for Socially Supported participants it is not.

Archmunster Toll: are you able to feel like you're here (at least sometimes)?

Chip: if I didn't, I wouldn't bother being in Second Life , I wouldn't see the point, it would be no more than a computer game

Eirene takes this notion of essentiality one step further by claiming that immersion is not just essential to the experience of SL but it has a pronounced effect upon her wellbeing:

archmunster Toll: so can you describe what it feels like "to be" in SL?

Eirene: I feel alive. I feel like this world is the greatest medicine for me.

What these excerpts represent is that achieving a feeling of presence is of utmost importance to the Socially Isolated. What this indicates is that for people who are limited in their social life, there is a much greater need for an environment that can more fully replace or compensate for these limits. To achieve such a compensation, to "believe" in such a compensation what is important isn't so much a feeling of realism—that it reflects the actual world—what is important is that they feel present, that they feel a part of the environment, that they belong. It should be noted that this notion of belonging is an important one. For the Socially Isolated, feeling present within SL not only helps compensate for the lack of presence they experience in the actual world (which will be discussed in greater length below) but also helps compensate for the lack of belonging they experience in the AW world. In other words, feeling present in SL may act as a proxy for a feeling of belonging in SL.

Ironically, for the Socially Isolated, their personal situations make feeling present in the *actual world* an ostensive challenge. Certainly embodiment of the AW is a given—they do without a doubt embody the AW, however, due to health-related, physical and/or psychological conditions, the degree to which they actually feel a part of that world and by extension present within the AW is limited. It is thus speculated that virtual immersion is highly important to them and to their lives because they are unable to immerse themselves as easily or with as much frequency in the AW. What is particularly paradoxical about this is that for those participants who are in some way outsiders in the actual world, a virtual world such as Second Life may offer greater opportunity for immersion than does the actual world.

Immersion is typically a concept applicable to a virtual world for the very reason that it is virtual, that it does not possess anything that is concrete or touchable and thus we require special terminology to even suggest that we might feel present within such an ethereal space and hence the use of terms like immersion and presence. In other words because people instinctively may find it hard to accept that a person might feel as if they were "in" a virtual world like Second Life, we are forced to describe such a feeling with "special" terminology; there is enough skepticism around this notion of immersion, that researchers have gone to great lengths to prove its existence. In fact, research around presence is substantial enough to warrant entire university programs focusing on the notion of presence (for example, see the Stanford University Presence Project 2013) and entire academic journals developed to publish research around presence and immersion, including *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, *Virtual Reality*, and *International Journal of Human Computer Studies*. By contrast, and in order to better highlight just how uniquely virtual-specific the terms presence and immersion are, it would almost be nonsensical for a university to house a research centre devoted to studying the phenomenon of presence in actual world settings: i.e. *of course* people feel present in actual world settings because by definition if we are somewhere we are present in that somewhere. It would be equally absurd to imagine an academic journal which publishes research into the phenomenon of presence in actual world settings. Rather, if presence has any meaning at all it is because there is an actual world that infuses that word with its meaning to begin with. In other words, feeling present in a virtual world specifically means that we are able to feel about a virtual world the way we feel about its actual world counterpart –it is, in other words, the counterpart (the AW) that gives presence its

meaning to begin with. On the other hand, although academic journals, university

programs and university courses do not exist which explore the phenomenon of AW

presence, such a statement may be taking a too literal interpretation of such a

phenomenon. For the degree to which human beings are able to feel present in the

actual world is something in which sociologists, philosophers and psychologists take

great interest – they just might not define or describe such a phenomenon as

"presence" or "immersion." It is a sociological and philosophical question to

wonder how connected, how present, how interconnected people are or have become

or how such things have changed over time or depending upon the shape of society

or the nation or technology. Such philosophical/sociological questions are generally

speaking reflective of fairly grand scale (macro scale) thinking, e.g. what is

mankind's place in the world? Do we exist? Do I inhabit the world or does my body

inhabit the world? Where does the mind end and the body begin? Are we really here

on earth or are we just engaged in a collective hallucination? Such questions are

grappled with by philosophers of all stripes, from existentialists to futurists to

gestaltists to religious philosophers. Similarly, sociologists also study and query

such questions, with a decidedly more societal focus. And certainly entire university

departments, academic journals and academic courses exist which explore questions

such as these.

Thus, the phenomenon of AW presence has, in fact, been studied and

grappled with for centuries (if not millennia) but packaged under different

terminology—i.e. philosophy, sociology, psychology, existentialism, gestaltism,

etc... And in some ways, this research fits within a philosophical framework, for it

ultimately does reflect the ethereal nature of presence to begin with. For example,

feeling here now (whether that here be in a VW or an AW) is quite reminiscent of

Ram Dass's (1971) seminal mental construct of being here now. And ultimately the very notion that there can be conflicts between the AW and the VW in terms of presence raises the almost inescapable question of what such presence even means in the first place. Such a question is ultimately a philosophical one—why does the AW claim superiority insofar as presence is concerned? If presence is a state of mind, why should one domain be better equipped to engender such feelings? Can anyone really ever feel fully immersed in anything? Aren't we all subject to the limitations of our minds and bodies to begin with? How connected I feel to the AW depends on how connected (or disconnected as the case may be) I feel to my body and/or my environment and how connected I feel to my body and/or environment depends on how well my mind and body and/or environment operate in concert.

And yet, what the qualitative research of the current study suggests is that for some individuals AW presence is more illusory than VW presence—not the other way around. It is AW presence that is ethereal; it is VW presence that has greater salience. In effect, the notion of presence is flipped on its head when considered from the perspective of the Socially Isolated. Yet it is not just a conceptual flipping that is taking place here—it is also an experiential flipping. For while most people take their experience of feeling present in the AW and are then able to apply such an experience to the VW and in so doing assess and judge the quality of their virtual world immersive experience (by comparing it to their everyday, banal AW feelings of presence), the qualitative findings suggest that socially isolated participants may undergo such a process in reverse. That is to say, a Socially Isolated individual may take their feelings of presence in a VW and apply them back to the AW; they may, in fact, judge the quality of their AW feelings of presence by harkening back to the way in which it feels to experience presence in a virtual world. Of course, in either

case, whether the feelings of presence originate in the AW and are then used to judge the quality of presence in a VW or whether such a process happens in reverse, the truth of course is that the notion of presence is fairly ethereal to begin with. In other words, feeling present in the AW is not something easily described and may even be one of those things that you just have to do to fully appreciate. A textual description of presence only goes so far but what probably really matters is a sensation that words may be inadequate at capturing.

Moreover, some of what classifies an environment as immersive will of course have to do with preconceptions and conceptions about presence, and it would be difficult to tell what the origin of such conceptions is—whether they be from written materials, visual materials, aural material or whether they be from actual experiences or some combination of all of these. Yet the important point here is that for at least some socially isolated participants the experience of presence may be something they learn (to a large degree) through virtual worlds initially at which point they may or may not then apply such feelings to the AW. It may even give them a way of evaluating progress they are trying to make on their introduction or re-introduction to AW society. In other words, if the AW is starting to feel more and more similar to the way in which they experience the virtual world, this may be an indication (for themselves anyway) that they are becoming emotionally/psychologically healthier and more engaged AW citizens.

For example, such was the case with Jessie who used Second Life to heal and return a stronger person to her actual life. Such was also the case for Dylan who used Second Life to better understand herself and then take this understanding, grow from it and return to the actual world more confident and at ease in her own skin. Ironically, many psychology practitioners would classify the person for whom the

AW begins to feel more and more like the VW as exhibiting psychoses and cause for concern, rather than classifying them as becoming emotionally and psychologically healthier (see, for example, Schimmenti & Caretti, 2010; Toronto, 2009).

In this next section, I will discuss the theme the degree of importance of Second Life.

Theme Four: Degree of Importance of SL

This notion of immersion introduces a more fundamental difference between Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants. Specifically, the degree of importance of SL to the Socially Isolated seems to far surpass the degree of importance of SL to the Socially Supported. SL seems to be an essential component of a Socially Isolated participant's life, while for Socially Supported participants, though perhaps in some cases heavily invested in SL (perhaps even financially), SL is not nearly so important; in fact, a good way of describing just how important SL is to Socially Supported participants would be via the word ambivalence. At best, Socially Supported participants seem conflicted about just how important SL is to them and for some Socially Supported participants, SL seems quite unimportant to them.

The following are just some of the ways in which Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants express the degree to which SL is important to them. As Eirene, a Socially Isolated participant, suggests, if she were to lose SL for some reason—if, for example, SL was shut down by its owners—this would have a noticeably negative impact on her life.

Eirene: Could I be happy if I left SL and found other things in RL to keep me going? I don't think so.

archmunster Toll: Why not?

Eirene: Been here so long...and know so many..it would be like a life cut short in a way. we lose people to RL everyday. whether it be work, death, change of RL disposition...and on and on.

Another Socially Isolated participant makes the point that the loss of SL would not be crushing but this seems to be largely because she has a number of alternatives lined up in the event that it does disappear.

archmunster Toll: And if it were to go away, how would you feel?

Astoria: I would be quite sad, however, not crushed. there are other communities similar to SL which are out there that a lot of my friends have joined, I also, and many of us are just waiting for them to take off so we can all belong to many of these types of place "just in case" SL were to go away

Although she claims that she would not be crushed by the loss of SL, it could be inferred that the reason she wouldn't be crushed is because she has back-up plans in place in case of such an event. Specifically, she and her friends have begun to scope out potential replacement worlds for SL. Rather than indicating a lack of concern for SL, her confession suggests that the loss of SL is concerning enough to her that she has made preparations and plans in order to deal with what she claims is its eventual disappearance. This also suggests that she is not specifically attached to Second Life but rather the category of online virtual social worlds of which Second Life is merely one manifestation. However, the important thing to glean from this admission is the great lengths to which she has gone to ensure she is not without a virtual environment in which to spend time. This seems evocative of a disaster plan

that an AW homeowner might have in the event of an actual emergency.

And yet another Socially Isolated participant, Athena, indicates that she would be quite upset if it were to go away.

archmunster Toll: so if SL were to go away...how would you feel?

Athena: I would not lose my best friend, but, yes, I would miss SL very, very much. I would feel very bad. I would lose lots of others .. I would lose all objects I paid for, worked for

Athena's last point here, that she would lose the things she has worked so hard for, does in many ways conjure notions of AW hard work and AW possessions—people often become attached to the things, the objects that are the result of hard work, of money earned via a job perhaps or something built over time with one's own hands—furniture, a house, etc. She has, in a sense, begun to take pride in those virtual goods that she has worked so hard for in much the same way that individuals take pride in their AW jobs and their AW possessions (Richins, 1994).

Daphne, also a Socially Isolated participant, compares the potential loss of SL to the feeling of actually being lost and ill at ease. Moreover, she indicates that even were she to find a VW to replace SL, she would still miss SL very much:

archmunster Toll: so if SL were to go away, how would you feel?

Daphne: Very sad. quite lost. I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I'd be scrambling to reconnect with the friends I made on SL, and to find some sort of place like SL.

archmunster Toll: So if you found another place like SL...would your sad

feelings brought on by SL's disappearance go away...?

Daphne: I think I would be relieved. But I would still miss SL greatly.

Echoing Astoria's words, Daphne too would need another virtual world to replace SL were it to disappear—and while she has not made plans for such a potentiality (unlike Astoria) her use of the phrase "scrambling…to find someplace like SL" indicates just how important a virtual world like SL is in her life. Furthermore, even were she to find a replacement world, she would still nevertheless be deeply affected by the loss of SL.

In sharp contrast to these responses, are the responses of the Socially Supported. For Socially Supported participants, the loss of SL seems to be much less problematic. For example, Scarlet expressed only mild disappointment at the notion of leaving SL:

archmunster Toll: would you consider leaving sl for another virtual world at some point

Scarlet: oh, probably not. I'm not much of a gamer, came her for the people. and that is what I stay for. I suppose if all my friends left I would consider it, but more likely I'd just move on to something else.

Another Socially Supported, Amanda, says SL is just a game and "people who think it isn't…well they worry me." By this she implies that SL is just for "fun" and while real relationships and real friendships can form in SL that is just because that is what happens when people get together. She continues by stating that "SL is really just a glorified chat room", "it's like dress up dolls and chat rooms". She spends considerable time in SL now (4 hours each night, 10 or more on the

weekend) but she thinks that will decrease considerably after she moves in with her new fiancé (whom she met in SL)

Amanda: I will have moved up north and be with him. then I don't know if I will even be on SL any more. who knows

archmunster Toll: oh really...why don't you think you'll be on SL any more after that?

