Bowling online: introduction to Social Worlds in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

BOWLING ONLINE: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL WORLDS IN SECOND LIFE

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During the ongoing Covid pandemic, people with underlying conditions that could become comorbidities were forced to retreat into their homes and were banned from social spaces if they wanted to survive. Those with capital could participate in online social spaces. With the push towards considering Covid an endemic disease, which by definition means repeated outbreaks, immunocompromised people will be forced to continually withdraw from social spaces. Virtual worlds and other digital communities may be helpful in dealing with the social isolation and anxiety caused by having to distance oneself in order to protect themselves. Virtual worlds are not a perfect solution, as there are problems such as harassment and accessibility that exist online.
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BOWLING ONLINE: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL WORLDS IN SECOND LIFE

BY

HOPE MAC DONALD
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In February of 2020, I was close to having a field site for my thesis. My topic had nothing to do with the internet or virtual worlds. Around Valentine’s Day, I read an article about a virus outbreak in China (Rosner, 2020). The article was an interview with a couple in Shunde, China, and how they were living with the city on lockdown (Rosner, 2020). My takeaway was, “I should stock up on canned goods because if I prepare for this it won’t come to pass.” It was, of course, magical thinking.

Spring break was in mid-March. I went into the break excited that my thesis plans were falling into place. I was making my way through a fun reading list for the project. Then, cases of Covid-19 began to be reported in the United States. The state locked down and the university extended break for a week. Then, classes moved online and countries began closing their borders. I realized that the pandemic was going to last a while, at least through the summer, when I was planning on doing my ethnographic study. I knew I would not be able to go to Canada and I felt it would be wrong to leave the state during a pandemic.

I began wondering what I was going to do, specifically for my thesis and in general about socializing when I would not be able to see people in class or even leave my apartment. That led me to wonder what other people were going to do, which was how I arrived at my new research question: can virtual worlds be used to cope with Covid-induced isolation, and if so, how?

Do people use virtual worlds like Second Life to cope with social anxiety and Covid-induced isolation, and if so, how?
Introduction to Second Life

As stated, Second Life (or SL) was not my original thesis topic, although I have been interested in virtual worlds and massive multiplayer online (MMO) games since they first began appearing. I first became aware of Second Life in 2006, when I stumbled across a copy of Business Week with a SL avatar on the cover. The appeal of online games, for me, was the idea that one could meet and make friends with people from other parts of the world.

I do not have a lot of experience with MMOs. In the 1990s-early aughts, the bar for entry was too high for me. The price was having a computer at home, having internet access, having a large data plan on that internet access, and a physical game purchased from the store, in addition to a monthly membership fee. Now internet access and a computer are necessary to function in society. While some may argue that is not the case, it was certainly true in 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Schools and nonessential workers moved to online spaces. Shopping for things online has become more common and widespread with the introduction of grocery delivery apps. Looking for and applying to work, even at places like McDonald’s, has moved online. While some games do have an initial starter fee, there are plenty of MMOs and virtual worlds that have free membership options.

I chose SL because it does have a free membership option that would allow me to check out the world without having to make a monetary commitment. I researched the companies that were responsible for the virtual worlds. Linden Labs, the makers of Second Life, was the only company that had an easy way to contact them as a “non-customer”. By “easy” I mean that I was able to find an email address on the Second Life website. I received an email to my inquiry in a timely manner, which gave me a positive first impression of Linden Labs and Second Life.
Second Life launched in 2003 with 36 million accounts created and an average of a million monthly users reported in 2013 (Linden Labs, 2013). In 2017, active monthly users were reported to be around 800,000 to 900,000 (Axon, 2017). The number of users is reported to have dropped to half a million by 2018, but that year also saw an increase in interest and new accounts created (Buscemi, 2020). Second Life has a stable user base and a longevity that other virtual worlds do not. For example, World of Warcraft (WoW) has been around nearly as long, coming out in 2004, but WoW is a game and operates as one. The difference between game worlds and virtual worlds will be further explained in another section of this paper. WoW changes the gameplay and the world with the addition of expansion packs, thus players who do not have all of the expansion packs are experiencing the world of WoW differently than players with all of the packs. Second Life has no expansion packs, thus all residents experience the same world.

Second Life was not conceived by the people of Linden Labs as a place for socialization (Malaby, 2009). In fact, at the time it was created, games with a social aspect were often looked down on, even by the people of Linden Labs (Malaby, 2009). Second Life was created as a place to create and share objects (Malaby, 2009). The tools for Second Life are geared towards webdesign (Malaby, 2009) and are difficult for people who are unfamiliar with webdesign/creation tools. Despite this, Second Life users have created social spaces and communities in SL.

Starting in March 2020, community interaction was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. People were encouraged to physically distance to slow the spread of the virus. Gatherings in physical buildings with large groups was discouraged or not allowed. Schools moved classes online, some churches offered services online, and other civic engagements were canceled or delayed. Community interaction and civic engagement also moved online. Although many
restrictions began to be lifted by June of 2021, with further restrictions lifted by 2022 and many schools returning to in-person classrooms and events such as the Olympic Games and the Oscars being held.

**Pre-Covid Understandings of Impacts of Online Worlds**

Since the Luddites in England, there has been a fear of new technology and the changes it brings. Technology often gets the blame for weakening social connections and increasing civic apathy. Putnam (2000) argued that civic engagement, which he defined as political party, religious and volunteer groups, and “more formal” connections, such as union memberships, had been on the decline and he placed the blame on technology. Workplace union membership began declining around 1977 (Farber and Krueger, 1992). Dwindling membership in civic organizations were not being replenished by new, younger members (Putnam, 2000). Membership and attendance of religious institutions also began dropping, with a large decline in the mid-1980s (Putnam, 2000). Meanwhile “informal” connections, like book clubs and support and self-help groups, were on the rise. Putnam cited the lack of major social-political movements as one indicator of declining social and civic involvement. However, Putnum’s book was published in 2000, which means he wrote it before or during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests. The book was written before the 2000 election protests, the 2002 protests against the war in Iraq, and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. More recently there has been a push to unionize by workers of Starbucks (Johnson, 2022) and Amazon warehouses (Levy & Palmer, 2022). While there was a decline in social-political movements, or more likely a decline in how social-political movements were covered by the media and thus visible to nonparticipants, social-political involvement has been on an upswing in recent years.
Turkle (2011) argues that our “digital connections” allow us to both hide from others while simultaneously being in constant contact with one another. Turkle (2011) claims that online interactions could serve as an alternate for in-person interactions, but digital interactions (including texting from a cell phone) are now used to control the “intensity of our connections.” Online communications (Skype and now Zoom and other platforms) allow us to seem as if we are engaging with others while not paying attention by making multitasking easier (Turkle, 2011). The example Turkle uses is checking emails while Skyping with Grandma (Turkle, 2011).

