

Running head: DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

Life as art: The interplay of identities among virtually performing musicians

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## **Problem Statement**

Second Life (<http://secondlife.com>) is the world's largest user-created three-dimensional virtual environment. As a learning space it is used by hundreds of colleges, universities, and businesses as a collaboration tool. As an entrepreneurial test market, it has enabled thousands of individuals to earn an income in pursuit of a virtual vocation (according to the Second Life website, over 2 million USD are exchanged in Second Life daily). In late 2006 my own efforts to become a virtual entrepreneur birthed the House of Flames (<http://houseofflamesmedia.com>), a virtual music venue hosting live entertainment for concert-going avatars in Second Life. Using streaming technology, it is possible to have a live performing musician play from his real-life home using a computer and microphones, then broadcast the “stream” of his music over an Internet address that will then be delivered into Second Life at the location of a specific virtual venue. Within Second Life, resident avatars (as they are called) fill the venue and are able to dance, chat with each other, and hold conversations with the musician (who is also an avatar on stage, animated to play the instrument of choice). This all happens in real time, with virtual concert goers “tipping” the artist in Linden Dollars (the currency of Second Life), which then can be exchanged for USD or the home currency of the musician.

Second Life doesn't require residents to reveal their real identities; one comes into the environment as an avatar with a manufactured name (which the resident has only limited latitude in choosing). It is possible for a person to live their virtual life in complete disguise if that is their choice. This presents some unique abilities for role-play and risky behaviors but in the case of a musician that is using Second Life as a marketing

tool to extend a real-life performance identity, the interplay between identities that are real and virtual can have an impact on the real-life of the person behind the avatar.

### Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework is an iterative process of interplay between real and virtual identities (see figure 1). The framework addresses the inputs of real life identity, subject-object orientation, and real life role in a process of creating a virtual identity. This virtual identity, in turn, cultivates behaviors based on particular avatar identity attributes and migrates these aspects into the participant’s real life identity over time. This process can be repeated with any number of highlighted roles. I also am interesting in revealing whether there is a causal relationship between the real life music role of the performer and the level of embeddedness or immersion the performer has with his avatar persona.