Amanda: because we have gotten to know each other on the mental level .. and once we get together we will be busy getting to know each other erm... ya .. there is also his family and mine and that will take precedence over this game.

Although she has made very strong connections and attachments here in SL, she nevertheless does not express overt attachment to it. She seems to think that SL is merely a tool for helping to bring her together with her fiancé but little more than that. She has her family to attend to (children from a previous marriage) and so does he (also has children from a previous marriage). After she moves in with him (and meets him for the first time face to face), she will then be too busy to have much time for SL. Whether or not this turns out to be the case is irrelevant here—what matters is her own perceptions and interpretations of SL's importance in her life and, as with the other Socially Supported participants, she seems fairly dismissive of the role SL plays in her life, of its potential importance—she seems to take it for granted in fact. And yet, it would not be too difficult to make a fairly convincing argument as to the profound impact that SL has had on her life—it has led to her meeting her fiancé and soon will lead to her changing her entire life, e.g. moving in with him. Nevertheless, it would hardly be straightforward to discern such profundity from the manner in which she discusses SL.

As another example of this, Candice, also a Socially Supported participant, despite spending more than 20 hours per week in SL hosting parties, forming deeply meaningful relationships, hanging out with friends whom she considers to be like family, wants to make it clear that she is not "crazy".

> *Candice:* seems like you're here to prove that people get too immersed, that they lose the line between rl & sl
>
> *archmunster Toll:* really? not good if that's the impression
>
> *Candice:* and I bet some do. the quiz too. survey*. I am capable of making that distinction "In my real life I am blessed. I don't need this place but it is a nice escape from the loneliness of my real life".

Thus, while SL is important to her, even very important to her, she does not "need this place"; rather, "it is a nice escape" from her "loneliness". Like the other Socially Supported participants already mentioned, Candice expresses feelings of ambivalence with respect to SL. It is something they enjoy and with which they have fun but Socially Supported participants are generally unwilling to go much further than that—to ascribe much more significance to SL than that. All of the Socially Supported participants, Brodie, Scarlet, Amanda, Ender, Kianna, and Candice, while they do not speak identically about SL, they do share a certain degree of ambivalence even dismissiveness in their conversations about SL and the role it plays in their lives.

In sum, Socially Isolated participants are much more willing than are Socially Supported participants to unapologetically admit the critical role that SL plays in their lives. This may at least in part be due to the fact that SL *is* much more important to them. It could certainly be said that for Socially Isolated participants, SL plays a much more crucial role in their lives—it seems to be something that

would be very difficult for Socially Isolated participants to live without. To varying degrees, Second Life for Socially Isolated participants is an intrinsic part of who they are. For Socially Supported participants, on the other hand, there is much more dismissiveness and ambivalence with respect to the importance of SL to their lives. As will be discussed in the ensuing section, some of this difference in perception between Socially Supported participants and Socially Isolated participants may be due to the personal circumstances of Socially Supported participants versus Socially Isolated participants. It also may well be that contrary to the role SL plays in the lives of Socially Isolated participants, SL really is not an intrinsic part of Socially Supported participants' lives. And so it may be that Socially Supported participants' more ambivalent tone is due to the fact that SL plays a more ambivalent role in their lives than it does in Socially Isolated participants' lives. However, it may also be the case that Socially Supported participants find it more difficult to express their unfettered appreciation for SL due to the uncomfortable position in which SL places them, attached to a world that mimics the one in which they already live, i.e. the actual world. Such attachment for virtual people, places and things may cause Socially Supported participants discomfort and even embarrassment as they grapple with what this means in the face of the potential neglect they heap upon their actual lives and the actual family and friends who inhabit those lives.

In the following section, I will explore the theme of place attachment and the ways in which such a theme unearths (perhaps surprisingly) some of the similarities which exist between the two groups of Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants.

Theme Five: SL Place Attachment

While overall, SL seems more essential to Socially Isolated participants than to Socially Supported participants, there are other more specific emotional forms of attachment which indicate that at least in some ways the two groups may be more closely aligned than one might suspect. For example, Candice, a Socially Supported participant, describes quite poignantly her response to a virtual theater building being "torn down" in SL:

Candice: so they had a grand ball and destroyed the theater area. i cried lol. the music they have here is from phantom of the opera. isn't this just besplendent?

Archmunster Toll: yes it is

Candice: i wish i could buy that staircase…188 prims for just one handrail.lol. ouch

Archmunster Toll: that's a lot of work

Candice sighs. they're going to rebuild it. with less prims. now that they can use sculpty prims. but still. i watched this come down. and yes i know this is a game, a cartoon, yes, my heart sunk. Lol. you can really get caught up in the majesty of this place. lol. i sound so ... silly

Candice: I've seen so many places in this game. in my year and 12 days here. this was the most beautiful, the most "powerfully beautiful"

Her love for this virtual theatre was (clearly) deeply felt and very personal, not unlike the feelings a person might have for an AW place (Williams & Vaske, 2003). As Candice very eloquently described, the loss of this theater really did affect her quite deeply, to the point that she was reduced to tears. Yet even in the midst of describing this very poignant moment in her life she still felt it necessary to bracket

what she was saying by adding "I know this is a game, a cartoon…" and "I sound so silly", and adding several instances of "lol" to make sure I understood that she knows this is a frivolous place; as she says, it is after all just a cartoon. Thus, while she clearly possesses a deep emotional attachment to SL, she nevertheless attempts to negotiate her own discomfort over such feelings and in so doing represents a characteristic common to Socially Supported participants. Namely, Socially Supported participants generally consider deep attachment to SL to be problematic, even if they themselves are the ones experiencing such attachment. It should be noted that the way in which Socially Supported participants bracket their feelings of attachment for SL may be the result of the research itself. In other words, their knowledge of the research and feeling that they are "under the spotlight of scientific research" may make them feel obligated to express to me (the researcher) that they are aware that Second Life is just a silly game.

Socially Isolated participants, not surprisingly, also express deep attachment for SL. Yet, unlike Socially Supported participants, Socially Isolated participants tend not to express any discomfort or embarrassment over such feelings (directly to me anyway). For example, Astoria, a Socially Isolated participant, claims that a number of the places in SL are very important to her and her friends, particularly one bar she frequents called the Drift On Inn:

Archmunster Toll:: so if the Drift On Inn were to get deleted...how would you feel?

Astoria: Awful. Really, it would be terrible. it's gone through some changes over this past year and each have been difficult, but it still is there thankfully*.* everyone really cares a lot about it

Archmunster Toll: and your home here...if it were to get deleted, how would

you feel?

Astoria: Equally depressed. Just yesterday, somehow the land got all messed up, not sure how. I was so upset, had to re-terraform and I'm not very good at it. a friend had terraced my whole back yard and now i have to beg her to come back and redo it

Archmunster Toll: oh sorry

Astoria: oh and I've deleted the house myself plenty of times - yikes, how stupid lol

Archmunster Toll: lol

Astoria: and i LOVE this land, if i had to give it up, I'd be very upset

It is worth noting that in this case, Astoria's use of lol is not to bracket her feelings of warmth for Second Life; rather it is meant to laugh off a mistake she made several times by deleting her house.

Another Socially Isolated participant says something similar about her own house:

Archmunster Toll: So if Athena's house were to be accidentally deleted, how would you feel?

Athena: terrible

Another Socially Isolated expresses how much she misses the first land she ever owned in SL. In so doing, she compares this feeling of missing to the way in which we feel in the AW about things and places that we have lost:

Archmunster Toll: So about this move you're about to do...has that been an easy decision...?

Margo: Yeah, this time it has. The first land I owned was really tough to leave though. I was attached to it for some reason and I actually kept it around for awhile even though I had a huge island plot that was much better.

Archmunster Toll: Why were you attached to it?

Margo: It was the first spot here I could really call my own. I had a lot of memories there. It just felt like leaving that spot was leaving all those memories behind. Even though in sl, it doesn't really matter how far apart you are on the map.. it just feels that way like rl, I guess.

Archmunster Toll: Have you ever gone back?

Margo: Yeah, all the time. But it makes me sad to see it since it's all cut up and full of junk now. I also tp [teleported] back to the first apartment I ever rented .. I did that last night actually and got an ejection threat from the land owner lol   I had to explain the situation and then we actually started talking because she remembered me from way back when.

In all of the Socially Isolated examples mentioned above, like some Socially Supported participants, deep feelings of attachment are expressed. Yet unlike Socially Supported participants, such attachment is not trivialized by forms of bracketing (e.g. via the use of lol) or embarrassment. Rather, the Socially Isolated participants expressions of attachment are unapologetic and without embarrassment.

It seems that for most participants, whether Socially Isolated participants or Socially Supported participants, what truly matters about SL are the people. Yet for

some, the places within SL are also extremely important to them. For example,
Astoria says that what keeps her in SL are the people, the friends she has made, yet
she quickly reconsiders this statement acknowledging just how important the places
can be to her as well.

archmunster Toll: losing the friends you made there would be worse than
losing the Drift On Inn...or vice versa?

Astoria: yes, the friends are what matter there. if the Drift On Inn left, I'm
sure we'd find another place to create together, but even still, it's the ambiance of the
place too that seems to matter, like it has a life of its own - like the bar on "Cheers"
or something

It is also interesting that Astoria helps explain what this place means to her
by comparing it to a fictional bar—namely Cheers, the centrepiece of an American
sit-com by the same name. So it is perhaps ironic that her way of describing the
importance of a virtual bar is by comparing it to a completely fictitious bar, an
imaginary bar. In fact, the SL bar, the Drift On Inn, is more real than Cheers in the
sense that it functions like a bar, people meet there, people are able to order drinks
(though not actually able to taste those drinks) and so for all intents and purposes it
is a bar. The Cheers bar, on the other hand, is not real—it is merely a set on a
television show; it is fabricated and imaginary—when the show aired on television,
it was not something to which people could travel and at which they could meet
friends and order drinks. So on the one hand there is a virtual though real bar in SL,
virtual by dint of the fact that it is not concrete, not something touchable and on the
other hand there is an unreal bar though actual in the sense that there is a set
somewhere in Hollywood (or at least there was) that someone could touch and even

take a seat at. In another sense, the Cheers bar, when depicted on television, is also virtual, for at that moment it is not something one can touch. In effect, it becomes an unreal yet virtual bar.

What is particularly interesting about this, is that in defining and describing the SL bar, Astoria refers to an unreal, fictitious bar to help convey what she finds intrinsically important about this virtual SL bar. Furthermore, she is not the only participant who uses Cheers as an analogy for SL's capacity to engender strong social bonds (Candice also refers to Cheers in describing the friendly, familial quality of her Second Life friends and associates). What this comparison suggests is the degree to which virtuality and in some cases unreal virtuality already plays a role in peoples' lives. It is, as Baudrillard (1994) claims, as if the meaningful aspects of our lives have become tangled together versions of simulacra, simulation upon simulation serving as reality and meaning. For some, the standard bearer for what a good meeting place, a social gathering place should be resides in a fictional depiction of social gathering (i.e. Cheers) not in actual gathering places or actual social experiences. Some even claim that any fascination we might have for virtual worlds more generally may be due to the pervasiveness of such unreal, fictitious images made only more erratic and disjointed and everywhere-present due to the Internet and related digital technologies. In a sense, the virtual world has been determined by this disjointed imagery, the fictions upon fictions which surround and engulf us. Those who find such worlds conducive and rewarding have been brought to such a state by living amid so much unreal, fictional imagery on a daily basis. A virtual world in some ways seems only a natural extension, a welcome progression if you will to such an actual world that is already overflowing with so much unreality and fiction on the one hand and virtuality and simulation on the other. In some

respects, it provides a much needed respite from this cacophony of fictional and/or virtual imagery. The virtual world, despite its non-concrete nature, its virtuality, seems much more contained, defined and predictable than the erratic, disjointed, perpetually changing actual world in which we live. It might even be said to represent the ideal banality that so eludes us in the actual world—it is, in some respects, the commonplace, the boring, the banal world that we so wish existed in the actual world. That said, it also has its share of oddities, but even these oddities are things that we can come back to if we wish—residents of SL know where they are and how to get to them. They are contained and controlled. And in some cases even restricted and supervised. Consider, for example, the lengths Second Life has gone to ensure more "deviant elements" of Second Life are restricted, including gambling, pornography and prostitution. In the case of pornography and prostitution, Linden Lab has restricted such activities to one island within Second Life that requires users to provide evidence of their identity and age prior to being granted access. And in the case of gambling, all such activities have been banned from Second Life altogether.