In 2007, Edward Castronova predicted that more and more people would be spending more time in virtual worlds which would lead to game design and public policy being seen as “similar activities”. In his previous book Synthetic Worlds (2005), Edward Castronova discussed how “real world policy analysis” could be used in game design and how game design techniques might be used in “real world policy debate” (Castronova, 2007: xvi). The tangible world and the virtual world would overlap (Castronova, 2007). Castronova (2007) argues that virtual worlds would be ‘better’ because they offer things that reality cannot. The main overlap between the virtual and actual worlds is at the social level, as socialization is the force that holds both worlds together (Castronova, 2007).

There are large obvious problems (inequality, civil rights, climate change, as well as others) with the tangible world (or reality) that affect individuals which online games and virtual worlds provide resolutions for or an escape from. Reality is filled with obstacles and menial work that leave people feeling unfulfilled, which can lead to people feeling socially disconnected or isolated (McGonigal, 2011). Participation in society is “forced” (McGonigal, 2011) and “opting out” of the system is difficult (eg., living off the grid).
Games have a set objective, or win conditions, and there are obstacles to those win conditions (McGonigal, 2011). A clearly defined goal and applicable steps to reaching that goal make games satisfying (McGonigal, 2011). Games have a feedback system that increases satisfaction, as progress can be seen and measured, which contributes to a “sense of self-worth” (McGonigal, 2011). Since Second Life is not a game, it does not have a set of win conditions. Instead, SL has fewer arbitrary-seeming obstacles to existing in its world. The reasons for joining Second Life are different than for joining a massive multiplayer game such as World of Warcraft or Fortnite.

Playing the game is a choice made by the player (McGonigal, 2011). Similarly, “residency” in a nongaming world like Second Life is voluntary. One can choose to participate in Second Life or can choose not to participate. One can choose the level of participation. SL has two membership tiers. There is the free membership, which gives an avatar to operate and access the world of SL. The account also has access to a library of avatar selections that allows for some choice and modification to the avatar without using money. Then there is the premium account, which for $99 USD a year (at the time of writing) gain users the ability to own land, a stipend of 300 Linden Dollars a week, and access to “exclusive areas” and “exclusive virtual goods” (Second Life membership page; Linden Labs, 2022). One can even opt out of SL after joining by no longer logging in and terminating the account.

Many adults feel isolated and alone (and have trouble connecting with others outside of already-established groups or outside of work environments (Bonior, 2013; Brandt, 2017). Online communities give people opportunities to meet with people. Social games “make it easier and more fun to maintain” social connections with people outside of everyday life (McGonigal, 2011). Online communities also allow for passive sociability, i.e., times when a person wants to
be alone but with people (McGonigal, 2011) or around other people but not interact with them. Engaging with a digital community (for example: reading comments on a YouTube video or on webcomics) can feel like socialization even if the person does not leave their own comments. In my experience, this passive participation of just reading the comments activated my feelings of, “I have socialized with someone other than a family member today.” During the pandemic, I like many people would wake up from apocalyptic nightmares that triggered panic attacks (Kennedy et al., 2022). I would enter Second Life, not to directly interact with people, but to feel less alone. Seeing others, even though it was through a digital representation, had a calming effect and reminded me that there were still other people in the world.

Communication technologies and social media platforms have been used to counter the feelings of isolation. The definition of “social isolation” is still being debated in academic circles (Chen & Schultz, 2016). Nicholson (2009) identifies five factors that contribute: 1) belonging, 2) social contacts, 3) quality of relationships, 4) fulfilling relationships, and 5) engagement (Nicolson in Chen & Schultz, 2016). Cornwell and Waite (2009) identified multiple components contributing to feelings of social isolation: contact frequency, network size, loneliness, social activity, and support. Some studies conducted on the use of information communication technology to help reduce social isolation among elderly populations have shown positive results, yet others have shown no result or even negative impacts (Chen & Schultz, 2016).

**History of Online Gaming**

The development of online virtual worlds had five milestones (Sanchez, 2009). The first was the development of multi-user dungeons, or MUDs (Boellstorff, 2008; Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). In 1979, Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw began developing a ‘multi-user
dungeon’ (MUD) that was accessed on the Essex University Telnet (Boellstorff, 2008; Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). The game was popular with Essex University students and soon spread beyond the university (Taylor 2009). MUDs were usually text-based adventure games that would occur in real time and players would access and play in groups (Boellstorff, 2008; Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). They were often similar to the tabletop game Dungeons and Dragons, many contained fantasy elements and several people would play at the same time (Boellstorff, 2008; Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Players would be able to “explore” the world by typing in commands such as “Take left tunnel”, and the game would describe the world.

In 1985, Lucasfilm Games and Quantum Computer Services created an “online graphical virtual environment for multiple users” called Habitat (Taylor, 2009:23). Habitat was a “2-d world with a third person perspective (Taylor, 2009:23). In 1989, James Aspnes created TinyMUDs (Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). TinyMUDs were virtual worlds where players could socialize and “create new game aspects and objects from within the world itself” (Sanchez, 2009:10). TinyMUDs were places where the players/users were not just experiencing the environment but actively participating in the development of the world (Sanchez, 2009). TinyMUDs were not focused on game play as defined by “slaying dragons” (Taylor, 2009), or other end-goal objectives. The third milestone was MOOs (multi-user dungeons, object orientated) (Boellstorff, 2008; Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). MOOs allowed users to create objects in-game and share the objects with other users (Sanchez, 2009).

The first 3-D online multiplayer game was Meridan 59, released in 1996 (Sanchez, 2009; Sanchez identified it as Meridan, [www.meridan59.com](http://www.meridan59.com)). It is a sword-and-sorcery type game with puzzles and player vs. player combat that is still running today and available free through Steam. Ultima Online was the first game to have a monthly subscription fee, which changed the
video game industry in major ways (Sanchez, 2009). Before *Ultima Online*, purchasing a game meant that the player owned their copy of the game (Sanchez, 2009). Games were also finished products when they shipped, though some would still have bugs. *Ultima Online* was the first game to use end-user agreements that state that purchasing the game does not give ownership to the purchaser, and the company may “brick” the game at any time. To brick a game is to make it unplayable in some way, such as shutting down the servers it is hosted on for online games. Companies can now ship incomplete or buggy games and use updates to fix or add as they see fit. Once a month the game *Animal Crossing New Horizons* has an update with new game-play features or insects and fish to collect. Some games have even been shipped without the ending, which in some cases has than been put behind a paywall (e.g., the video game *Asura’s Wrath*).