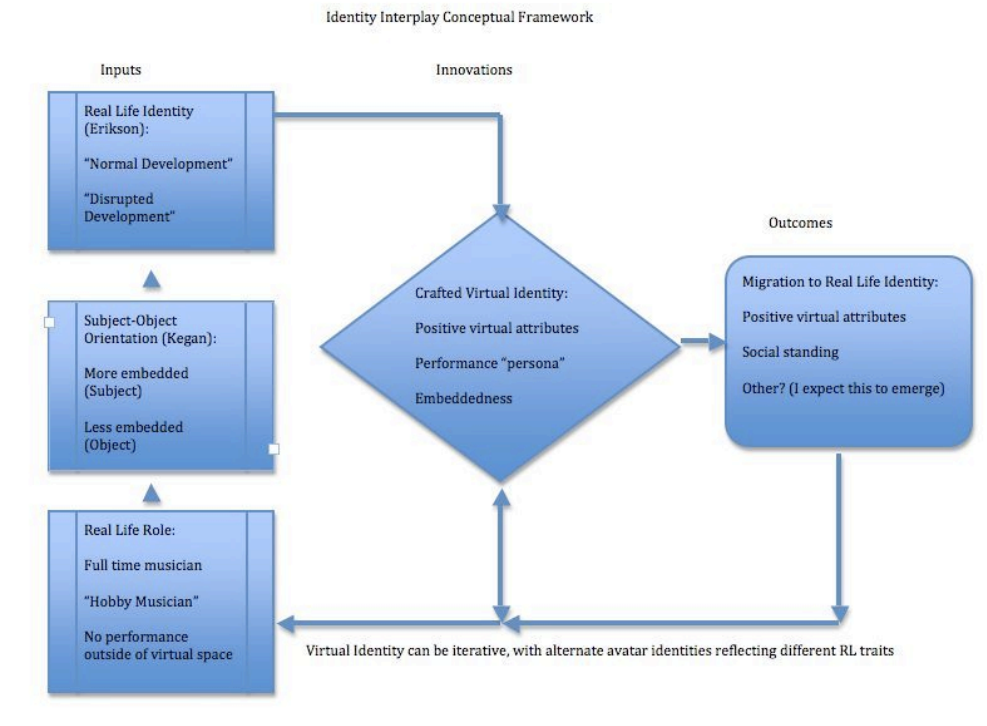


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Identity Interplay

## Research Questions

My research questions have to do with the crafting and interplay of identity in virtual worlds among performing musicians as a comparison and contrast of my own identity interplay as someone who is not a performer.

*What factors influence the crafting of identity for performers in virtual worlds?*

The background for this question lies in identity development and group perception. We begin crafting our identity with mimicry and gestures, then assign meaning to those gestures to begin to craft a sense of self. Once we have a sense of who we are we test that assumption by becoming part of a group. The group either will agree with our perception of who we are, or we will be forced to become what the group finds acceptable (or find another group to join). All this is part of “normal” identity development in the framework of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1968).

In real life, we are dealt the cards of our appearance, economic standing, environment, and any number of other factors that create what I call our “cultural footprint.” Some of things are beyond our ability to significantly change...or are they? In a virtual world, it is possible to change almost everything about our real lives, particularly if we can remain anonymous. If we become a virtual blank slate, wouldn't it stand to reason we would be most likely to change those things we find undesirable in real life? This explores role-based identity and the migration of culture but it also looks at the work of Nick Yee (2007) and what he calls the Proteus Effect—the behaviors of an avatar that conform to what is expected by a group in order to gain social advantages.

*Is there a relationship between a performer's real life role and the level of embeddedness they experience with their avatar?*

This is tied to the work of Robert Kegan (1994) and his Orders of Consciousness. Kegan's work is fascinating to me in the context of virtual environments because at some point in our lives we develop to the point where we become agents in our lived experiences as opposed to being the experience itself. I intend to show how Kegan's Levels of Consciousness can apply to how embedded a person becomes in the lived experiences of their avatar and whether this level of embeddedness migrates to their real life. For virtually performing musicians (my target group for the study), this embeddedness may also have to do with the feedback they get from a fan base. It would be easy to remain embedded in a virtual identity if that identity was giving feedback that was salient with an identity one wanted to maintain, as opposed to a real life identity that may have no resemblance to the virtual.

Given the crafting of a virtual identity and the level of embeddedness a participant might feel with their avatar, *How is real life identity influenced as a result of virtual world participation?*

Yee has shown that when an avatar changes behavior (and appearance) to gain acceptance in a group, some of those effects migrate back into real life. Yee's work had to do with appearance—relative attractiveness and avatar height—and how those traits affected social interactions and aggressiveness. Yee showed that if an avatar presented favorable traits, that these traits migrated their way into the real lives of the participants.

### **Importance of Topic**

If we consider the theories of Erikson and Kegan, they describe normal psychosocial development and subject-object orientation. What happens when that progression isn't healthy, or is punctuated by a traumatic event such as the loss of a

parent, divorce, or a caregiver who isn't able to act as an example? Can we expect individuals who are party to these scenarios to progress into maturity at the same rate, or is it possible they can reach adulthood and have never mastered some of these essential stages? Does the iterative interplay of a real and a self-crafted virtual identity enable an individual to "revisit" essential development stages in a relatively low-risk environment?

Take, for example, the student who is bullied in real life because he is somehow "different." As a result, he is frequently harassed and over time develops an identity that is unhealthy and could lead to behaviors that "act out" this victimization at an important developmental life stage. Is it possible to use virtual worlds (and the ability to create one's own persona) in an effort to level the playing field with regard to attributes that might otherwise be a barrier? In Second Life everyone uses the same building blocks; no one can be bigger than another, no one can be the wrong color because the same color palette is available to everyone. If the playing field is leveled, then the only weapon a bully has is the ability to invoke fear. If this unhealthy attribute were segregated, would it be easier to address over time as one engages in real-virtual interplay? Could this be an asset in learning? Could virtual interplay be used as a therapeutic tool?