Esther, a Socially Isolated participant, discusses just how emotionally connected she felt to one particular SL sim (or region) in which she participated in a military role-playing game. Because a major component of this game involved protecting various things: including their home base, their gear, their fellow players, their land, Esther developed deep-seated feelings of attachment for these virtual objects, places and people.

Esther: "When I was in one of the armies, I loved the sims we were in because it was my home, and we worked so hard to defend our homes. Either some new scandal is going on with one of the leaders of the main groups, or someone

leaked new equipment, or stuff like that, which in a normal society would never be an issue like it is with the groups. So because we were always feeling this tension of having to be careful of what was ours, our gear, our people, our land, I would feel deep-seated feelings of fondness and loyalty for our headquarters and base and land."

It is interesting to note that her more deep seated feelings of attachment for the land was associated with this group of army gamers. As with AW military situations, it is the threats from outsiders and the associated danger which such outsiders portend which can bring soldiers together. It is the protective behaviour that develops in such situations which can result in camaraderie and deep feelings of attachment and the formation of strong bonds among the relevant personnel as well as mistrust, fear and boredom (see, for example, Lecluse, 1998). Relationships can become heightened, as can feelings for inanimate objects and land. Thus, it is interesting that such camaraderie and deep feelings of attachment to land can also develop in virtual settings and virtual army groups which simulate wars and war-like scenarios. But perhaps more to the point, it is interesting that this participant compares such feelings developed in virtual army situations to those that might develop within AW army scenarios—or at least such may be the perception. It is as if the mimicking of army life does not just end with the visual and experiential aspects of war but also the emotional bonds which war engenders.

In the next section I explore the theme of identity construction and compare the ways in which the socially isolated and the Socially Supported construct identities within Second Life.

Theme Six: Identity Construction

With Socially Isolated participants in particular, SL is often used as a means of better understanding who they are as individuals. That is not to say that all Socially Isolated participants are in SL to better understand themselves, but it is to say that it is the SIs, and not, for the most part, the Socially Supported participants, who use SL, sometimes explicitly, sometimes only in retrospect, in this way. On the other hand, it could be argued that all individuals are continually negotiating and re-negotiating their identities via social interaction and other more introspective activities such as reading, writing or even sleeping and dreaming. Yet that said, I would distinguish such everyday identity construction and formation that is either consciously or subconsciously part and parcel to the human condition from the more overt form of identity construction practiced by at least some of the Socially Isolated. Again, that is not to say that there is necessarily a plan involved, one in which these particular SIs map out a strategy for using SL as a way to better understand themselves but rather that they make such a connection between SL and their personal identity—either during their involvement with SL or later, upon reflection.

Moreover, for Socially Isolated participants when such a connection is made it seems to be tied to a positive, almost transformative experience, one in which SL acts as the conduit for personality changes, changes the participants claim have been positive even life altering (for the better) or what some have described as freeing, and of a type, according to the participants, not necessarily possible in the AW. For example, both Jessie and Dylan came to SL feeling like there was something about themselves that was missing, something they did not fully understand or could not fully accept. For Dylan, SL exposed her to certain lifestyles, particularly the BDSM

lifestyle, that, as she puts it, "freed her". It helped her to more fully understand herself, accept who she was and take such understanding back into the AW. As a result, she feels she no longer really needs SL—that it has served its purpose for her and believes she is now thriving in the AW in ways that were not possible prior to her SL involvement:

>*Archmunster Toll:* so pre-SL, you weren't shy, but you did feel...?

>*Dylan:* different, just didn't know why. now I do. Lol

>*Archmunster Toll:* so sl helped you find other "different" people like you?

>*Dylan:* yes. I would never have found them otherwise. I wouldn't have looked in other words

>*Archmunster Toll:* but now you don't really need sl anymore...? is that it?

>*Dylan:* yes :) and it is ok now. 2 years ago I could not imagine leaving sl

Dylan goes on to describe what it was like to feel different from others and what led her to feeling that way.

>*Archmunster Toll:* different? what is it about you that makes you feel that way? (or made you feel that way?)

>*Dylan:* I know who I am and what I want. I am not afraid to work. nor tell someone how I feel. I go to work to work. not socialize or for popularity. that is what most are there for. gossip and drama is not me

>*Archmunster Toll:*...and so pre-SL, when you said you felt different--what did you mean?

>*Dylan:* I did not know why I was Dominant. so after learning about the traits and that I am it opened me up more. in a way it freed me

>*Archmunster Toll:* so it was a BDSM-related thing?

Dylan: it was the inner me coming out. so yes. I was searching for who I was and what I wanted to be. and I found it here. by accident rofl [rolling on floor laughing]

Archmunster Toll: so prior to finding out who you were, prior to coming to SL, how did you deal with feeling different

Dylan: I hid

Dylan: :)

Dylan: behind a computer

What is perhaps ironic is that while she hid behind a computer initially this type of hiding is different from the identity work she performed once in SL. Initially this hiding involved merely playing single person shooter games, computer games that she played alone, without the involvement of anyone else—it was quite literally—herself and her computer. And while an outsider might not see the difference between playing computer games and participating in SL (also something reliant upon a computer)—for her the difference was stark. One was self-indulgent and acted as a barrier to her own personal growth, the other, SL, was the very thing that allowed for her personal growth and identity construction. SL, and the people she met in SL, gave her the tools she needed to more fully understand and *appreciate* who she was as a person.

For Jessie, SL also has allowed her to come to better understand herself, what she considers to be her true self. Through her participation in SL with others who could guide her and help her come to terms with herself, she was able to discover who she really is—namely a submissive as she calls it.

Jessie: and by the way Sir, this is me lol. i am only one person, i can't handle the multiple personality thing at all

archmunster Toll: so it's not as if people in SL know you better than people in RL...

Jessie: not anymore, no, Sir. it used to be that way, but no more because i am no longer under that rock *smiles*

Thus, for Jessie, the actual world was initially a more confining space than SL. The actual world was the place where she felt she could not fully be herself. It was SL, on the other hand, that showed her who she truly was and how to express her true self. Through what she learned about herself by being in SL, she is now able to more fully express herself in both domains, the actual and the virtual.

Athena, a Socially Isolated participant, also explores various aspects of her identity and her personality through the avatars that she creates. This is different from the way in which Jessie and Dylan explore their identities/personalities. Dylan and Jessie's experience is one steeped in discovery while Athena's is not one primarily of discovery but rather one of instrumentality—she uses SL to express various self-known aspects of her personality through the use of three different avatars. Not that she doesn't necessarily discover or uncover new things about herself by doing this but she is mainly interested in taking what she already knows about herself and using these different sides to her personality to have some fun in SL and explore her sexuality—she is, in effect, roleplaying some very specific aspects of her personality.

archmunster Toll: do you act differently with each ava [avatar]?

Athena: I can get one here, in a few. yes, I do. Athena likes to expose herself, wearing somewhat kinky clothes

archmunster Toll: lol

Athena: whereas Hoppa, the FW[11], is very decent

archmunster Toll:: ah

Athena: and the slave, Cassidy, has been ordered to be nude all the time

archmunster Toll: lol. who has made this order

Athena: she is a pleasure slave, as you know what that implies

archmunster Toll: yes i think so

Athena: well, it just happened ... various sides of my personality. I do not have a male ava, I am not inclined to play male things.

[At this point, another avatar, Hoppa, enters Athena's apartment. As I want to maintain my participants' privacy I ask if we shouldn't resume the conversation at another time.]

archmunster Toll: should we try this another time?

Athena: ok. I may have more time than you

archmunster Toll: oh I've got time--i just thought you would want to talk to your friend now

Athena: lol. this is Hoppa, my alt [Hoppa, in other words, is another avatar or alt she controls using a second computer]

archmunster Toll: oh...oops :)

*Athena***:** hahaaaaa

archmunster Toll: well you fooled me

Athena: but there is something else I want to mention

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[11] In Gorean role-play, which has many similarities to the bondage/BDSM lifestyle, an FW is a free woman as opposed to a collared female or slave

archmunster Toll: yeah?

Athena: in rl, I am alone, and I have to take my own decisions all the time, while, in fact, I am a submissive. Athena is the strong one, self sufficient - as is Hoppa but Cassidy is a slave, is owned, does not have any possessions ... it fills a need in myself

This discussion of identity is important to the overall discussion of socializing and virtual worlds for it addresses what may be, at least in part, the underlying rationale for why SL is so important to most Socially Isolated participants. And that rationale has less to do with identity construction per se and more to do with the way in which the AW interferes with individuals' capacity for unfettered self-expression (see Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Sanguine summarizes this point quite eloquently and succinctly:

Sanguine: we are now sitting seeing each other, talking... but also experiencing a projection of what each of us wishes to appear like. this gets very similar to RL. I feel that all of us put on masks in life, in order to interact. I have one mask for my family, one for my spouse, one for my business associates

archmunster Toll: right

Sanguine: masks and safety. in SL we are simply putting on other masks. but these are even better than RL ones

archmunster Toll: how better?

Sanguine: the ONLY thing that these masks let through is the pure personality of the person. none of the baggage... the crippled person... the one with scars... or who is ugly, or obese. all those things cripple RL interaction. several of my very closest friends here, by coincidence have crippled knees... (along with lots

of other things wrong with them physically). they walk with crutches. and, one of them... i think she struggles with life issues constantly, but here... she is a totally beautiful person...

The blocking of self-expression is an issue that all humans are at least subject to running up against, yet being able to express one's true self is an everyday issue for those who are marginalized from social society to begin with. In other words, because such individuals are often cut off from social contact due to their condition, expressing their true self is often a nonstarter since there is usually no one to express their true selves to. And even in those cases where they are given the opportunity to express themselves such expression is usually quite difficult as their particular condition gets in the way, it obfuscates who "they are" from ever having the chance to peek through. SL's capacity to allow members to visually reveal themselves via avatars while simultaneously concealing their AW conditions provides the perfect environment for repairing the social deficiencies which result from such conditions. In some cases, actual healing is not possible (in the case of terminal illness, for example) and in those cases SL still provides the opportunity for embodied co-habitation and socializing, something that would otherwise not be possible.

Does such a set of circumstances necessarily result in an improved social life for Socially Isolated participants? No, this is not certain and the degree to which it does improve varies considerably from one individual to the next and seems, at least in part, dependent upon the severity of the condition. For example, a number of Socially Isolated participants, including Daphne and Galen, seem to have only minimal improvements in their social lives as a result of their SL involvement, yet in

both cases, these are participants who have conditions which are of such severity that even the safety afforded by SL is not enough to release them from the conditions which constrain them. For the most part, they merely repeat their AW behaviour within the VW of SL. On the other hand, individuals such as Margo, Eirene, Harmony, Jessie, Dylan, Esther, Athena, Astoria and Chip did experience marked improvement in their social situations. It could be argued that although their conditions are severe, perhaps even as severe as Galen and Daphne's, their conditions are such that they were able to, at least eventually, express themselves more openly than was possible in the AW. In other words, depending upon the individual in question and the severity of the condition in question, social success in SL is a possibility rather than a pre-ordained fact. On the other hand, it is somewhat misleading to claim that all of these Socially Isolated participants were equally able to express themselves more openly than was possible in the AW. To be precise, it is more accurate to say that for these Socially Isolated participants, SL provided at least some of the conditions necessary to enable them to experience some level of social interaction. That is to say that SL helped them to sidestep their AW conditions and experience meaningful human interaction if not permanently than at least temporarily. Again, these conditions could either be in the form of medical issues which prevent them from getting out of the house or psychological or familial issues which prevent them from forming meaningful connections.

Having explored the attachment and rationale for such attachment among both the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported participants, I will lastly compare and contrast Second Life multi-dimensional national-type attachment across the two groups.