*Everquest* was released in 2000 and was a ‘massive multiplayer online role-playing game’ (or MMORPG) that was designed to require players to cooperate in order to succeed (Sanchez, 2009; Taylor, 2009). The game required social networks within the game, but those networks expanded beyond the game world (Sanchez, 2009). Forums were developed for players to discuss the game online and tangible world, face-to-face conventions were held (Taylor, 2009; Sanchez, 2009). The availability of broadband internet and better personal computers lead to the success of MMORPGs (Sanchez, 2009).

As with action/adventure MUDs being followed by TinyMUDs that emphasized socialization, MMORPGs were followed by 3-D social virtual worlds (Sanchez, 2009). These social virtual worlds are not based on game mechanics, goal-orientated quest objectives or combat (Sanchez, 2009). The users of these games are often referred to as residents instead of players (Boellstorff, 2008; Sanchez, 2009). In time, these “fantasy worlds” came to be “mirror worlds” with social dynamics and economies that rival tangible-world countries (Sanchez, 2009).
Corrupted Blood Plague

Studying the way people behave in online worlds can offer insight into behavior in the tangible world. Online lives taking place in virtual worlds can have impacts on social lives in the actual world (Boellstorff, 2008), and actions in the virtual world can model how people behave in the actual world.

I am interested in virtual communities because I hypothesize that they are a vanguard for what can happen in the offline world. The controversy known as “Gamergate” occurred in 2012. In 2012, the online gaming community became a toxic environment dominated by misogyny, racism, and other forms of hate directed at non-white, non-cis, non-hetero, non-male people. Other beliefs that are considered fringe beliefs or even dangerous have a presence online, such as the anti-vaxing movement or the flat-earth advocates. People with these ideas may not find anyone in their real-world communities who support their ideas but can find like-minded people online (Koehler, 2014). Online a mother can find other people encouraging her not to vaccinate her children, and if enough people find and encourage each other, there can be drastic real-world consequences. One consequence is outbreaks of diseases that were once thought to have been eliminated in the United States, such as measles (Hassan, 2019).

Another example of how online worlds prefigure trends in offline worlds is the “Corrupted Blood” plague of World of Warcraft. It has been studied by epidemiologists because of the similarities to the spread of real-world pandemics (Girish, 2019). In September 2005, Blizzard Entertainment added new regions to World of Warcraft (Girish, 2019). In one of the new regions, players encountered a boss who had a spell that gave the character a status effect that would slowly drain their hit points (Girish, 2009). An oversight by programmers allowed the
spell to escape the region (Girish, 2019). Pets that were summoned during battle were infected with the status effect, but the spell was not removed when the animal was dismissed and maintained its infected state when summoned again (Rossi, 2020). This allowed the pets to become carriers of the status effect (Girish, 2019; Rossi 2020). Players who left the area and summoned the pets in areas with other players infected the players and nonplayer characters (NPCs) who were standing nearby (Rossi, 2020). Healer players rushed into these infected areas to heal infected players and revive dead players (Girish, 2019). Revived characters were still infected and thus still able to spread the status infection (Girish, 2019). At first players, later joined by Blizzard Entertainment, tried to establish quarantines (Girish, 2019). As with the Covid-19 pandemic, some players complied while others refused (Girish, 2019). The status effect would kill low-level characters immediately while high-level characters survived (Girish, 2019; Rossi, 2020). Using the summoned pets as incubators, some high-level players began to spread the “plague” to other regions (Rossi, 2020). Computer models of epidemics have limitations because the model is unable to model human behavior (Girish, 2019). Tangible-world epidemiologists cannot do experiments in the tangible world because people will not react to a pretend disease the way they would if their lives were actually in danger (Girish, 2019). Thus, virtual worlds can offer safer alternatives for simulating behavioral responses during a disease outbreak.

This specific case is relevant to the current real-world situation. During this pandemic there are people trying to spread the virus, though often not stated as the conscious goal. In Wisconsin a woman was caught licking freezer door handles at a grocery store as a “protest” against Covid-19 (Slisco, 2020), and a woman in California was arrested for licking merchandise at a supermarket (Kaur, 2020). Players in the game reacted to the in-game plague in the same
ways that people are reacting to the actual-world pandemic, with some people putting themselves at risk to help, some people trying to limit their exposure and others trying to spread the disease to as many as possible. The summoned pets acted as disease reservoirs in the same way real world wildlife are disease reservoirs, such as bats for SARS (Wang et al. 2006) and waterfowl for influenza (Ito et al., 1995).

There is also the fact that with the Covid-19 pandemic, people are being encouraged to “social distance,” or more correctly physically distance, from people and self-quarantine if necessary. There is a very real possibility that this virus could be a recurring part of life, with repeating periods of outbreaks and people needing to physically distance. Online virtual worlds offer a way of socializing that does not risk infecting others or being infected and may see an increase in users. Are more people now engaging with virtual worlds, and is that engagement changing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic?
CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Virtual World vs. Game World

Game worlds and virtual worlds are not interchangeable ideas. A game world is a world in which a game is set. A game is defined as having a goal that players work towards (McGonigal, 2011). *Everquest, World of Warcraft* (WoW) and *Final Fantasy VIX* (FF14) are online games. Virtual worlds are the spaces in which those goals are worked towards, such as Norrath (*Everquest*), Azeroth (*World of Warcraft*), or Vana’die (FF14), or they are spaces in which people can socialize, such as Second Life (Sanchez, 2009). Not all virtual worlds, however, are a game world. Second Life is a virtual world, but not a game (Boellstorff, 2008). Second Life has no goal to work towards, such as defeating the Lich King in the second expansion of *World of Warcraft*.

Virtual worlds have five common features identified by Betsy Book (in Sanchez, 2009:9). A virtual world is shared by many users at the same time, has a visual depiction of an interactive space that can be altered by users and in real time, and the world continues after the user logs off. It is theoretically possible for a virtual world to have only one resident (Boellstorff, 2008). The closest to this would be the Animal Crossing games; however, the fact that players can erase the world and start over if they make a mistake is possibly a mark against it being a virtual world. If I make a mistake in WoW, I cannot delete the world and try again; my actions have unavoidable consequences.
Virtual Worlds as Places of Ethnography

Virtual worlds can be places of ethnographic research (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2009). There is some debate over research being done within the context of the virtual world alone, or research of the virtual world within the context of people’s lives in the actual world (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010). The argument for not including outside the virtual world is that virtual worlds are “places” and thus the researcher does not need to refer to places outside of the virtual world (Golub, 2010). In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff (2008) separated his research within Second Life from the actual world. He did not (purposefully) meet with other residents in the actual world, nor did he attempt to verify information related to their demographics or identities (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010). Other researchers do meet face-to-face with the other players or residents in the actual world (Taylor, 2009).