As we will see in the literature, particularly the work of Yee (2007), real and virtual identity interplay can ultimately result in an equilibrium or resolution of what we consider ourselves to be.

### **Related Identity Literature**

Our earliest formation of identity includes gestures in a stimulus-response environment, leading to meaning making and the development of tools by which we interact with others. Mead (1934) described this as a "Process between organism and

environment.” As we develop a language, activity plays an important role in how we interact within a community (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky asserted, “The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously independent lines of development, converge.” Identity is a self-cognition based on the acceptance of a role that is either self-determined or assigned by others. These accepted roles determine behavior across a variety of situations (Stryker, 2007).

Interestingly enough, the development of identity is a dynamic process that is largely dependent on the feedback of others (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). It would be no surprise to discover, we tend to gravitate toward people who affirm our self-identity, even if our self-identity is poor (Swann, Stein-Seroussi & Giesler, 1992). This is a significant point to make as our conversation moves to culture and power, where the self-identity is influenced by our social identity as a member of a particular group.

The work of James Clifford and others have helped make sense of my questions about virtual identity, particularly with respect to what causes a person to choose one type of identity over another. After looking more closely at Clifford’s work, it is possible the choice of a virtual identity might be the product of a voice (identity) that is subaltern, looking to emerge and participate within a community of like-minded members (Clifford, 2003a). Giddens (1991) talks about the emergence of communities that are boundary-absent by stating, “A pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver.” He goes on to discuss that, “No one can ‘opt-out’ of the transformations brought about by modernity...the connecting of the local and global has been tied to a profound

set of transmutations in the nature of day-to-day life.” This concept is not new; there has always been a tension between what is tradition and what struggles to emerge. Clifford (2003b) states, “Any community’s ability to persist, to innovate, to change its own terms, is relative to its structural power.” In a virtual space, community is constantly in a state of flux, as people bring their own cultural footprint in and out of the community at will. As this trans-world opportunity arises, and we hold our synthetic (virtual) lives to be as important as our real lives, the value we place on the status and good we attain in our synthetic life will take on the same value as if they were real. Synthetic worlds are becoming a legitimate alternate life for millions of people, and that number is expected to increase. The distinction between real and synthetic worlds is beginning to fade and has begun to impact issues of power, policy and law, as well as commerce. This is some of what makes virtual environments attractive to performing musicians—it is the next best thing to being there.

### **Virtual Worlds**

While foundational literature on identity has spanned generations, literature on participant observation, lived experiences and culture in virtual worlds is more recent. Early research focused more on text-based chat rooms followed by two-dimensional video and multiplayer games. The more recent advent of three-dimensional spaces such as Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplay Games (MMORPG) and Collaborative Virtual Environments (CVEs) have created a new generation of researchers that have built on this earlier work.

User-created virtual environments such as Second Life shouldn’t be confused with video or roleplay games. In fact, it is questionable if they should be considered

games at all. Second Life doesn't follow a prescribed set of actions with pre-determined consequences depending on which action is taken (as is typical with video games). The developers of Second Life also didn't design the game with attained levels of proficiency (such as in World of Warcraft), in effect designing a class structure into the game. There are also no determined roles for specific classes of avatars and conquest is not a means for advancement. Compared to what has been typical in the design of computer "games," Second Life doesn't appear to be a game at all but rather a three-dimensional social network. As a result, my own inquiry into Second Life (and the group at the center of my focus) includes elements of anthropology and the social sciences, economics, business and the arts. It has been difficult to point to any one or two recent studies that has a relation to my own work, however there are five previous studies I expect to draw on, in addition to the foundational research in identity listed above.