Chapter Eight: Qualitative Results - Theme Seven

Theme Seven: Second Life as Nation

As has already been mentioned, during the course of the qualitative interviews, discussions involving Second Life and national attachment did not occur organically; in other words, they required me to purposefully prompt and direct that particular line of questioning—they were not participant directed. However, although they may not have organically materialized, such discussions were not entirely fruitless. For example, they often unearthed noteworthy differences between the two groups. Furthermore, while many of the discussions around nationhood could be classified as intellectual and academic, that was not always the case and oftentimes led the interviews in unexpected and important directions. On the other hand, more general discussions of attachment (i.e. attachment to aspects of Second Life and to aspects of the AW) did occur organically during the course of each of the interviews and as has already been discussed, often led to interesting findings.

I am of two minds with respect to the discovery that nationhood-related questions were often intellectual and non-organically occurring topics. First, as the pilot phase of the interviews demonstrated, if I wanted to better understand attachment to Second Life more fully, I clearly needed to be less stringent about the focus on national type attachment; otherwise, the qualitative portion of the research would become more of an academic exercise than an interpretivist exploration of Second Life attachment. It would, in other words, serve to satiate my own interests in virtual worlds and nations rather than allowing the participants, the people who actually "live" in Second Life to explore and explain what Second Life means to them in their own words and from their own perspective. In fact, had I dogmatically stuck to this national attachment line of questioning, I would have in essence been

forcing participants to see the world through my eyes (as the pilot phase of my study highlighted). Rather than conducting interpretivist qualitative research, I would have in effect been conducting positivist qualitative research—and while countless other researchers do employ positivist qualitative research, this again, was not my intention.

So what does it say about the comparability or insight that can be drawn between national type attachment and virtual world attachment if participants were not organically drawn to such a topic? From my perspective, there are two important conclusions that can be made with respect to this outcome. First, generally speaking, the topic of nations and national attachment is not necessarily something that people are able to easily talk about—it is not something that is top of mind. Other scholars have come to similar conclusions (see, for example, Billig, 1995). That said, qualitative research is not an uncommon method for investigating national attachment including national identity. From a qualitative perspective, researchers have used any of a number of methodologies to assess the character of attachment people feel for their nations, including, but certainly not limited to, ethnographies (Cerwonka, 1997; Roberts, 2003), content analysis (Nugent, 1994), semi-structured interviews (Bechhofer, McCrone, Kiely, & Stewart, 1999) and discourse analysis (Wodak, Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). So on the one hand, while determining national identity/attachment may not be an "easy" task for a researcher, still, qualitative methods, particularly ethnographies, are quite common methods for assessing national attachment. Second, the exploratory nature of this research more generally meant that I needed to allow participants to lead me, to help me see what was important to them. Had I taken a too unwavering approach to national type attachment, I would have missed the much more nuanced portrait of

SL attachment that participants had to offer and that has already been discussed. It should also be noted, that this was not entirely unplanned for—I had all along been using national attachment as a way in, as a way to explore attachment to virtual worlds more generally. However, I think at some level I was hoping to "discover" the first virtual world nation in SL and at least initially, as I began to realize that this was not necessarily the case, or put more accurately, that this was not what most participants really wanted to discuss or had an interest in discussing, I admittedly was disappointed. However, the more nuanced and rich portrait of virtual world attachment that emerged made such disappointment fleeting.

That said, I do not mean to suggest that I completely abandoned questions related to virtual worlds and national type attachment. I still did want to investigate participants' attitudes and opinions towards Second Life as nation or the ways in which attachment to Second Life might be similar or dissimilar to national type attachment. Therefore, I partitioned a portion of each interview to explore these concepts, albeit briefly. In other words, as has already been discussed, these were not completely unstructured interviews; rather they could appropriately be described as semi-structured interviews, often touching upon issues of interest to me—in the case of the topic of multi-dimensional attachment, even greater structure was required; in the case of more general attachment, less structure was required as participants were able to more easily contribute to such discussions.

In terms of the way in which Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants discuss nationhood and the applicability of such a term to SL, there seems to be little difference at the surface of what they say. However, both groups bring interesting perspectives to the notions of nationhood and virtual

nationhood. Some of these insights also shed light on the degree to which they themselves are attached to SL.

SL as Nation—Macro perspective

For example, a number of participants make the claim that SL is not like a nation. Their rationale includes such things as: the sheer size of SL—it is too immense both in terms of population and territorial size to be adequately captured by the term nation; SL is too heterogeneous, comprised of people ushering from too many different AW nations; and it lacks the necessary structure—such as a ruling government—to be counted as a nation. Furthermore, it should be noted that this perspective, i.e. that SL is not like a nation, was shared by Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants alike. As has already been discussed, in some noteworthy ways there were strong divisions between Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants across a number of different themes that emerged from the data—however, SL not like a nation was not one of those themes—in this case, there was no discernible difference between the two groups. It should be noted that while several Socially Isolated participants did indicate on the quantitative questionnaire that they felt SL was like a nation, these same participants did not always repeat such a sentiment, sometimes contradicting the response they made on the questionnaire.

The perspective of one participant in particular, Ender, a Socially Supported participant, serves as a good example of the sort of argument made by both the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported as to why SL is not like a nation. In general Ender finds the comparison lacking primarily because its members are represented by too many disparate groups, not least of which are the AW nationalities that define them.

archmunster Toll: So...do you think SL is like a nation?

Ender: I think it's too broad to be a nation, and it'd be hard to form some kind of national identity when every member is also a member of a real world nation. Everyone on SL is also part of some other culture, some other nation. Unless someone was very upset with their country and into escapism, I don't think they'd find it possible to identify with SL more than their own real world nation.. and even for people that do, I don't think they'd be able to gather enough together.

What is particularly relevant about Ender's objections to SL as nation are the two issues that he highlights. First that there are too many AW nationalities represented in SL for there to be a cohesive whole and second that for there to be such a nation, individuals' identification with Second Life should supersede their identification with their AW nations.

It is tempting to engage Ender's commentary from an academic perspective; nay, not only tempting, but perhaps unavoidable. In other words, I feel compelled to offer an analysis which addresses the merits of Ender's argument. For example, I could point out that many current AW nations are comprised of immigrants with quite heterogeneous national backgrounds. New Zealand, for example, is comprised of individuals who usher from some 140 different nations. The United States for that matter is comprised of individuals from some 200 different nations. Yet contrary to Ender's point, such heterogeneity neither discredits nor cancels their status as nations. In fact, the US not only does not downplay its multicultural composition but, at least in part, embraces such diversity in order to promote its particular brand of nationhood and the melting pot mythology that surrounds it (Sidanius et al., 1997)—a land where *anyone*, irrespective of their background, can make it "if they just work hard enough."

With respect to his claim about the importance of prioritizing one's SL identification over one's AW national identification, I could further point out research which suggests that immigrants often do have conflicting levels of attachment to both their home nation and new nation, that there can and will be such tensions, yet without either nation falling apart or losing their relevance as nations (Sidanius et al., 1997; Wald & Williams, 2005). As Smith (1991) points out, it is not at all uncommon or unexpected for an individual to have multiple levels of national identification and overlapping loyalties.

On the other hand, as Hall (1992) suggests, there are moments in national histories when "national cultures are tempted to turn the clock back, to retreat defensively to that 'lost time' when the nation was 'great', and to restore past identities...to 'mobilize the people' to purify their ranks, to expel the 'others'" (p. 518). At the very least, the State is certainly wary of the discordance and divisions that can occur when too many disparate groups are thrown together (Hall, 1992). Undoubtedly, one of the primary functions of the State is to engender cohesion where such tensions exist through such things as the dissemination of national education curricula, the perpetuation of national ceremonies and traditions, and the administration of national laws and regulations (passport requirements when travelling overseas, compulsory national military service, national tax laws, etc…), all of which help to cement for the public at large what is and is not deemed to be "nationally acceptable behavior" (Bourdieu, 1994). Thus, Ender's point about Second Lifers not being able to "gather enough together" may at least in part reflect the weak hand of the Lindens, who in this case could be said to serve as the de-facto government (Boellstorff, 2008), the SL State-like entity. Were they to exert greater control over Second Lifers, perhaps such "gathering together" (as Ender puts it)

would be more likely. Then again, were they to exert too much control via some form of Second Life-wide compulsory activities (such as compulsory education), mightn't such action spoil the fun of SL and lead members to "defect", i.e. hit the close button and never return? For if SL is a nation and if the Lindens represent the State, it seems hardly plausible that SL and its unavoidably impermanent nature could match the quite permanent and serious repercussions that would visit upon the individual who decided to leave forever (or even for an extended period of time) their AW nation. That said, the degree of seriousness of the ramifications of such a migration would depend of course upon the particular nation in question as well as the particular person and his or her personal circumstances; in other words, leaving some nations would be more problematic than leaving others and for some people the repercussions would be devastating, for others less so. Yet suffice it to say that regardless of the nation or the individual, a decision to leave would be more complicated and serious than merely hitting a close button on an open computer desktop window. That said, and as a number of the Socially Isolated participants exemplify, while the initial act of leaving SL may be easy, the act of staying gone from SL may be quite problematic for certain individuals, more problematic than one might imagine.

However, Ender's argument becomes ever more supportable if we consider Second Life not as a nation already formed but as an entity in the midst of nation formation. Contemplated from this perspective, the actual world offers a number of examples of nations having formed as a result of only a few ethnic groups congregating together as a cohesive, national unit—still not necessarily borne of a single ethnicity, but certainly not typically borne from the congregation of a hundred or more ethnic groups. Thus, from this perspective Ender's claim about the

heterogeneity of SL seems a valid reason for discounting its potential to not

necessarily be deemed a nation at present but to even *becoming* a nation in the first

place. That said, Hall (1992) makes the valid point that the notion that nations

formed from a single, original pure folk is often problematic when the historical

records are taken into account. Furthermore, this raises the question of who

determines nationhood in the first place. Is it the state or the people who determine

that yes indeed we now have a nation? If the people have any say, then it certainly

seems reasonable that the people of SL, no matter how heterogeneous their AW

origins, could decide to more formally demarcate their world as a nation. In other

words, AW nation-forming rules and precedents may not hold true with respect to

VW nation-forming. In other words, irrespective of their AW national origins,

Second Lifers, when in Second Life, may see themselves as Second Lifers first and

as constituting a single nationality imbued with the culture of "Second Life-ness".

Yet without a doubt it is at the very least a mixture of both the people and the

State that are needed to pronounce nationhood—few nations have ever formed

without the organization, direction and discourse of a governing entity, i.e. the State.

Some, like Gellner (1983), even go so far as to claim that the nation is a fiction, a

discourse, used by the State to gain control over its populace; such a discourse is

particularly helpful at times of war when masses of people are needed to defend the

State from intruders or to attack the territory and people of another State. Yet even

when considered from the perspective of nation formation, the idea that nations

typically form as a result of one or even two ethnic groups is debatable—there is

often (though not always, e.g. consider the many island nations which generally

form out of one, sometimes two, cultures or ethnic groups), a complicated mix of

powerful people and entities who usurp the initial unsophisticated trailblazers at the

onset of nationhood (Gellner, 1983).

That all said, the former interrogation of SL as nation seems largely academic and I think misses the more important point of what this means to the participant himself, why he and other participants place the emphases they place on certain aspects of nationhood when contemplating SL as nation. In fact, that Ender finds the heterogeneity of SL to be problematic when contemplating SL as nation seems less interesting to me than what he later says—that someone would have to be into escapism to identify more strongly with SL (and by extension to perceive SL as nation). Such a statement again reinforces one of the true divides that exist between the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported —namely that Socially Supported participants often associate SL attachment in negative value laden terms, such as escapism, while Socially Isolated participants typically do not.

Like Ender, Chip also believes that SL is too vast and differentiated to be counted as a nation. Chip, however, unlike Ender, is a Socially Isolated participant. Yet, like Ender, what is particularly interesting about her answer is not that she does not consider SL to be like a nation but rather her more general attitude towards SL that this discussion unearths. As she indicates, from her perspective, SL is more like a family than a nation, but a family as immense as the human race. So for her it is paradoxically close-knit while at the same time vast and differentiated:

> *archmunster Toll:* does SL seem like a nation to you?
>
> *Chip:* more like a family than a nation I think
>
> *archmunster Toll:* yes...that's interesting...how so?
>
> *Chip:* or perhaps I should say "community" ? which is the word that LL [Linden Lab] use too
>
> *archmunster Toll:* okay but you said family...how did you mean that

Chip: well in the sense that we are all united by a common bond - which is Second Life itself. so you could say Second Life is the gene pool, or something like that

archmunster Toll: i see :) like the question previous--how would you describe a SLer to someone who knew nothing about SL? Do SLers share things in common (either SL things or RL things)? Or...not?