However, other researchers argue that virtual worlds do not exist in a vacuum but are a part of societies and cultures (Golub, 2010; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2009). Even Boellstorff (2008) acknowledges that there are areas of the virtual world that exist outside of the virtual world. Virtual worlds and MMPOGs (massive multiplayer online games) have official websites, forums, wikis, fan-sites, blogs, and now even YouTube channels (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub 2010; Taylor, 2009; Thomas and Seely Brown 2009). Boellstorff excluded these sites from his research as well, declaring them “virtual virtual worlds” (Boellstorff, 2008:199; Golub, 2010). Golub (2010) argues that research of virtual worlds should follow the example of Oceania Studies and view virtual worlds as “systems of meaning and commitments which spread across multiple locations, rather than discrete places which have ‘culture’” (Golub, 2010:20).
Tangible-world cultures and events have an impact on virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010). Cultures do emerge within virtual worlds but they are often based on actual world cultures (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2009). However, the game-world culture being based on a tangible-world culture is not enough for people to socialize within the game world (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010). They are part of interconnected sites and evolve in response to outside forces (Thomas and Seely Brown, 2009). Virtual worlds are changed by mods and add-ons, player interactions, and the company that owns the rights to the virtual world reconfiguring game play in response to mods by adding expansion packs (Golub, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2009).

Virtual worlds are not set up by programmers and companies and left to run on their own. They are monitored, both inside the virtual world and outside from the actual world. The companies react from outside of the virtual world to make changes. Furthermore, the virtual world is inhabited by real people, not just NPCs, and those real people are influenced and reacting to tangible-world events that may impact how they experience and operate in the virtual world. The way in which a virtual environment is designed and built has an effect on how users interact, not only with the environment but also with each other (Cheng et al., 2002). Virtual worlds that are geared towards building a persistent identity helps the users create longer lasting relationships (Cheng et al., 2002).

All this is to say, virtual worlds like Second Life can be very fruitful places for understanding human behavior. The social bonds formed in a virtual world are often seen as weaker or less valid than bonds formed in a traditional, physical-world social system (Becker & Mark, 2002). However, groups in a virtual world engage in “shared codified behavior” (Becker & Mark, 2002) and act as groups that meet in the same physical space.
The methods of offline/actual-world ethnography are used in online/virtual-world ethnography. Participant observation and interviews can be done in the virtual world, chat rooms, and even in the actual world. The first step is for the researcher is to set up the boundaries of their field site (Snodgrass, 2016). There is no consensus on how to include offline life in virtual ethnography (Snodgrass, 2016) or even whether offline life should be included. In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff (2008) purposefully did not include offline life. He argues that virtual worlds can be studied without reference to people’s offline lives and identities and, furthermore, that the study of virtual worlds can be done wholly within the virtual world (Boellstorff, 2008). Other researchers argue that online life cannot be separated from offline life (Golub, 2010; Snodgrass, 2016; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2009). The person controlling the avatar in the virtual world is not limited to the virtual world space. Snodgrass (2014:441) states that people use virtual worlds to express “real life concerns”; therefore the virtual world cannot be divorced from real-life concerns.

In addition to “real-life concerns” bleeding into the virtual world (e.g., Black Lives Matter having a headquarters in Second Life), there are other online spaces outside the virtual world where players gather (Boellstorff, 2008; Golub, 2010). Boellstorff (2008) calls these spaces “virtual virtual worlds.” These places are forums, fanwikis, and websites the companies that operate the virtual worlds. There are channels on YouTube that create fan tribute videos, how-to-plays, or dig into the lore of the virtual world. There are also sites where people will post their fanfiction stories based on the game. Players also meet in real life. To research *Everquest*, Taylor (2009) attended a convention, met with people on her server as well as other servers, and visited with people in their homes. Golub (2010) argues that other sites should be taken into
account. Projects begin and are tied to a virtual world, but the project is not confined to the virtual world (Golub, 2010).

I followed Boellstorff’s (2008) example of not including offline-life demographic data. I conducted semistructured, informal interviews within Second Life. I focused my questions on interaction within Second Life and whether that helped with offline-life concerns. I joined five organizations, four of which are active and one that does not appear to be active. I joined a new residence organization, a church, a book club, and a general events group that focuses on health and wellness. The inactive group is a Chinese language learning group that I joined to see if I would get a message if it began meeting again.

I told the people I interviewed that I was doing my MA thesis and also posted that information in my profile biography. I interviewed six people during the time period of October 2021 to January 2022. The first interview was conducted by voice chat; while all other interviews were conducted by text chat. There are two types of text chat, general and private chat. General text chat can be read by anyone “nearby.” Private chat works like an instant messenger that can be sent to nearby residents or to friends who are somewhere else in SL.

Signing up for Second Life is a quick process. Setting up the account and downloading the launcher took about five minutes total via cable modem. The most difficult and time consuming part for me was coming up with a username. There was a lot of pressure on picking a name, as it is “very important” and needs to be something “you’d be comfortable with in real life” and something “that’s attractive and memorable” (English, 2008). The account username can only be changed if one has a premium account.
Getting Started

I regretted the name immediately after entering SL, which would have happened no matter what name I had picked. It is possible to change the display name, but it took me a year to finally change it. After changing the display name, the account name is still displayed underneath the display name. I, personally, found this to be distracting. Group names can also be displayed above the avatar, leading to a clutter of information above the avatars. In the beginning, I (a user
with ADHD and dyslexia) felt a sensory overload by the avatar labeling. I had to look up how to remove the group label each time I joined a group. I did learn how to “tune out” the labels after a couple of months, but it was intimidating in the beginning. After a year, I found the option to turn off group and account names.

Another issue caused by having dyslexia is the fact that the chat text font cannot be changed. Certain fonts on the computer are easier for people with dyslexia to read while others are more difficult. While I can read Times New Roman, Calabri, and other fonts, I find it easier to read in Comic Sans on a computer. When I have the option to change font styles, I choose styles that are closer to Comic Sans because it is less taxing on my brain. I can read Comic Sans easier and comprehend what I am reading faster than in other fonts. I could not change the style of the text in Second Life, though I could change the size. This would lead to a slight delay on a few occasions as I would have to reread what someone had typed, and if I was having a bad comprehension day, I would have to copy and paste the wall of text into a Word document and change the font there.