### **Comparable Studies**

The first relevant study is Castronova (2005) *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online games*. My own book review of this study has recently been published in the Journal of Learning, Media and Technology (Wise, 2009). The book was something of a "virtual worlds confidential" study into how lucrative virtual worlds are and the economic engines behind them, from deliberate design by the games developers to the free-market economics and social pressure that makes the buying and selling of goods and services just as profitable in virtual life as in real life. Castronova suggests that people who aren't satisfied with their real life might find a second, synthetic life more attractive. He states, "The default and unconscious assumption of the brain is that everything seen [*on the computer*] is absolutely real." This is enhanced by the stimulus-

response that we create: Our stimulus affects the simultaneous response of someone who might be on the other side of the world. A synthetic world can be anything we choose to make it, as it is the domain of its participants. He suggests that people who are unsatisfied, isolated, restless, bored, and discriminated against in contemporary life may feel connected and accepted in a synthetic one. This suggests my hypothesis that we are motivated in a virtual world to “act out” the identities that have not found salience in our real lives.

The second study I intend to build on is that of Nick Yee. By the time Yee (2007) wrote his dissertation, he had already been well published for what he has termed the Proteus Effect. This is a process by which someone develops avatar characteristics which they feel will give them social advantage. Yee’s work experimented with relative attractiveness and height, where regardless of what the person behind the avatar looked like in real life, if the avatar was attractive and tall, the person (as the avatar) began to exhibit the same social characteristics that would be expected in real life interactions. The participant became more assertive, and more aggressive in financial transactions. This shouldn’t surprise anyone who has experienced an anonymous virtual life. What is very surprising however is Yee’s work proving that once someone has interacted in these expected ways as an avatar, *the behaviors migrate into the participant’s real life interactions*. This is directly related to my question on embeddedness and how virtual identity interplays with real life.

The third study deals specifically with identity. It is the thesis of Kelly Boudreau, who wrote the study in partial fulfillment of a Masters of Arts (Sociology) for Concordia University in Montreal. Her auto-ethnographic account of identity and gameplay in

Everquest focuses on how identity is developed through interaction, as Everquest is a battle game that requires “high levels of organization and cooperation among players to succeed” (p.3). Boudreau (2008) says that while the crafting of an avatar identity is important, “There are multiple, interconnected factors throughout the gameplay process that impacts identity, including the interaction a player has with their avatar, social interactions with other playing characters and the understanding of the game space on behalf of the player.” Boudreau’s research is *very* similar to mine regarding individual/social identity and how interactions (with other players and physical self) contribute to a dynamically changing persona, however my own work will look at one specific group of people and the interplay between real and virtual identities, particularly the migration of virtual characteristics into real life.

The next two studies I am hoping to build upon are very recent (2008) and both relate directly to my study in popular three-dimensional spaces. The first of these is by Boellstorff (2008): *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Boellstorff’s book is the first ethnography I have come across that is about Second Life specifically. While his book is a great ethnography, his goal is to journal the everyday observations of “average” Second Life residents. As an ethnography done over three years, the book chronicles the maturing of participant identities in the environment, examining community, relationships, gender, and sense of place - Bourdieu’s idea of Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). The author’s goal is to compare the epistemology of human nature (our human rationale of doing things a particular way) and what he calls “techne” or crafted knowledge, which is dynamic and unfolds as a participant moves through a virtual existence. What I refer to as embeddedness, Boellstorff calls “embodiment,” stating that the ability to create an

avatar as a method of embodiment is “powerfully linked to vision” (p. 134) and is “significant because it challenged a longstanding presumption of cognition as disembodied.” This later statement suggests a more posthuman mindset; at some point there needs to be a separating of real and virtual lived experiences as an order of conscious and my hope is to study a group where real life and virtual life is closely interconnected, in order to better grasp the concept.