Chip: well, I'm going to contradict myself now - having said we are like a family - it's a family as broad and wide as the human race!

It is quite interesting to contrast these two viewpoints, one from a Socially Supported participant, the other from a Socially Isolated participant, both of which seemingly agree that SL is not like a nation, yet their overall opinion of SL could not be more different. On the one hand, Ender, a Socially Supported participant, believes that someone would have to be into escapism to consider SL a nation and on the other hand, Chip, a Socially Isolated participant, believes that SL is like a family, "as vast as the human race!"

Ender's attitude here is emblematic of the typical Socially Supported—i.e. someone who could be so immersed in SL as to consider it like a nation must truly be out of their mind, or "into escapism." Chip's attitude towards SL, on the other hand, is emblematic of the typical Socially Isolated, for although she did not consider SL like a nation, her feelings for SL were much more positive and complimentary. In other words, while Socially Isolated participants and Socially Supported participants do not always disagree (e.g. on the question of whether or not SL is like a nation), those divisions which do exist often fall within this value negative/value positive dichotomy, with the Socially Isolated expressing a more

positively charged attitude and the Socially Supported expressing a more negatively

charged attitude. It is a dichotomous pattern that appears fairly consistently

throughout the data (as the previous sections and discussions have highlighted) and

as such it is worth noting again. This is not to suggest that there are no exceptions,

no divergent cases as Silverman (2004) terms them, i.e. no instances where Socially

Isolated participants apply negative value judgments to SL and instances where

Socially Supported participants apply positive value judgments to SL—however,

such cases are atypical. In fact, and as has already been discussed, such atypical

cases often serve to better clarify and define those divisions which do exist.

SubTheme: Depth of AW National Attachment vs. SL Attachment

Another theme which emerged shows the depth of the attachment

participants feel for their AW nations, especially those who believe SL to be like a

nation. Many participants seem comfortable claiming that SL is indeed like a nation

as long as the question remains theoretical, but once asked to choose between SL

and their AW nation, they typically retracted this claim about nationhood and revert

to the more normative response that "SL is not real and an AW nation is—SL is,

after all, just a computer program."

For example, despite Barbie's feelings that SL is like a nation, these feelings,

it should be noted, only go so far. As was speculated in the quantitative portion of

the research, here we have some confirmation of the seriousness with which

individuals ascribe to their AW nations; it is, in some cases, a love which has deep

historical and familial ties and conjures very personal and heart-felt feelings of

attachment. Yet, in other cases, these feelings do not run so deep; there is, it seems,

much variety and variability in the level of attachment participants hold for their

AW nations—and such also seems the case with the level of attachment participants

hold for SL:

archmunster Toll: let's say Linden Lab started issuing valid SL

passports...would you go through the process of getting one?

Barbie: I don't know what that is... not familiar with it.

archmunster Toll: Well--like you were able to become a citizen of SL--

Barbie: is that something in the works?????

archmunster Toll: nonono. just a question :)

Barbie: oh, I see... I always consider myself as somewhat of a citizen of SL

archmunster Toll: so you might be willing to go through a formal process of

becoming an SL citizen?

Barbie: I would have to know what it was all about

archmunster Toll: right...okay...

Barbie: I wouldn't jump into something "just because"

archmunster Toll: right...but you might be open to it...? you might consider

it--but you'd need to know more...?

Barbie: I'm open to anything

archmunster Toll: :)

Barbie: but I'm not one to follow the crowd

archmunster Toll: what if it meant you had to give up your US citizenship--

you wouldn't have to move, but you'd no longer be a US citizen...?

Barbie: I wouldn't do it

archmunster Toll: why not?

Barbie: I'm an American and dedicated to this country....I have family

members died and gone who have fought for this country....I have 2 sons who have served in the military... I would not forsake my country of birth

>*archmunster Toll:* right...understood. so America is very special to you?

>*Barbie:* yes, it is...even with all the problems in America, I wouldn't want to live somewhere else that it required me to give up my citizenship. it would be as if I were to throw mud in my ancestors' faces!

>*archmunster Toll:* right...so SL maybe is like a nation...but it doesn't come close to how special America is to you...correct?

>*Barbie:* no, of course not..SL is my social life

It is interesting to note that once probed further, Barbie makes a sharp distinction between SL and the USA. While SL may be like a nation—it is that word "like" that is key here for her. It does not even come close to comparing to an AW nation—it lacks the history and blood of her forefathers for one thing. In fact, while she was earlier quite willing to agree that SL is like a nation, once a much more direct comparison is made between SL and her AW nation, she very much backs away from such an assignation. This only serves to further underline the emphasis which some participants would want to make when saying SL is like a nation—it is only like a nation; it really cannot possibly be a nation—such a thing is practically laughable—it is after all, just her "social life". This exchange very aptly explains why she favors her AW nation to SL, despite personal issues which place here in the Socially Isolated group. For some, such strong feelings of patriotism and such deeply held views on nations, honor and sacrifice make it difficult if not impossible for certain individuals to favor virtual places and people over their country and fellow co-nationals. However, we should also not dismiss her

admission that she would be willing to consider becoming a citizen of SL; based on how sacred her AW nation is to her, that is a quite stunning admission. There are many people who maintain dual AW citizenship, citizens of two nations, not wanting to give up allegiance to either for any of a number of reasons. It seems she too might even be willing to become a citizen of SL as long as she could also retain her US citizenship. Even being open to such a proposition, it seems to me is a fairly hefty thing for her to say, particularly in light of the great depth of her attachment to the US and the reverence she feels for the US.

Daphne, a Socially Isolated participant, also feels that SL is like a nation but takes this notion of "likeness" one step further in claiming that there is really very little difference between SL and her AW nation (the USA, in this case).

archmunster Toll: does sl seem like a nation to you?

Daphne: I guess so. One that's a little disorganized, but yeah it does seem like it could be if LL was more like a government.

archmunster Toll: so which one, SL or the USA, are you more proud of?

Daphne: The real one. I think SL - while I am proud of it and all the things we can do and be and everything.. there's a certain bit of.. I don't know.. I don't mention it too much because I am so addicted to it - there's a certain bit of shame I guess.

archmunster Toll: So are you embarrassed by it?

Daphne: It's not so much embarrassment. I think, this is my little haven. and yes I do spend way too much time in it. And really - I don't want people I know in real life in here. I don't know. It's hard for me to separate my view of SL and my own feeling of "wow this is eating my RL"

archmunster Toll: And why do you think you're bothered by how much time

you spend in here...?

Daphne: Because the majority of people spend their times out with their friends in real life. With their families.. hell, having families.. and I sit here in front of my computer.

Thus, it seems that Daphne feels somewhat ambivalent as to which entity is more (or less) like a nation. While the questions were different for Barbie, it is still quite interesting to compare the two sets of answers. On the one hand, Barbie, a Socially Isolated participant, becomes almost indignant at the thought of giving up her US citizenship for SL, which, after all, is just her "social life" as she puts it. On the other hand, Daphne, also a Socially Isolated participant, really doesn't see much difference between SL and her AW nation—"they're very much the same" as she puts it with the only difference being that "SL doesn't have a government". Some might claim this to be a pretty big difference, but she does not seem overly concerned by what she perceives to be the absence of government in SL. And while Daphne does admit she harbours some discomfort over her involvement in SL, she clearly needs SL—it isn't just her "social life" (as Barbie puts it) (in fact, as with the actual world, her social life is also somewhat lacking in SL), it's her "haven". A safe port in a lonely world. So while we might be inclined to ascribe the difference in tone between Barbie and Daphne not to a difference in the level of importance of SL but a difference in the level of attachment each has for the US, I think that would be too simplistic an interpretation. For although it may be true that Barbie is more deeply attached to the US than is Daphne, it also seems to be true that Daphne may be more deeply attached to SL than Barbie. On the other hand, Daphne's shame for her SL involvement is palpable, and one reading of it certainly could be that she

anguishes over just how trivial sitting in front of a computer is when compared to the actual lives that people are living. She seems acutely aware of the opinion that non-SLers might have of her and it seems to torment her at least to a degree. She freely admits the catch 22 she finds herself in—the haven, the very thing that seems to sustain her simultaneously seems to also undo her. Barbie, on the other hand, seems much more readily willing to admit that although she spends a considerable amount of time in SL it is really not very important—it's just her social life, as she puts it. However, while she, like Daphne, recognizes the trivial nature of SL, she seems much less conflicted by this realization, quickly and easily dismissing the role it plays in her life as "her social life". On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the language she uses in dismissing SL—"SL is my social life". While she did use this phrase to quickly show the stark difference between SL and her AW nation, it could be argued that she inadvertently elevates SL by claiming it to be her social life. The nation in which she lives and so passionately believes apparently is inadequate in fulfilling for Barbie one of the most important facets of the human condition—namely providing her with a social life—so to dismiss the thing (SL) that ultimately enables her socializing as "my social life" is paradoxical. After food, shelter and water, there are few things more important than an individual's social life—we are, after all, social animals (Argyle, 2013; Powdthavee, 2008; Veenhoven, 2013). Yet as she later reveals, she seems quite undisturbed by the possibility of leaving SL and by extension—her social life. Although Barbie is a Socially Isolated participant, her dismissive regard for SL, in this case, is quite similar to that of the Socially Supported. It may be that Barbie's particular conditions, shyness and economic challenges, while within the spectrum of conditions encompassed by Social Isolation, their salience is certainly at the milder end of the spectrum. As

such, SL may not be as critical to her life as it is for other Socially Isolated participants. That said, Barbie is displaying quite conflicting points of view. On the one hand she seems dismissive of Second Life while on the other admitting that she might hypothetically be willing to apply for SL citizenship.

What is perhaps particularly interesting about all of the answers, including those who considered SL to be like a nation, is that their AW nation is far more important to them than Second Life (perhaps with the exception of Daphne…though even Daphne seems to admit that her AW nation is more important). It could be speculated that at least some participants might have felt that to compare SL to their AW nation is "untenable because it trivializes the duty-bound, perhaps even sacred, relationship of a citizen to his or her nation" (see, for example, Plato, 427?-347 B.C.).

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the major findings of this research project. This study adds significant contributions to research that centres around the feelings of attachment people hold for virtual worlds. First, this research helped to provide an understanding of those individuals who possess strong multi-dimensional attachment to an online virtual social world such as Second Life. It showed that such strong attachment among the study participants is often, though not always, related to the degree to which a person is socially isolated from the actual world. It showed that participants who are socially supported in the actual world are more uncomfortable expressing unambiguous attachment for SL. They seem acutely aware that others may view them as being unhealthy (in mind or body) if they suggest they were strongly attached to SL. They indicate that only the most disturbed among us would consider a virtual life a healthy and positive development. In many ways, the socially supported individual stigmatizes those who most desperately need the refuge of a virtual world like Second Life. This is, of course, ironic, since the socially supported individuals from this research tended to lead rather multi-dimensional lives in Second Life, including experiencing robust forms of socializing, business building and virtual civic participation (to name just few).

By contrast, those who are socially isolated in the AW seem much more willing to unambiguously express their love and attachment for SL. Their AW situation, which includes some form of social isolation, makes admitting strong attachment for SL unproblematic for them. Loving SL for them is as obvious and uncontroversial, to borrow from Gellner, as having a nose and two ears. It not only helps define who they are as individuals but it provides them with opportunities for social success that do not typically exist for them in the AW. It moreover can have a

profound impact on their AW lives, giving them the experience and point of reference necessary to improve their relationships in the AW and the way in which they live their lives in the AW. Their love for SL is very similar to the love individuals hold for actual world nations. It is strong and uncritical, in many ways, and they see in SL the values and experiences individuals often assign to AW nations. This is a place they live, a place they love, the people they know and the places they frequent in SL having profound impacts upon their lives.