I had tried SL around 2014 and the experience was different. The first time, I was immediately deposited into the world with no explanation or tutorial. The place I was dropped was a beginner-friendly area that had some signs that explained how to move the avatar, how to move the camera, and how to chat with other residents. I spent maybe seven minutes in the world before I wandered through a portal and into a different section of the world where I was propositioned by someone. I left the world and did not return until 2020. By that point, I had forgotten the previous account name and password and had to start over.

This time, entering Second Life for the first time I arrived on Learning Island. The tutorial was a relief after my previous experience. It gave me a chance to acclimate to the new
environment without having to worry about talking to others. There were other people going through the tutorial but no indications that anyone was interested in chatting. The other four new residents that I encountered moved away from each other as quickly as possible.

New residents arrive in a default avatar, based on which gender is selected, which were at that time male, female, and gender variant/nonbinary. The architecture of Learning Island had a science fiction/Greek feel to it. By that I mean it was reminiscent of ancient Greek architecture (as portrayed by Hollywood) mixed with modern or even sci-fi taste and elements. The Greek elements were the appearance of white stone or marble and walls that were pillars to allow lots of sunlight into the corridor. The modern element was that everything was bright and clean and no evidence of soot from torches.

Learning Island is a long hallway that users follow, with tasks to be completed to move to the next step. A box appears on the left-hand side of the screen with the directions what to do to accomplish the task. Step 1 is moving with the arrow or WASD keys. Step 2 is jumping with the page up or “e” key and demonstrated by making residents jump over gaps in the floor. Step 3 was learning how to fly, which is like jumping but longer. For Step 3, new residents have to fly up to a second floor which leads to the end of the learning island. The end of the tutorial is a room that has aquariums along the wall and a door leading to the next space.

The doorway led to the courtyard, which was where the chat tutorial was. The courtyard had the same style as the rest of Learning Island, though with more plants. It was also home to Rinaldo, a friendly parrot object that allowed one to practice using the chat box. The parrot was helpful since I was the only one in the courtyard. I used the fact that I was alone to switch to a different prebuilt avatar in the menu options. The default avatar I received upon entering reminded me of a socialite/influencer type, complete with a purse dog. I was also annoyed by the
way the jacket was being worn on just the shoulders like a cape. The avatar seemed too flashy for me and was not how I wanted to present myself to the rest of Second Life.

The door that exited the courtyard led to Social Island. There are two islands with the designation of Social Island: Social Island 8 and Social Island 10. Both are identical in appearance, at least as far as I can tell. For the description I will be lumping both of them together as Social Island.

Social Island has the same architecture as Learning Island, but open and outdoors. The entrance point is a circular tower area with stairs leading to a central courtyard gazebo with a topiary of the Linden logo and three other paths. Facing the logo, the path to the right is a set of stairs that leads to a landing with two more sets of stairs branching off. The left stairs lead to a beach alcove with a tiki barest up that has a dance animation disco ball tutorial. The right set of stairs lead to a hedge maze tutorial for “advanced camera movement.” Both of these new areas are on the ground level.

The goal of the hedge maze is to navigate the maze and find a trophy. The staircase is the back entrance to the maze, which is the part I entered from the first time. The actual entrance to the maze is on a path that leads from the tiki bar area to a meadow that has some tree swings. Further on there is another beach alcove area that has a movement tutorial that involves navigating a rowboat through rings.

Back at the Linden logo topiary, the path to the left of the logo leads to another circular mini-courtyard that also has three pathways. The left pathway leads to a camera challenge. The camera challenge is reminiscent of a modern art sculpture that has red boxes placed on it. The goal is to center the camera on the boxes within a time limit. High scores are displayed on a board next to it.
The middle path leads to the shopping tutorial and private changing rooms. The shopping tutorial consists of a YouTube video that plays inside the world of SL (rather than opening up a separate webpage). The shopping tutorial is inside a round building with an open door arch. Along the walls are portraits of hair styles, a skin tone, an outfit and one pair of shoes; the left side is female human avatar parts and the right side is male human avatar parts. The right path leads to a building containing the building tutorial video and presentations. Completing the tutorials rewards users with tutorial L$ that can be spent in the tutorial shopping area.

Back at the Linden logo topiary, the final (middle) path leads to the portal area. The portal area has a kiosk to purchase Linden dollars in the center. There are nine portals that teleport the user to a destination in SL and are labeled by the type of destination. The categories are ART (3-D art, world exhibits and museums), ROLE PLAY (goth, vampires, steampunk, fantasy, historical, pirate and nautical communities), POPULAR PLACES (hotspots with lots of people), PORTAL PARK (Linden realms, seasonal places The grid hunt, PaleoQuest),
NEWCOMER FRIENDLY (places with orientations, tutorials and resources for new residents), GAMING ISLAND (games to play and win LS), EDITOR’S PICKS, MUSIC, and ADULT.

The Gaming Island portal takes users to the same place each time. It is a land with games to play. Gaming Island is a place where there is the possibility to win Linden dollars. The Newcomer Friendly portal leads to a random location. The first time I went through it I was taken to New Resident Island, which is a location set up with tutorials that are more in-depth than the Learning and Social Island tutorials and some free items for new residents.

I avoided the popular places, editor’s picks, and adult portals. I worried about crashing my computer with places that had high traffic. The first event I tried to attend had about thirty avatars when I tried to join. I could not move my avatar or respond to people greeting me before my computer locked up and I had to reboot. While I was invited to the adult locations by other residents, I was not interested in taking them up on the offer. I found it bothersome that I would be propositioned within two minutes of a conversation when I was in Social Island, as well as other newcomer locations or church, and did not want to deal with the hassle of going to a place where that was the expected behavior.

Social Island is advertised on the destination guide as a place to “[m]eet new friends, go through Second Life tutorials and more” (in-world Destinations menu). While those are things one can do, it is not as safe and easy to understand as other places within SL. I encountered several men who immediately pestered and/or propositioned me. It seemed as if they were hanging out on Social Island waiting for new female avatar users. I would later find out that this is a common issue for all new female-presenting avatars.

When I first started in October of 2020, Social Island had few visitors. I would either be the only one there or there would be only one to two other people. Around September of 2021,
more people appeared to be on Social Island. The destination menu would show thirty people and when I visited the entrance there would be around ten people visible. I was later informed that some of them could be bots, though there were enough interactions between avatars (conversation in the local chat) that showed some were not bots, and the increase in avatars was noticeable.