The last study I will try and build on is *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (Corneliusson & Rettberg, 2008). As the title suggests, the book is more of an ethnography of World of Warcraft, with as much detail about the observation of participants in that space as Boellstorff (2008) wrote about Second Life. My interest in this book is on the influence of culture on identity from a virtual perspective. The authors mention play as a kind of work, saying the game teaches us “know how” and “how to be” (p. 25). This comes back to Boellstorff’s idea of *techne*. The book also has contributors who deal with issues of feminism, and how the female form is sexualized in gameplay. It is this piece I would like to elaborate on because according to Yee, *everyone* seeks to advance him or herself socially by creating an appearance that meets the expectations of a peer group. This also harkens back to what Stryker, Swann, and others say about how social identity (gestures, language, etc.) gradually conforms to community norms. What I would like to elaborate on is: what is the community norm for a performer? They are all part of a music performance community but at the same time they are competitors. In order to be successful at what they do, they need to develop traits that make them distinctive from other musicians. I would have to suppose that an “ugly” avatar would be less successful, regardless of how

good a musician he or she is because part of the “draw” of a performer is the ability to attract a following.

### **Methodology**

Creswell (2007) says that “Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator (*that would be me*) explores a bounded system (*a case, in my situation the life of a performing musician in Second Life*) or multiple bounded systems (*several musicians*) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving **multiple sources of information** (*virtual concert video, personal interviews, observations, and Second Life data*) and reports a case description and case-based themes (p.73).

Using a case study methodology is the best approach to use in my study because each musician I will speak to is an individual case of crafted identity, yet within the larger bounded system of Second Life performance. This represents a *collective case study*, where I look at the singular issue of how identity is crafted, but use multiple examples to illustrate it. I will also *compare* how musicians collectively craft their virtual identity with my own virtual identity journey, as someone who is not performing.

### **Participants**

While there are over 1.5 million Second Life residents, there is no official statistic for how many residents are performing musicians (there are no requirements to disclose this information when an account is created). My goal is to show purposeful maximal sampling (Creswell 2007, Maxwell, 2005) and different perspectives on the issue. My expectation is to observe, interview, survey and record one to three musicians from each of the following three role-based classes:

- a. Professional musicians who earn their entire real-life income from performing, in addition to performing in Second Life.
- b. Musicians who do not make their primary income from performance in real-life; they hold jobs in other disciplines and may only perform in real-life occasionally.
- c. Individuals who have a performance persona only in Second Life and keep their real-life and Second Life identities separate.

The intent is to choose subjects that meet Creswell's (2007) four possible goals for purposeful selection: subjects that are representative of the whole, capture the heterogeneity of the population, are critical for the theories I am using, and reveal the unique characteristics that come to light as part of comparison.

### **Instruments**

*Interviews.* My interview questions correspond to the places where the theories of Erikson and Kegan overlap, enabling me to craft interview questions that relate to particular theoretical phases of development (Creswell, 2007). According to Kegan (1982), moving from a subject to an object orientation enables an individual to completely separate their real existence from the activities of their avatar. They have a relationship with their avatar, but they *are not* their avatar. Their avatar has relationships, but they are able to emotionally separate what happens in the virtual space from what happens outside of it. Contrastly, Huizinga (1970) states that artists and musicians (due to their level of passion and creativity) are more likely to be embedded in their identity than those of us who are not in creative professions. This raises an interesting paradox among

people who perform virtually, especially if their creative identity is largely confined to a virtual space.

***Concert Video.*** Cross-platform video of the musician during a performance will reveal the similarities between real and virtual personalities and also how the performer interacts with their live audience. This will require being in the same physical location as the performer, and videotaping not only what is happening in real life but in Second Life at the same moment. These videos will not only act as a data record – it will become part of the digital storytelling of the interplay of identities.

***Observation.*** By watching (and recording) the interactions between the performer and their audience, data will be collected that helps determine the level of immersion the musician has with their avatar. While this is not all-inclusive, the mention of the musician’s real name, the use of the musician’s real-life photograph on marketing materials and the frequency with which the musician talks about “tipping” all may be an indicator of how much the musician sees their virtual identity as being salient with their real-world identity.