Based upon the results from the semi-structured interviews, this investigation demonstrated the stark differences which exist between the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported participants. Furthermore, this thesis sought to answer the research question of how can we describe and understand those participants who possess a robust, multi-dimensional attachment to Second Life. This research question was answered by comparing and contrasting two groups of participants, the Socially Isolated whom possess conditions which marginalize and/or exclude them, by varying degrees, from social society as well as the Socially Supported whom, generally speaking, do not experience marginalization and/or exclusion from social society. The Socially Isolated, on the other hand, are subject to one or more of the following categories of socially isolating conditions: health conditions, psychological conditions, physical conditions, societal conditions and familial conditions.

Furthermore, across a number of themes unearthed from the qualitative semi-structured interviews, the two groups differed in noteworthy ways. These themes include: Second Life as Isolation Remedy. According to this theme, the Socially Isolated utilize Second Life to either temporarily or more permanently lift themselves from beneath the shackles of whatever condition ails them. In some

cases, Second Life enabled participants to develop the confidence necessary to overcome their condition and return to the Actual World ready to take on whatever challenges might face them. In other cases where the conditions may not be easily remedied (e.g. health related issues, psychological issues, etc.), Second Life provides participants with essential respite from their conditions, oftentimes actualized via virtual social interactions of one type or another.

The third theme explored was immersion or the experience of feeling present within Second Life. Results indicated that the Socially Isolated tend to value immersion and the feeling of being "there" while the Socially Supported are quite dismissive of immersion, bracketing any appreciation they may feel for immersion with expressions of derision and self-conscious embarrassment.

The fourth theme interrogated the degree of importance of Second Life. As with immersion, this theme also revealed the Socially Isolated to unambiguously and eloquently express their strong appreciation for Second Life while the Socially Supported were again much more dismissive of SL and unwilling to ascribe much importance to it.

The fifth theme looked at SL Place Attachment and again found that the Socially Isolated were much more vocal and unambiguous in their feelings of attachment for various places within Second Life. The Socially Supported, on the other hand, again expressed little regard for the places of Second Life and even in those cases where they did exhibit deep feelings for the places of SL they undermined these expressions by bracketing their commentary with expressions of embarrassment and derision.

The sixth theme looked at Identity Construction. As with the other themes, this theme also witnessed the Socially Isolated investing considerable energy and

passion into their avatars, their virtual homes and their outward expressions of self. The Socially Isolated take identity construction quite seriously (though that is not to say they don't have fun doing it) since such opportunities so elude them in the actual world. The Socially Supported, however, do not place much of a premium on expressing their true selves in SL, dismissing it as just another part of the "game" as they call it.

The seventh and final theme, Second Life as Nation, produced much more mixed results than did the other themes. In this case, both groups of Second Lifers, the Socially Isolated participants and the Socially Supported participants, both considered the possibility of Second Life as nation. However, for both groups Second Life was, by and large, viewed as less important than their actual nations.

In many ways, the positive impact that Second Life seems to have upon socially isolated individuals is the most profound finding of this research. It mirrors the work of other scholars who have noted Second Life's therapeutic qualities (see Best & Butler, 2014; Cabiria, 2008; Gilbert et al., 2013; Good et al., 2013; Stendal et al., 2013). Perhaps what distinguishes this study from those, however, is that this research has not focused merely on this or that virtual form of therapy or this or that condition. Rather, this research has attempted to demonstrate the more robust, multi-dimensional attachment that socially isolated individuals may develop for Second Life. It seems that this research has begun to demonstrate the way in which a virtual world like Second Life offers therapy not just for the specific condition facing some individuals (e.g. low self-esteem, physical disabilities, etc.) but also therapy for the isolation that such conditions afford. Those who cannot walk down the street, now can. Those who cannot talk with friends at a pub, now can. Those who cannot work

a sales job at a clothing store, now can. You can marry now and build a family. You can help others and improve the community.

To be sure, therapy for what ails you is nothing to be scoffed at. For the hopeless recluse like Jessie, given renewed confidence by the friends she meets and the experiences she encounters in Second Life, her turnaround is nothing short of miraculous. But I believe what this research unearthed that is particularly noteworthy is that it has helped to demonstrate the significance of banal, commonplace activities and experiences which most people take for granted but which contribute to a feeling of belonging that is likely essential to the human condition (Billig, 1995). These small, everyday experiences likely contribute to our feelings of attachment for actual world entities, perhaps even those as vast and enigmatic as nations. It may be the case, in fact, that we all need nations as much as nations need us (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983).

As to the related question of whether Second Life could be considered a virtual nation or a nation-like entity, the results of this particular study are inadequate in addressing such a profound question. Nevertheless, based on my observations of the virtual world setting and the individuals who occupy it, I might speculate that a virtual world like SL *could become* an entity similar in kind to a nation for it offers the socially isolated, in particular, nearly everything an AW nation could ever provide. It has the people, the places, the culture, the economy, the civic activities and groups, the normal everyday life experiences and the profound life changing capacity often associated with AW nations. And while the socially supported participants express much more embarrassment and even outright disdain for those who would become so enraptured by a place like SL, such people represent a real contradiction. For these are people who also have had profound

experiences in SL—they have earned money creating virtual products enjoyed by many, they have had love affairs which led to marriage and/or bitter and painful break-up, and they have cared for one another as much if not more than the sort of care one would provide to close friends and family. While they want it known that only a "crazy person" would ever become so obsessed with SL as to leave the AW behind—in many ways, the Socially Supported participants have invested as much of themselves in this world as those they would consider crazy—as the Socially Isolated. What this portends is it shows that a virtual world like SL is more than capable of becoming a multi-dimensional presence and destination for people of all stripes, both the Socially Isolated and the Socially Supported.

And yet the Socially Supported participants generally expressed derision and embarrassment when discussing Second Life. It seems likely that one explanation for such expressions of embarrassment and derision (despite their having deep involvement in SL) rests squarely on this uncomfortable question: why would someone live a virtual life when an actual one awaits him or her just beyond the borders of their screen?

Paul Virilio (1997), writing in Open Sky, said that, "[various digital prosthetic] interfaces (keyboard, cathode screen, DataGlove or DataSuit) make the super-equipped able-bodied person almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person" (p. 11). What Virilio describes here is a fully digital world inhabited by able-bodied people who, through this wired habitation, become effectively disabled. However, ignored, or perhaps not ignored but forgotten, in Virilio's analysis are those people who *actually are* disabled in some way. For just as able bodied people have made their choice so too have socially excluded and socially marginalized people. And when possible, when funds and technology allow,

many such people will likely choose a virtual existence over an actual one for it offers them the sort of robust and multi-dimensional experience that so eludes them in the actual world. And for this reason, it is critical that virtual worlds remain open for business for they provide such an important role in the lives of so many socially isolated, excluded and marginalized people. If Second Life were ever to go away, some government ought to step in and save it—add it to their portfolio of social service offerings and make it available to all who would seek refuge in its virtual shores.

Based on the results of this research, Second Life, it seems, provides such individuals with the shelter and refuge they so desperately need, evoking the words of *The New Colossus*, a sonnet by American poet Emma Lazarus (1883), engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

"…Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

As Paul Astor (2005) wrote, *The New Colossus* turned "…[Lady] Liberty into a welcoming mother, a symbol of hope to the outcasts and downtrodden of the world" (p. 508). And so too apparently does Second Life offer virtual world refuge to at least some of the actual world's social refugees.

One question that remains, however, is if an able bodied person who "jacks into" a digital world becomes disabled, what does a socially excluded and/or marginalized person, who "jacks into" a digital world, become? In my mind, such a

person becomes whole again, she becomes un-disabled. She becomes, for all intents and purposes,…an able-bodied virtual world citizen.

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Appendix 1: AUTEC Approved Ethics Forms

Participant Questionnaire Information Sheet

AUT
UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Date Information Sheet Produced:
24 September 2007

Project Title
A Comparison of Second Life and Real Life Attitudes and Beliefs

Dear Second Life Member,

Brief Introduction
This research is being conducted by Kevin Sherman (archmunster Toll in Second Life). I am a PhD candidate at Auckland University of Technology. This is a university survey and I am not selling anything.

Purpose of Research
I am interested in learning about the attitudes and beliefs of people from around the world who use Second Life.

Your answers are very important to me because they will help me to understand how Second Life affects people. In particular, your answers will help me to understand people's attitudes towards their real life nations as well as their attitudes towards Second Life.

Please note that the data I collect from you will be used in my PhD dissertation. Also, this data will be kept for an indefinite period of time and may be used in the future for further studies and for presentations and publications in academic and non-academic settings.

No One Will Be Able To Identify You
Please also note that no one will be able to identify you based on any answers you give me—any identifying information you provide me will be kept completely confidential.

Must Be 16 Years of Age or Older to Participate
Individuals must be 16 years of age or older to participate in this research.

Incentive
Five individuals who complete this survey AND provide contact information will be selected at random to receive $50 US (payable in Linden Dollars).

Length of Survey
The survey should take between 15 and 30 minutes to complete. The progress bar at the bottom of each page indicates what percentage of the survey you have completed.

Ending the Survey
You can end this survey at any time by clicking "Exit this survey" located in the top right hand corner of each page of this questionnaire, or by clicking the close button on your browser window.

Concerns, Questions
If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me at ksherman@AUT.ac.nz or my supervisor, Dr. Allan Bell, at AGBell@AUT.ac.nz. You may also contact my avatar, archmunster Toll, in-world. Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext. 8044.

Thank you very much for your time and willingness to complete this survey.

PLEASE NOTE: Completion of the survey will be taken as indicating your consent to participate.

Participant Observation Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:
28 August 2007

Project Title
A Comparison of Second Life and Real Life Attitudes and Beliefs

Dear Second Life Member,
My name is Kevin Sherman (archmunster Toll in SL). I am a PhD student at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) New Zealand. I am conducting research in Second Life and I would like to ask for your participation in my research.

What is the purpose of this research?
I am interested in studying your attitudes and beliefs towards Second Life as well as your attitudes and beliefs regarding your real world life. I believe that you can make a valuable contribution to my research. Please note that the data I collect from you will be used in my PhD dissertation. Also, this data will be kept for an indefinite period of time and may be used in the future for further studies and for presentations and publications in academic and non-academic settings. Furthermore, the data collected for this research may be part of a longitudinal study and that you therefore may be contacted in the future about participating in such ongoing research.

How was I chosen for this invitation?
You were selected to participate in my research in one of four ways: (1) you responded to an advertisement posted within Second Life; (2) you filled out a questionnaire in Second Life and indicated that you were willing to participate in further research; (3) you are a member of a Second Life group that I contacted requesting individuals who might be willing to participate in my research; or (4) you are someone I met in Second Life.

Please also note that in order to participate in this research you must be 16 years of age or older and fluent in English.

What will happen in this research?
I would like to perform my observational research of you by observing your avatar in Second Life as often as you will allow. I will conduct these observations through my avatar, archmunster Toll. These observations could happen at SL get-togethers, SL parties, SL informal gatherings, other SL events and/or activities and at any other things you happen to do while in Second Life. The bottom line is that I want to observe you doing the things you usually do in Second Life—I neither want nor expect you to do things in SL that you think will make my research more interesting. For example, if you sometimes (or often) wander around Second Life by yourself, then that is what I would want to observe. Again, I am interested in your usual Second Life routine.
I would like to begin my observations of you as a more or less objective observer. But gradually, after one or two months, and with your permission, I hope to become more of a participant in your activities. For example, with your permission, I will go to SL parties with you and hang out and chat with you and your friends; or help you in any way I can with any SL endeavors or activities you are involved in. All the while I will be using screen capture software to record our activities and taking notes of what I observe (including interactions and discussions). This type of observational field work is known as ethnographic research. One of the hallmarks of

ethnography is an attempt to understand a particular culture and that culture's world view by seeing things through the eyes of those who make up that culture (in this case, you). By involving myself in your Second Life, I will be attempting to see things as you see them. Please also note that if you have not already done so, I would also like to have you fill out a questionnaire–the results of which I may include within my findings.
(PLEASE ALSO SEE PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW INFORMATION SHEET FOR MORE INFORMATION ON INTERVIEWS I WOULD LIKE TO CONDUCT WITH YOU)

What are the discomforts and risks and how will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

During the Second Life observations, you may become annoyed or embarrassed as a result of my presence. If you ever feel that way, please let me know and I will politely excuse myself and teleport away.

Please note that you will be able to withdraw from the study at any time, up until June 30, 2008. By then, I will have begun the final stages of the writing process and will no longer be able to remove any information from the document. If you do opt to leave the study, I will destroy all data collected from you and will not use it any way, shape or form.