Groups

People in Second Life form groups that one can join. There is a limit to the number one can belong to; in 2008, it was 25 groups (English, 2008). In 2022, the basic membership allows 42 groups and premium membership allows 70 groups. Groups in SL can be formed around anything. There are universities and churches, book clubs, museums, resident organizations, and political movements. Joining a group puts users on the emailing list for that group and to receive in-world notifications and emails from the group. The notifications are important because not every group will post events to the event calendar. Some groups will have a meeting location and allow group members to assign this location as the members’ “home location”. The home location is where a resident “rezzes” into the world. (Rezzing is the term for appearing or loading into the world or the world appearing around the avatar; English, 2008).

The Interviews

One challenge in Second Life, for me, is that how people present themselves is the only impression that I have of them. Everything about the avatars is chosen by the user. Gender, hairstyle and color, skin tone and clothing, all the social cues for who the person might be or how I should interact with them. All of the signals that I use to know how to engage with a person are
stripped away. I had no way of knowing if the people I was speaking with were older than, younger than, or the same age as me. This can be slightly disconcerting because I had no way of knowing if our base cultural knowledge matched (for example, which Star Wars trilogy is the one to reference? Harry Potter or Twilight?)

Avatars can act as an expression of who one wants to be rather than who one is. My avatar can be male or a cartoon robot. My avatar can appear Asian, Caucasian, or Na’vi. One thing that I found confusing was that racism, sexism, and body shaming do exist in SL. Instances of all three have come up in conversation and from searching the forums. I find it confusing because a person can be racist to another person online, but the racism is based on pixels on the screen, and the person behind those pixels is not necessarily of the same racial group as their avatar. My avatar looked Asian for a few months, which I am not. Due to my aforementioned issue with the menu navigation, this was not intentional or “cultural appropriation.”

Events are posted on the account homepage under Upcoming Events or on a separate events page. Upcoming events are events that will occur within the next 24 hours. The events page displays a calendar so that future events can be seen. The person advertising the event pays a small fee for the event to be listed on the calendar. Events are listed into 12 categories: Arts and Culture, Charity/Support Groups, Commercial, Discussion, Education, Games/Contests, Live DJ, Live Music, Miscellaneous, Nightlife/Entertainment, Pageants, and Sports.

**Learning Spanish in SL**

Education events include programming, scripting and creating objects in Second Life, as well as non-Second Life skills such as meditation and language classes. Most of the language
classes are English as a second language with a couple non-English practice groups. The only non-English language teacher I could find was Eugenia Calderon, who teaches Spanish.

According to Calderon, she is the only non-English language teacher left in SL. Most of the other teachers have left SL for the platform DigiWorldz. She offers a couple of beginning Spanish classes in SL but also teaches on Skype. She likes teaching online as she lives in a dangerous area and it is not always safe to travel to a physical school. SL offers her a safer work environment and allows her to reach more students. Most of her current students are in North America, but in the past she also had students from the other side of the world. One issue with SL is that it is on UTC-8m which can make it difficult for people on the other side of the world to attend events. There are also issues with people not being able to sync up between the eastern and western hemispheres (Calderon, personal communication, 10/6/2021).

**Stepping Stones Christian Church**

Stepping Stones Christian Church (SSCC) was established on February 2, 2020, about a month before states in the United States began issuing stay-at-home orders (Norwood, 2020). Kerrianne Wheatcliffe is the founder and acting minister of the church, though she is quick to insist she is not a minister but “an account called by God.” She does not think that the coronavirus played a role in the success of SSCC. She does know some people began attending SSCC because they could not go to church in real life and continued to attend SSCC after real-life churches were opened. Stepping Stones is not affiliated with a real-world church or a specific denomination. There are church groups in SL that are affiliated with churches and denominations outside of SL. In the wake of the lockdown orders, several churches appeared in SL, with some of them disappearing over time.
When stay-at-home orders were first being issued, some churches protested the fact that they were not allowed to hold large services in the church building (Presa et al, 2020). Church leaders pushed the idea that everyone in the congregation had to be physically present for the service (Presa et al., 2020). SSCC has members from across the United States as well as from other parts of the world. While they are not physically together in the real world, they are together in the virtual world. Wheatcliffe will often speak during her services about how Jesus is everywhere and that includes Second Life. The core purpose of a Christian church, a group of people coming together to worship God, can be present in a virtual church.

According to Wheatcliffe, people are drawn to SL for many things. A big draw for her was the creativity aspect. She knows of others who enjoy being able to do things they cannot do in real life, whether it is something as fantastical as flying or as mundane as swimming or walking without pain. There are also those who are attracted to the adult-orientated sites. Overall, she believes that “social is the underlying reason for a vast majority” joining and participating in Second Life (K. Wheatcliffe, personal communication, 10/20/2021).

Members of SSCC will also get together for events not related to church. They will go shopping together, attend Linden events, and support each other at other activities, such as when a musician has a concert in SL. Outside of church service, the group will also offer Bible study sessions and the occasional movie night. One issue with movie nights in SL is that someone is showing the movie and not everyone’s computer will be synched together. There is a chance that one might not see the end of the movie because the host gets to the end and turns it off while some viewers might be a few minutes behind.

There have been some “griefing” incidents in the church’s history. One major incident that occurred was in the early days when the congregation was first learning how to organize and
operate, as well as smaller, less coordinated instances that targeted the congregation as a whole. There have also been instances of people attending the services and meet-and-greets with the purpose of targeting and propositioning individual women. One specific sexual harassment incident occurred in the first year of the church’s existence. The person was reported and banned from the parcel, only to return a year later with a new name, a new avatar and the same scam.

**The Cat’s Tale Café**

Finn Zedmore runs The Cat’s Tale Café. The café specializes in science fiction. It is a cozy place filled with sci-fi easter eggs and artwork. A poster of Dr. Who and anime art hang on the wall. Finn hosts a book club that meets once a week and is currently making its way through the Discworld Series by Sir Terry Pratchett. The café is also the meeting place of a sci-fi discussion group on the weekend.

I spoke with Finn at the café where we were joined by another person (S). Finn believes that SL made a huge difference for her during the pandemic. She would meet in the café with others who had also started working from home. She was able to go the café and see friends while working at home. SL also gave her the chance to connect with people from other countries and be comforted by sharing frustration with others over the different governments’ botching of Covid responses.

Finn currently works in mental health and well-being. According to her, from an article she remembered reading, the pandemic did cause a severe disruption to school children, but the ones who played online games with friends were not as isolated. Most of the studies I found have focused on the negative impacts of increased internet use and screen time on children. I could not find studies that spoke of positive impacts of engagement with others.
One issue that Finn identified with Second Life is the complexity of the interface and how that may prevent more people from joining or sticking around. The interface and menu system is not intuitive and navigating the inventory is difficult (English, 2008). In addition, customizing the avatar is also difficult. While it is possible to make one’s avatar look like anything, the process to changing avatar appearance can be overwhelming. The interface issue was a concern for the educational institutions that had once populated Second Life. Many of the educational institutions left when Linden Labs raised the prices of membership. Before they left, many of the institutions were concerned with their students being able to learn the interface.