***Second Life data.*** Attendance, sim performance (latency of the Second Life server that the performance is being held on), and the number of other music events being held at the same time, all round out the nature of the performer’s popularity and ability to secure a virtual income.

## **Procedures**

My role within this study is as a personal acquaintance. It is this very role I have within Second Life that makes the issue of trustworthiness so important. I am part of their same community and as such, I take what Miles and Huberman (1994) call a

*relational view* toward analysis. They state that this type of analysis places both researcher and subject in a symmetrical, equal-status relationship. They end the paragraph...and “confirm, support, and even celebrate people who are defined as friends.” As a long time supporter of live music in Second Life, my goal is to celebrate this expression of the arts with my friends who have devoted the time and energy to provide it to any participant who would like to listen.

The design of my study also celebrates this friendship-symmetry. The study is designed to highlight each artist as an individual and performer, taking the time to submit interview questions ahead of time in order to give them time to think of responses. Where the videotaping of concerts is concerned, the artist will have the latitude of determining which concert they would like to have observed, in order to present them in the best possible light.

As such, I will be given details that a subject may want to have kept confidential, even if that subject doesn't want to remain anonymous (Creswell, 2007). It is not unusual for a performer to reveal their real life identity to their Second Life audiences—many use the space as a marketing tool. The issue of anonymity and confidentiality will be extremely important (and complicated) and any information or permissions required for the study will have a prominent opt-out clause if at any time a subject feels they are being compromised.

In this study, the research goal is to affirm the theories of Erikson and Kegan within the realm of virtual identity (if that affirmation emerges), as opposed to espousing my own claim based solely on data from this study. Still, there exists the issue of potential bias because of my own virtual world experience crafting an identity and as part

of the music community. Having multiple data sources as a triangulation procedure is one way to minimize bias and ensure verification of data (Creswell, 2007).

### **Support for Qualitative Method**

There appears to be as many labels in qualitative research as there are design methodologies: Symbolic Interactionism, Ethnography, Structuralism, Critical Theory, and Postmodernism, to name a few (Prasad, 2005). While they differ from each other somewhat in the lens they use as an approach to research, they all share the same focus as to *why* a certain behavior, condition, or phenomenon occurs as opposed to *how many* are part of the occurrence. The interest is in the *process*, rather than the *outcome* (Maxwell, 2005). Since my goal is to uncover the “why” of identity in one specific group of people as opposed to how many people in general craft virtual identities, my study is well suited to a qualitative approach.

### **Analysis**

The primary method of analysis will be the coding of transcript text into themes, patterns, and causal links as well as the transcription of video and memos from observations into text (Maxwell, 2005). All data will be housed on my personal, password-protected hard drive with a redundant backup. Early analysis will begin with the first interviews, organizing the data into categories that will facilitate easy entry into research or spreadsheet software. Audio and handwritten notes will be transcribed and all data will be dated to create a timeline. Participant contact information will be recorded with a summary of the main points of the contact. Protocol instruments will be used for each subject contact. Data will be displayed in matrix format to highlight the connections among the data, the conceptual framework, and the research questions (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman mention memoing as “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding. They don’t just report the data; they tie together different pieces of data in a recognizable cluster, often to show that those data are instances of a general concept” (p.72). As sole researcher, I will be the person responsible for the creation of categories, according to high-level patterns that emerge in the data. Categories are created from the conceptual framework, research questions, possible causal links, and other variables the researcher brings to the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The goal of any researcher is to have their findings repeatable by others using similar methods (which are described in detail). In this study, it would mean that another researcher who is studying the interplay of real and virtual identities among virtually performing musicians (in Second Life) would have similar results. There are causal relationships I hypothesize existing at the beginning of my study but until I have collected and analyzed the data, there can be no confirmation that my hypothesis was correct. Similarly, there may be a completely different causal relationship at play that I was completely unaware of. The goal is not to inductively try to prove my own hypothesis but to deductively let the data speak for itself.

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