While it may be technically possible for someone to figure out who you are based on what you say, it is very unlikely. I will protect you from this possibility as much as possible by never using your real world name or address. Also, I will always use pseudonyms for your avatar name and any groups you belong to (unless you grant me permission to use your real avatar name and the names/descriptions of your groups). Please also note that any data I collect, either through observations, interviews or questionnaires, will be securely stored on AUT premises to ensure that your real world identity and your data remain confidential.

What are the benefits?

This research will help both academics and non-academics to better understand the attitudes and beliefs of individuals who participate in Second Life.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

This observational research will not cost you anything monetarily.

In terms of your time, I will only observe you in Second Life doing the things you would normally do. Thus, the Second Life observations should not cause you to spend any more or less time in Second Life than you would have normally spent.

The questionnaire (assuming you have not already filled this out) will take approximately 30 minutes.

As a gesture of my thanks for your participation in these interviews and observations, I would like to offer you a total of $30 US (to be paid in Linden Dollars).

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please consider the information I have provided (in both this form and in the Participant Interview Information Sheet) and let me know whether or not you would like to participate in this research within two weeks' time. If you have any questions regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact me via telephone (64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473) or email ksherman@aut.ac.nz. You may also contact my avatar, archmunster Toll, in-world, to discuss any questions you may have. Please also know that if you do decide to participate in this research your participation is completely voluntary--you may withdraw from this research at any time by sending my avatar a message in-world or contacting me via telephone (64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473) or email ksherman@aut.ac.nz up until June 30, 2008. By then, I will have begun the final stages of the writing process and will no longer be able to remove any information from the document. If you do opt to leave the study, I will destroy all data collected from you and will not use it any way, shape or form.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

After having read this Observation Information Sheet and the Interview Information Sheet, please fill out the consent form I have provided you. Please read this form carefully. If you agree to participate, please type the following message at the bottom of the form: "I, _____ (type your real world name), agree to participate in your research." This message is compulsory if you wish to participate. However, I would also like you to include a few other pieces of information within this form (which are not compulsory): (1) the name of your avatar; and (2) your real world country of origin (for example, USA, England, etc…). Also, please indicate whether or not I may use your actual avatar name and the names/descriptions of any SL groups to which you belong. Once you have completed the form, please email it back to me at ksherman@aut.ac.nz. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact archmunster Toll in-world, via telephone (64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473) or email ksherman@aut.ac.nz.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

I may show you rough drafts of my work along the way so that you can make any comments to the things I have written about you prior to publication. However, please note that if I do decide to show you these findings, I will have final say over how and/or whether any information is used in this research.

If you wish to see my completed dissertation, just ask me or my avatar (through email or IM) and I will gladly supply you with a digital version (in pdf format).

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Dr. Allan Bell, email:* AGBell@aut.ac.nz*, work phone number:* 64 + 9 + 921-9683.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), Madeline Banda, *madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz* , 921 9999 ext 8044.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?
Researcher Contact Details:

Kevin Sherman, in RL; archmunster Toll, in SL. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473 and/or via email at ksherman@aut.ac.nz.

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

I have two academic supervisors, both of whom will be monitoring my research closely. You may contact them at any time. Dr. Allan Bell, my primary supervisor, can be reached via email at AGBell@aut.ac.nz. Dr. Bell is the director of the AUT research centre to which I belong: the Institute of Culture, Discourse and Communication. My secondary supervisor, Dr. Ian Goodwin, is a lecturer at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand and can be reached via email at I.Goodwin@massey.ac.nz.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 21 June 2007, AUTEC Reference number 07/95.

Participant Interview Information Sheet

AUT UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Date Information Sheet Produced:
28 August 2007

Project Title
A Comparison of Second Life and Real Life Attitudes and Beliefs

Dear Second Life Member,
My name is Kevin Sherman (archmunster Toll in SL). I am a PhD student at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) New Zealand. I am conducting research in Second Life and I would like to ask for your participation in my research.

What is the purpose of this research?
I am interested in studying your attitudes and beliefs towards Second Life as well as your attitudes and beliefs regarding your real world life. I believe that you can make a valuable contribution to my research. Please note that the data I collect from you will be used in my PhD dissertation. Also, this data will be kept for an indefinite period of time and may be used in the future for further studies and for presentations and publications in academic and non-academic settings. Furthermore, the data collected for this research may be part of a longitudinal study and that you therefore may be contacted in the future about participating in such ongoing research.

How was I chosen for this invitation?
You were selected to participate in my research in one of four ways: (1) you responded to an advertisement posted within Second Life; (2) you filled out a questionnaire in Second Life and indicated that you were willing to participate in further research; (3) you are a member of a Second Life group that I contacted requesting individuals who might be willing to participate in my research; or (4) you are someone I met in Second Life.

Please also note that in order to participate in this research you must be 16 years of age or older and fluent in English.

What will happen in this research?
There are two ways in which I would like to interview you: (1) I would like to interview your avatar within Second Life using SL chat tools and (2) I would like to interview you through email.
(1) I would like to perform one to two in-depth, one-on-one interviews with your avatar. These in-world interviews will be conducted at SL locations of your choosing using chat or private SL Instant Messaging, whichever you prefer. I will record these interviews by retaining SL chat/IM log files, by copying them into a Word document and/or by using screen capture software.
(2) I would also like to perform one to two in-depth one-on-one interviews with you via email. In these email interviews I will be asking you about your real world life, particularly your attitudes and beliefs towards the real world society(ies) in which you live and/or grew up. I will record these interviews by copying your responses into a Word document.
Please also note that if you have not already done so, I would also like to have you fill out a questionnaire–the results of which I may include within my findings.
(PLEASE ALSO SEE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR MORE INFORMATION ON OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH I WOULD LIKE TO CONDUCT WITH YOU)

What are the discomforts and risks and how will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

While it may be technically possible for someone to figure out who you are based on what you say, it is very unlikely. I will protect you from this possibility as much as possible by never using your real world name or address. Also, I will always use pseudonyms for your avatar name and any groups you belong to (unless you grant me permission to use your real avatar name and the names/descriptions of your groups). Please also note that any data I collect, either through observations, interviews or questionnaires, will be securely stored on AUT premises to ensure that your real world identity and your data remain confidential.

Please note that you will be able to withdraw from the study at any time, up until June 30, 2008. By then, I will have begun the final stages of the writing process and will no longer be able to remove any information from the document. If you do opt to leave the study, I will destroy all data collected from you and will not use it any way, shape or form.

What are the benefits?

This research will help both academics and non-academics to better understand the attitudes and beliefs of individuals who participate in Second Life.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

These interviews will not cost you anything monetarily.

In terms of your time, the SL interviews should take no longer than a total of one hour. The email interviews should also take no longer than a total of one hour.

The questionnaire (assuming you have not already filled this out) will take approximately 30 minutes.

As a gesture of my thanks for your participation in these interviews and observations, I would like to offer you a total of $30 US (to be paid in Linden Dollars).

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please consider the information I have provided (in both this form and in the Participant Observation Information Sheet) and let me know whether or not you would like to participate in this research within two weeks' time. If you have any questions regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact me via telephone (64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473) or email ksherman@aut.ac.nz. You may also contact my avatar, archmunster Toll, in-world, to discuss any questions you may have. Please also know that if you do decide to participate in this research your participation is completely voluntary--you may withdraw from this research at any time by sending my avatar a message in-world or contacting me via telephone (64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473) or email ksherman@aut.ac.nz up until June 30, 2008. By then, I will have begun the final stages of the writing process and will no longer be able to remove any information from the document. If you do opt to leave the study, I will destroy all data collected from you and will not use it any way, shape or form.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

After having read this Interview Information Sheet and the Observation Information Sheet, please fill out the consent form I have provided you. Please read this form carefully. If you agree to participate, please type the following message at the bottom of the form: "I, _____ (type your real world name), agree to participate in your research." This message is compulsory if you wish to participate. However, I would also like you to include a few other pieces of information within this form (which are not compulsory): (1) the name of your avatar; and (2) your real world country of origin (for example, USA, England, etc…). Also, please indicate whether or not I may use your actual avatar name and the names/descriptions of any SL groups to which you belong. Once you have completed the form, please email it back to me at

ksherman@aut.ac.nz. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact archmunster Toll in-world, via telephone (64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473) or email ksherman@aut.ac.nz.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

I may show you rough drafts of my work along the way so that you can make any comments to the things I have written about you prior to publication. However, please note that if I do decide to show you these findings, I will have final say over how and/or whether any information is used in this research.

If you wish to see my completed dissertation, just ask me or my avatar (through email or IM) and I will gladly supply you with a digital version (in pdf format) once the dissertation is approved by my institution.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Dr. Allan Bell, email:* AGBell@aut.ac.nz*, work phone number:* 64 + 9 + 921-9683.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), Madeline Banda, *madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz* , 921 9999 ext 8044.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?
Researcher Contact Details:

Kevin Sherman, in RL; archmunster Toll, in SL. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me in-world or via telephone at 64 + 9 + 921-9999 x8473 and/or via email at ksherman@aut.ac.nz.

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

I have two academic supervisors, both of whom will be monitoring my research closely. You may contact them at any time. Dr. Allan Bell, my primary supervisor, can be reached via email at AGBell@aut.ac.nz. Dr. Bell is the director of the AUT research centre to which I belong: the Institute of Culture, Discourse and Communication. My secondary supervisor, Dr. Ian Goodwin, is a lecturer at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand and can be reached via email at I.Goodwin@massey.ac.nz.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 21 June 2007, AUTEC Reference number 07/95.

Consent Form

Project title: A Comparison of Second Life and Real Life Attitudes and Beliefs

Project Supervisor: Allan Bell

Researcher: Kevin Sherman

1   I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Participant Interview Information Sheet and Participant Observation Information Sheet dated 28 August 2007.

2   I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

3   I understand that interviews will be conducted both with my avatar in Second Life and with me, the person who created the avatar using email.

4   I understand that my RL name or address will not be used in any academic or non-academic publications or presentations--however, the names of countries that I currently live in or have lived in will likely be used in such publications and presentations.

5   I understand that a pseudonym for my avatar will be used in any publications or presentations--unless I give consent for the correct avatar name to be used.

6   I understand that my SL avatar will be observed over the course of about six months and that I will be made fully aware prior to and during these observations.

7   I understand that notes will be taken during the observations and interviews and that the observations and interviews will be recorded using copy/paste, screen capture software and/or Second Life IM/chat log files.

8   I understand that the data collected for this research will be kept by the researcher for an indefinite period of time.

9   I understand that the data collected for this research may be used in the future for further studies and for presentations and publications in academic and non-academic settings.

10   I understand that the data collected for this research may be part of a longitudinal study and that I therefore may be contacted in the future about participating in such ongoing research.

11   I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to June 30, 2008, without being disadvantaged in any way.

12   If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including digital files, tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.

13   I agree to take part in this research.

If you agree with the above thirteen statements, please type the words: "I, (your real world name), agree to participate in your study" below (this is compulsory to participate). Also, please enter the name of your SL avatar(s) (optional) and your real world country of origin (optional).

Once you have done this, please email back the completed form to me at ksherman@aut.ac.nz.

Type Below: "I, _____ (type your real world name), agree to participate in your
      study"*

Note: By typing this phrase you have indicated your consent to participate in this research.

Second Life Avatar Name(s)_____

Real world country of origin _____

Date_____

*=must be completed if you wish to participate in my research.

Two Additional Questions

1.   May the researcher use the name of your avatar (supplied above) within any presentations
      and publications in academic and non-academic settings? (please type either yes or no here):

2.   May the researcher use the names and descriptions of any groups you belong to within any
      presentations and publications in academic and non-academic settings? (please type either
      yes or no here):

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 21 June 2007 AUTEC
Reference number 07/95***
Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 2: Qualitative Interview Questions

Questions List for Second Life In-Depth Interviews

Project title: The wretched refuse of your teeming (virtual) shore:

                                     Second Life as homeland to the socially marginalized

Project Supervisor: Allan Bell/Jennie Billot/Ian Goodwin

Researcher: Kevin Sherman

The following themes list will be used to structure the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. All interviews will be conducted in SL using SL IM tools. This is a synchronous text-based communication tool. All IM or chat text is automatically copied to a file and so no transcription is required.