Even for those who get past the interface issues, another issue for newcomers to overcome is the “weirdos and perverts” (S, personal communication). S was on Orientation Island and trying to figure out why her avatar head had been detached when a guy approached her. He commented on how she was new and invited her back to his place (S, personal communication). Finn managed to avoid these types of encounters after that as a friend helped her set up the account and immediately teleported her away from the new resident areas.

With the interface issues and the lack of a safe welcoming procedure for newcomers, Finn maintains that Linden Labs does not understand what they created. This idea supports Malaby’s (2009) idea that Second Life was not created for sociability. However, creativity and socialization often go hand in hand (Finn and S, personal communication). While creativity is often portrayed as a solitary process in pop culture, with the brooding loner type locking themselves away to create their masterpiece, the creator eventually wants to share their creation with someone.
The Light House Art Gallery

Juliana runs the New Kadath Lighthouse Art Gallery. Like most museums and galleries, the exhibits change. There is a permanent exhibit, “Maps of Second Life,” which is about virtual cartography and some of the history of SL. When I visited, there was a temporary exhibit of a ten-year retrospective of the art gallery.

Juliana describes herself and her wife, Dragonia, as expatriates from the online game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*. The original Uru shut down and many of the players made their way to other virtual worlds and online games, including Second Life (Juliana, personal communication). The world they went to was dependent upon the aspect of Uru they had enjoyed. SL and Uru had a similar community aspect (Dragonia, personal communication). Creative people like Dragonia were drawn to the creative aspect of SL and “brought their communities with them” (Juliana, personal communication) whereas people who liked working together were drawn to *World of Warcraft*. Another online version of *Myst* opened under the name of *Myst Online: Uru Lives Again* a few years after the original closed, but some former players stayed in Second Life.

In the beginning of the shutdown, much of everyday life moved online. People had to learn how to shop, work, do schoolwork, and socialize in online and virtual environments. People were discussing navigating the online world as if it were a brand new thing, when “everyone here [in SL] has been doing [it] for almost two decades” (Juliana, personal communication).

One major issue with virtual worlds that Juliana identified is concurrency. If too many avatars are present in a region, it results in people having trouble moving. Concurrency is an issue that the next version of virtual worlds will have to solve. Juliana believes that the success of the next version of virtual worlds will depend on a few things. One appeal will be if it is
customizable, as well as if it is easy to use. The third appeal will be based on if a person must present themselves as they are in their “first life” or if they can assume a separate identity. One of the appeals of Second Life, and other virtual worlds/online games, is the ability to form an identity of who the user wants to be or how they want to identify, rather than how the individual is identified in “real” life. Second Life identities do not have to be tied to “first life” identities.

Another major issue that will need to be addressed is “griefing” and harassment. Griefing is defined as purposely disrupting other players. In Second Life, griefing can take the form of someone showing up to an event that has voice enabled and playing something over their speaker to disturb others or being dressed inappropriately for an event or area.
CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION

This research started with the question of whether online virtual worlds would alleviate problems caused by having to go into lockdowns or quarantines. While the internet can provide solutions to certain problems, it can also exacerbate or create other problems. One major concern in the United States is the internet providing platforms for dangerous groups and ideas to grow and attract new people. A major concern that came up in the interviews was the issue of sexual harassment and griefing, or cyber-harassment. Another issue is unequal accessibility, not just to the internet itself but also accessibility once online. Escaping to online worlds does not mean escaping from all problems, and online life also has problems of its own.

Radicalization

Researchers and policy makers are aware of internet and online communities being used by organizations to radicalize and recruit new members (Koehler, 2014). The terrorist group Daesh (sometimes referred to as Islamic State) was very successful with online recruitment and radicalization, with articles appearing in The Guardian about British girls joining, attempting to join, or wanting to join the Daesh (Townsend, 2016).

Online communities work as a recruiting ground for several reasons (Koehler, 2014). It is a relatively cheap and easy way to communicate with others, to organize meetings, to provide a place for meetings to occur and to develop and advance an ideology (Koehler, 2014). The internet gives the illusion that a movement has more impact, or potential impact, than it actually has (Koehler, 2014). Recruits are able to communicate with high-ranking individuals within the movement, making the movement appear welcoming and approachable (Koehler, 2014).
Online communities provide a space where an individual can connect with others who share a similar interest and to share markers of a lifestyle, such as books, clothing, and music, that may be banned in one’s country (Koehler, 2014), as well as a platform where recruiters can draw someone in. YouTube’s algorithm and the auto-play feature make YouTube particularly fertile ground for this tactic. YouTube has programmed its algorithm to favor videos that promote far-right politics and hate-based ideologies (Bryant, 2020). This is particularly relevant to video games and “nerd culture.” If a person sets up a YouTube video to play in the background while they are doing something else and so is not paying attention to what auto-play has selected, it is easy to stumble into right-wing YouTube. For example, the video that is set up first is a simple review of a game from a channel, auto-play then selects a video that is “10 things you didn’t notice in [game]” from a different channel, which leads to a Let’s Play by PewDiePie, and subsequently the recommendations are from Neo-Nazi or Neo-Nazi-adjacent channels.

In 2015, Donald Trump announced that he was running for president of the United States. He based his campaign on misogyny, racism, and other forms of hate directed at non-white, non-cis, non-hetero, non-male people. Steve Bannon, the chief executive officer of Trump’s 2016 campaign, used “Gamergate” as the playbook for getting Trump elected (Sherr and Carson, 2017; Shoppmeier, 2019). Gamergate got its name in 2014, although the core problem that it represented began in 2009, when feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian began a YouTube channel called Feminist Frequency, where she critiqued pop culture through a feminist lens. In 2012, she launched a crowdfunding program for a video series titled “Tropes vs Women in Video Games” (Sherr and Carson, 2017; Shoppmeier, 2019). In response, internet trolls began
The so-called scandal that triggered GamerGate occurred in 2014. Game developer Zoë Quinn released a game in 2013 about dealing with depression. In 2014, an ex-boyfriend posted a rant online that accused her of sleeping with a game journalist for a good review (Sherr and Carson, 2017). Female game developers and anyone who discussed more diversity or better representation of non-hetero/non-white-men in videogames was subjected to harassment, threats of death and rape, and doxing (Sherr and Carson, 2017; Shoppmeier, 2019).