The themes list is organised according to three classifications: (1) SL-specific questions; (2) RL-specific questions; (3) SL/RL interrelationship questions. Moreover, within each classification there are further subcategories and within each subcategory there is a list of main questions and secondary questions. An effort will be made to ask most (if not all) of the main questions of all participants. The secondary questions will be asked when appropriate or when needed. In general, the themes list will be used to guide the interviews and frame them according to the stated interest in national attachment and identity. However, the list will not be shown to participants--as this is a study based on interpretivism, the interviews are meant to unearth the participants' perspective on the phenomenon of SL. As such, this themes list is not a rigid document. Rather, it is merely meant to frame the interviews--ultimately, the participants themselves will determine the direction of the interviews. As Marshall and Rossman point out, "the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)" (2006, p. 101).

Basic Information

   Real Life Specific

   1. RL Name

   2. Age

   3. Gender

   4. Occupation

   5. RL Country of Residence—Country you identify with

6. Health Issues

7. Family—Spouse, Children, Siblings, Parents

8. Close/Good Friends (#)

Second Life Specific

9. Type of Internet Connection—Speed, Age of Computer

10. Other MMORPGs or OVWs you have or do belong to

11. SL Avatar Name

12. Type of Account

13. Number of Alts Used

14. Hours Per Week

15. Year Joined

16. where log on from

17. earn money?

18. SL Family—spouse, children, siblings, parents

19. Close/Good Friends (#)

20. How many do you know in both RL and SL. Before Joining? Prior to Joining?

Second Life-Specific Questions

Subcategory: Second Life Overview

MAIN: Do you have an SL home region?

                       PROBE: Is it an important part of your SL experience?

                       PROBE: What is the difference for you between your impression of/your

experience within Second Life as a whole versus your impression of/your experience within

your Home Region?

                ID What does Second Life mean to you?

                Why are you a member of Second Life?

                Does your SL membership improve and/or worsen your life?

                What is the purpose of SL?

                       Does the world need a place like SL? Why/Why not?

Friendship/Family

MAIN: How many friends do you have in SL?

                How important are these friends to you?

                Do you have SL family? How important are they to you?

                Do you know any of them in RL?

                Which are more important: RL family/friends or SL family friends?

SECONDARY: Do you tend to hang out with other avys who look like you?

                       Do you tend to hang out with other avys who share your views?

What do you look for in a SL friend/family member? (What do you look for in a RL friend?)

Sense of Belonging

MAIN: Does Second Life seem like home to you?

Do you feel as if you are part of a much bigger community in Second Life?

SECONDARY: Are there Second Lifers who embarrass you? Or whom you are ashamed of? Or whom you are proud of?

Do you feel like you're part of the action in SL?

Do you feel comfortable in Second Life?

Does Second Life seem like a big family to you?

Are there icons or images or sounds that immediately conjure up Second Life for you? How do you feel when you encounter these things?

Attachment

MAIN: How do you feel about SL? How does SL make you feel?

Do you miss Second Life when you're not there? When you're in RL?

(Do you miss RL when you're in SL?)

What would you be willing to do to help protect SL?

SECONDARY: Do you feel pride for Second Life?

What would you do if Second Life were to go away?

Do you dream about Second Life?

Would it be hard to permanently leave Second Life? If so, why? If not, why not?

Identity

MAIN: Do you consider yourself to be a Second Lifer? Or a member of your SL Home Region? If so, what does that mean to you?

SECONDARY: Does Second Life help to define who you are?

When you find out someone who you meet in RL is a member of SL—how does this make you feel?

What does it mean to you to be a good Second Lifer or a good member of your home region?

What does it mean to you to be a bad Second Lifer or a bad member of your home region?

Security

MAIN: Do you feel safe in SL?

SECONDARY: How calm are you in SL most of the time?

Does SL stress you out?

Do you feel calm in SL?

Economy

MAIN: Do you feel as if Second Life is a place where people like you can earn money?

        Does it seem like SL has a vibrant economy?

        How does earning money in SL make you feel?

SECONDARY: Are some people making lots of money in Second Life?

         Would you like to earn enough money in SL to not need a RL job?

History

MAIN: What do you know about the origins of Second Life? How did it come into being?

        Does the history of Second Life matter to you?

SECONDARY: How important is it that the history of SL be based in fact?

         Can it be created by its inhabitants?

Territory

MAIN: Do you feel as if Second Life is a real place?

        Does its territory seem as real as any real land to you?

SECONDARY: Does the map of Second Life fill you with pride?

         Have you ever just sat and looked at a sunset in SL or a sunrise?

         (Have you ever just sat and looked at a sunset/sunrise in RL?)

         Do you like to go sightseeing in SL?

         Do you feel like there are lots of cool places to look at and visit in SL?

Culture

MAIN: Are there fun things to do in SL? What do you like to do in SL?

        How important to you are the SL activities and events? (How important to you are

RL activities and events?)

SECONDARY: Do you enjoy participating in SL cultural activities? (Do you have a better time

doing these kinds of things in SL or in RL?)

         Is there good art in SL?

         Is there good theatre in SL?

         Is there good music in SL?

         How does the quality of SL culture compare with the quality of RL

culture?

Improvements

MAIN: Are you trying to improve Second Life? If so, how and why?

        Do you think it's good to criticize SL? Do you like to criticize SL? Do you like

others who criticize SL? How do you criticize SL?

SECONDARY: Are you passionate about SL?

What if anything is missing from SL? What do you wish were here that isn't?

Do you feel like you have some say in changes that are made to SL? Can someone like you make improvements to SL?

Does SL offer things that your RL country cannot or does not offer?

Does your RL country offer things that SL cannot or does not offer?

Typical Experience

MAIN: Can you describe a typical session in SL?

What kinds of things do you like to do in SL?

Are the things you do in SL more meaningful to you than the things you do in RL?

Are the things you do in RL more meaningful to you than the things you do in SL?

SL Specifics:

MAIN: How much time do you spend in SL per week on average?

When did you first join SL?

How many people who you know in SL have you met in RL? How many people did you know in RL before joining SL who you now see in SL?

Real Life-Specific Questions

Nationality

MAIN: What is your country of origin? Which country and/or countries do you identify with? How long have you lived in this country/these countries? Have you lived in other countries? If yes, which ones and for how long?

Overview

MAIN: What does your RL country mean to you?

How important is your RL country to you?

Friendship/Family

MAIN: How many friends do you have in RL?

How important are these friends to you?

Is your RL family important to you?

Sense of Belonging

MAIN: Does your RL country seem like home to you?

Do you feel as if you are part of a much bigger community in your RL country?

SECONDARY: Do you feel comfortable in your RL country?

Does your RL country seem like a big family to you?

Are there icons or images or sounds that immediately conjure up your RL country for you? How do these icons/images/sounds make you feel when you encounter them?

Are there people from your country who embarrass you, make you feel ashamed, fill you with pride?

Attachment

MAIN: How do you feel about your RL nation? How does your RL nation make you feel?

Do you miss your RL country when you're not there? When you're in SL?

(Do you miss SL when you're in RL?)

What would you be willing to do to help protect your country?

Would you sacrifice your life for your country?

SECONDARY: Do you love your RL country? Why? Why not?

Do you hate your RL country? Why? Why not?

Do you feel fairly neutral about your RL country? Why? Why not?

Does your RL country ever annoy you? Why? Why not?

Do you feel pride for your RL country?

What would you do if you could no longer live in your RL country?

Do you dream about your RL country?

Would it be hard to permanently leave your RL country? If so, why? If not, why not?

Identity

MAIN: Do you consider yourself a/an [enter name of participant's country]? If so, what does that mean to you?

SECONDARY: Do you feel closer to others once you learn that they are from your RL country?

Does your RL country help to define who you are?

What does it mean to you to be a good member of your nation?

What does it mean to you to be a bad member of your nation?

Security

MAIN: Do you feel safe in your RL country?

SECONDARY: Is there stress in your life?

How calm are you most of the time?

Health Issues

MAIN: Do you have any chronic health issues?

Do these issues impact your SL and/or RL experience? How? Why?

Economy

MAIN: How do you feel about your RL country's economy?

SECONDARY: Does your RL country have a vibrant economy?

Is your RL country a place where people like you can earn good money?

History

MAIN: What do you know about the origins of your RL country? How did it come into being? What does this history mean to you?

Does the history of your RL country matter to you?

SECONDARY   For it to be meaningful and important, does the history of your country need to be based in fact?

Territory

MAIN: How important to you is the land that makes up your RL country?

How do you feel about your country's territory?

SECONDARY: Does an image/map of your country fill you with pride?

Do you like to go travelling in your country? Why?

Culture

MAIN: Do you enjoy living in your country?

Are there fun things to do in your country?

SECONDARY   What is the social scene like where you live?

Does it interest you?

How does the quality of RL cultural activities (like theatre, movies, music, etc.) compare with the quality of SL cultural activities?

National Comparisons:

MAIN: What in RL would you compare SL to?

What in RL would you compare your SL Home Region to?

Do you think SL is like a RL nation?

Do you think your SL Home Region is like a RL nation?

Definitions:

MAIN: What does the word nation mean to you?

What does it mean to be attached to a nation?

What does the term national identity mean to you?

SL/RL Interrelationship Questions

Is there a clear separation for you between SL and RL?

Which place do you care about more—SL or your RL country? Why?

Do you feel like your RL intrudes on your SL?

Do you feel like SL intrudes on your RL?

Do you know people in SL who you also know in RL?

Are they RL family members?

Are they RL friends?

Is it important to know people in SL who you also know in RL?

Are there things about SL you don't tell your RL friends and family?

Are there things about RL you don't tell your SL friends and family?

What if you had to give up either RL or SL. Which one would you give up and why?

What kind of person is really into SL? Describe that person. Are you like that person? If yes, then how are you similar? If no, then how are you different?

Appendix 3: Revised Qualitative Interview Questions

Revised Questions List for Second Life In-Depth Interviews

Project title: The wretched refuse of your teeming (virtual) shore:

                    Second Life as homeland to the socially marginalized

Project Supervisor: Allan Bell/Jennie Billot/Ian Goodwin

Researcher: Kevin Sherman

After performing the Pilot Phase of the qualitative portion of the research, it was determined that too many questions were previously included. As a result, the questions list was greatly reduced. The following list of questions was used instead. These questions merely served as a guide during the interviews; the interviews were allowed to unfold according to the interests and direction of the participants.

Why do you spend time in SL?

What things do you do here that you can't do irl?

What things do you do irl that you can't do here?

Do you feel like a contributing member of your nation/your country?

Do you feel like a contributing member of SL?

What country(s) do your SL friends live in?

What things do SLers share in common?

What things do people from your country share in common?

How would you describe someone from SL?

How would you describe someone from your rl nation/country?

What would you like SL to become?

What would you like to happen to SL in the future?

Describe places in SL that you like going to…

Describe places irl that you like going to…

What do these places mean to you

How do they make you feel inside

Do you think there are others like you in SL?

Does SL seem big or small? And why?

How involved in your rl local community are you?

How involved in SL community are you?

Do you feel connected to SL?

What do you feel connected to?

Do you feel connected to your rl community?

Do you feel connected to your rl nation/country?

What do you feel connected to irl community/nation/country?

Why not just use some IM client (like AIM or MSN) or something?

Why not use a social networking site like facebook or myspace?

What would you do if you lost your group of friends?

How involved are you in your RL nation/community? What kinds of things do you do to be involved?

How involved are you in SL? What kinds of things do you do to be involved?

What do you think is more important: SL or RL?

What are you more attached to SL or your RL nation/community?

What are you closer to: SL or your RL nation/community?

If you could, would you become of a citizen of SL?

What is an addiction? Are you addicted to anything in RL? Are you addicted to SL?

Are you embarrassed by your SL involvement?

Are you embarrassed by your RL nation?

Are you proud of SL?

Are you proud of your RL nation?

Do you ever come to SL to be alone? Have you ever gotten lost in SL?
What kinds of things do you do when alone?

Does SL seem big or small? And why?

Does SL seem separate from RL? Is there overlap between the two?

What things can you do in SL that you can't do in RL?

Describe what you were like as a newbie?

How has that changed the longer you've been here?

How comfortable do you feel in SL?

Do you ever still feel like a newbie? What's that like? Give an example?