At the time, I watched what was happening in the gaming community, horrified by how my childhood hobby had changed. In 2014, Gamergate did not seem like something that would have an impact on the wider world. Then, in 2016, Donald Trump became president of the United States with help from Steve Bannon who had tapped into angry gamers (Henderson, 2019; Waldman, 2017). According to Soraya Chemaly, the director of the Women’s Media Center’s Speech Project, Gamergate was a breeding and practice ground that united “hard-core gamers” with far-right white supremacists (Sherr and Carson, 2017; Shoppmeier, 2019).

Suddenly, a silly and harmless hobby was not so harmless and having a larger impact on the non-gaming world. While Gamergate is an extreme example of online organization, it is what interested me in studying online community organization. GameGate is an example of how online communities can have an impact on the tangible world.

**Cyber-Harassment**

Cyber-harassment is defined as “computer mediated obscene comments, sexual harassment and generally harassing behaviors aimed at debasing and/or driving out a virtual
world user” (Behm-Morawitz & Schipper, 2016). Griefing is defined as harassment that uses the
game mechanics to disrupt and disturb other players (Coyne et al., 2009 in Brehm, 2013; Warner
and Raiter, 2005). Griefing seems to be more of a shotgun approach to harassment; there is not a
specific target for the griever. The goal appears to be just to ruin someone’s day. I knew a girl
who told me that she enjoyed playing World of Warcraft in player vs. player mode and “fucking
with people’s shit” (personal conversation in 2016).

Behm-Morawitz and Schipper (2016) conducted research on the influence of avatar
appearance on cyber-harassment in SL. One possible explanation for online harassment is the
online disinhibition effect (Behm-Morawitz and Schipper, 2016). The idea is that the perceived
anonymity of the internet acts as a permission to individuals to act in a manner that they would
not act offline (Suler, 2004, in Behm-Morrawitz and Schipper, 2016). Behm-Morrawitz and
Schipper (2016) found that cyber-harassment is a common occurrence in SL. Specifically, sexual
harassment as a legally defined experience that is mostly found “in the context of employment
and academic environments” (Biber et al., 2002; O’Donohue et al., 1998), in Behm-Marrawitz &
Schipper, 2016) was found to be less common than expected. In SL The sexual harassment that
occurs in SL may be more akin to street harassment which is not legally defined but is a range of
behavior from “physically harmless, leers, whistles, honks, kissing noises, and nonsexually
explicit evaluative comments to more insulting and threatening behavior like vulgar gestures,
sexually charged comments, flashing and stalking” (Kearl, 2010:3).

Cyberbullying may be an extension of traditional bullying, though it has some differences
(Erdur-Baker, 2010). With traditional bullying among children the target knows the perpetrator,
there is a power imbalance, and the bullying happens in or near school (Erdur-Baker, 2010).
Cyberbullying occurs with the use of a technological device (Erdur-Baker, 2010), which means that when it occurs, the target of the bullying may be in a place that is thought to be safe. The same applies to online sexual harassment.

The cyber-harassment incident takes place online, in that both parties are interacting through the internet, but both parties are in different physical spaces. The person being harassed might be at home in their living room or in their bedroom, a place that often feels safe and comforting. As a woman going out into the world, I have to come to expect, and sadly accept, that harassment might happen. It is more disconcerting when it happens as I am sitting in my home. Even though I know how bad people can be on the internet, having followed #Gamergate, getting sexually harassed still felt unexpected and more unsettling when it happened to me in my home.

Virtual worlds are not a perfect or a universal solution. The way a virtual world is set up affects how and who can interact with the world. Second Life has some issues that affect people with certain disabilities. It is not dyslexia or ADD/ADHD friendly. The menus, especially the inventory, can be overwhelming. Navigating in the world can be difficult as locations are not marked on the map. There is no indication of the area being private property, so it is easy to unintentionally trespass.

Accessibility is an issue for universities that may want to operate in virtual worlds. According to Finn, who was close with several academics who had operated in SL, universities left Second Life after Linden Labs changed the prices for accounts and owning land. This was a problem for universities, as this changed budgeting and grant requests had already been submitted and so many universities left SL (Finn, personal communication, 2021).
**Additional Issues**

In the real world, not everyone can afford a computer or internet access. For those who have computers, not every computer has top-of-the-line hardware that can handle the software for something like SL. In the United States, internet access is not equal throughout a state, let alone across the country or globally. Second Life has one “world” where everyone plays. Other online games will have different worlds or servers that players are in. In some online games it is possible to want to play the game with a friend, only to find your group on different servers and thus in different worlds. Second Life has some issues with syncing between different sides of the world.

There are also potential environmental implications. Server farms require power and generate a lot of heat. Making computers and other hardware also impacts the environment with mining and other resource extractions. Running computers in homes also requires power, which requires power plants, but these issues are not a concern of this paper. Technology is not a solution to every problem and is the source of some problems.

The Meta, as it is being advertised, will not work as a virtual world, as there does not appear to be anything to do in the virtual space. Second Life appeals to people who like to create, and they bring an audience to see or use their creations. Mark Zuckerberg is trying to recreate Second Life but is focusing on the ways people will be spending money in it. The marketing on the Meta is focused on shopping (Cambe, 2021) and as a place to work. There is no discussion (as of my writing this) on what you can do as a human and acting as more than be a consumer in Meta. Second Life offers ways to engage with other people and have other experiences. While
shopping and working in SL is possible, there are other ways to interact in SL and there are ways to engage with SL that do not cost money.

**Conclusion**

A 2009 article in response to the N1H1 pandemic claims that closing schools for four weeks would cause the U.S. GDP to lose 0.3%, which at that time was ten billion dollars (Lempel et al., 2009). Working and schooling from home does have an effect on local economies (Koehler, 2014; Kornreich, 2002). People are less likely to eat out for lunch if they are working from home, there is no need for a work wardrobe if working remotely, and people spend less money maintaining a vehicle or on gas. However, some of these economic activities would occur within a virtual world. Second Life does have an economy, and that economy can also affect the real-world economy. The first I heard about Second Life back in the early 2000s was a person who became a real-world millionaire by selling virtual realestate. Linden Labs will sometimes publish stories about people in Second Life and how their real-world lives are affected, like a recent one about a woman who was able to pay off her mortgage with the earnings from her SL business (Linden Labs, 2022).

In conclusion, virtual worlds can affect the real world, at the same time the real world shapes the virtual world. The virtual world is created by real-world programming code and inhabited by real people. The virtual world can enhance real life. I am not suggesting that they be used as an escape from real life because one’s virtual life cannot replace all of one’s actual-life problems.
REFERENCES


