

You don't want to look like a newbie

First steps into an avatar identity: to have a sense of self

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Users of virtual worlds act through a digital 3D representation called "avatar". State of the art environments like Second Life (SL) allow a visual adaptation of the single avatar to a certain extent; nevertheless they won't provide a digital copy of your natural face and body. This said, the appearance of an avatar is the first and crucial element in what can be called "a sense of self".

This paper will show and discuss the first of several cultural themes that constitute avatar identity in an avatar society. In an ongoing ethnography study in Second Life, the author identified visual appearance, posing, personal objects, social contacts and available media as several aspects that will help to form an avatar's sense of self. This is an important step in the life cycle of an avatar: you don't want to look like a newbie.

As this paper will argue, avatar identity at a young stage is first and most determined by the avatar owner. The owner will try in a continuing effort to define the avatar to peel off the standard look that was received when born and to develop into something unique in all areas of an avatar identity. With role models from the sims and SL media available around the clock, an avatar will simultaneously adapt to and distinguish from fellow residents.

The next paragraphs will discuss the process and the first steps of creating an avatar. They will follow the path of young avatars through their first phase as newbies and show different phases of identity development.

1. To Give Birth To My Avatar

The reason of being there

We all were born into a world without our personal consent. In virtual worlds, we create our virtual existence as conscious action. The difference between the two is that the first is happening to us, the second is done by us with an intention (Goldman, 1970).

The intention to create a virtual existence is driven by various motives, which can vary from person to person. In general, relationships, immersion, escapism, achievement and manipulation are key factors (Yee, 2006).

In Second Life (SL), a life simulating virtual world, the spectrum of motives goes from making new friends to role-playing, from doing business for (real life) income to enjoying your own creativity, from discovering new spheres of sexual varieties to achieving self-esteem.

Lured by friends, many have come for pure sensation like some of my informants in SL:

“I gave birth to Falke after a friend of mine posted a few too many pictures of their exploits on SL in an online photo gallery. I just knew I had to follow. So the first chance I got, I took it, and thus was the start of Falke.” Or: “Well when I first came to SL it was because of my best friend Sarah in real life”. And some like Lazarus followed relatives: “I have never heard of SL. Until my sister spoke about it. [...] My sister introduced me to SL. So I was very curious. I thought SL can only be stupid. “

Following friends were not the only reasons to create a virtual existence in SL. For Deborah, a female avatar, the reason to come to SL was not only her friend, but also the outlook of a more technical and graphical advanced environment:

“The environment and world as well as the avatars seem to be more realistic and beautiful to me.”

Some informants jumped in for a specific interest (*“I heard about it through a sex-bondage website. The woman who runs the site, has a sim here.”*) or were asked to join SL like a student who discovered this virtual world through an university class, urged by her professor to experience virtual existence. Another group of was serious about virtual life and has the dream to earn real life income only through Second Life.

Whatever the motivation to create an avatar is, the first condition to begin is to get access to a synthetic world, creating an account and to define the parameters of your virtual representative. This process will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

Ante portas: creating a synthetic world account

If identity meant continuity and singularity in the real world, Lisa Nakamura coined the term ‘identity tourism’ (Nakamura, 2000) as a matter of fact in virtual worlds. According to Nakamura, identity tourism is the way of obtaining another identity, which is very different from the real picture, and most of the time involving the other gender and / or race as avatar.

Nakamura tells us that identity is a concept, which is very mobile within virtual worlds. Depending on the purpose of stay in a virtual world (e.g. pleasure, learning, experience), we use different virtual representations ‘on the fly’. When players take different virtual identities, they often play out the characteristics of specific roles.

Sherry Turkle describes this role-playing in MUDs (Turkle, 1997). MUDs are text-based virtual worlds in the early era of virtual games. Her thesis is that humans like to project themselves into their own drama, where they can be producer, director and actor at once. The computer monitor is the new arena for our fantasies, and we use our virtual life to experience evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics and identity.

Turkle suggests the term ‘the multiple identity’ to describe a phenomenon, which Nakamura describes as outcome of identity tourism. Different identities are facets of the player’s personality, but never the complete or entire ‘mirror of mind’. This enables the player to act out a certain part of (a hidden) personality and to project ideas how to be online. The game becomes a way to create a new, changed or aspired personality, which is not limited to the virtual world, but also shows effects in the real world (see also Yee, 2007).

To “give birth” to an avatar is the first step to virtual existence in a virtual world. Unlike in real life, the appearance of the born can be chosen among several basic models, which can be further modified. In Second Life, size, sex, shape, skin, hair, eyes, face, even race and many other elements of visual appearance can be adapted to the player’s wishes.

The initial appearance of an avatar as well its name, another aspect of the new creation, is defined before the very first step in a virtual world. First names can be chosen freely, surnames must be selected from a list. This limitation does not stop fanciful name creations (see table 1) as well gives the virtual world a typical character of resident names. In almost all cases, it will avoid to wear an avatar name, which is identical to the real life name of the avatar owner.

GossipGirl	Erin	Sparta	Abeyante	Pearl
Core	Xaris	Zeplin	Aboma	Moonwall
Avril	Swords	Dover	Coba	Piers
Zepp	Zsun	Brandi	Miami	Levee
Jinx	Andretti	Ghost	Foxclaw	Alecto

Table 1: typical last names in SL (more at <http://slnamewatch.com/>)

The reason to choose a particular name (first name as surname) is very individual (as an example, see Perfect World Forum, 2009). Some players want to show a reference to real life (RL) by selecting a similar name to their true name, or to friends and relatives. Others go along with known personalities from RL, and a few use their avatar names from previous virtual world engagements. Other considerations like memorability or spellability are important as well but seldom considered during the moment of name selection (Saiman, 2008),.

Once a name is chosen, it can’t be changed in SL later, unlike the avatar appearance. In the history of virtual worlds, names played a major and often single way to recognize the virtual other. A name was the tag to an online identity as in MUDs (Kiesler, 1997), a way to show existence.

Unlike text-based virtual worlds like MUDs, 3D environments as SL offer various ways to present oneself. Linden Labs, the creator of SL, provides every new avatar with a library of basic items. Items refer to all objects that can be stored within the avatar’s personal database and can include clothes, accessories, gestures, body shape and parts among others. As these items are limited at the stage of initial avatar definition, the variation of different newborn avatars is somewhat restricted.

“Newbies” will show typical characteristics in clothing, walking or their haircut, and can be “smelled” from far away: Short after my avatars arrival in SL, Mutius made contact to one of his first informants, and during the first interview she urged him to adjust some walking animations as she did: “*You don’t want to walk like a newbie*”. This remark became one of the cultural themes I followed throughout the study, and which turned out to be one of the important lessons not only in the early stages of a virtual existence.

Rezday: the first day of an avatar

After the creation of an account and installing the client software, the first action in a virtual world like SL is to define an avatar. This is the avatar’s birthday, or its rezday, a common term for this happening. The first steps are made on Orientation Island, a dedicated region for just rezzed avatars to try out their tools. The island itself is designed to learn all an avatar needs to know – searching, walking, communicating and inventory management.



Illustration 1: Mutius in front of a map in Orientation Island

It’s a surreal world on Orientation Island: avatars are not talking, but helplessly bumping against each other. As Claudius revealed me once: “*When we first logged into SL in the beginning, we were both running away from others who would approach us and want to start a conversation...that seems like ages ago.*” Looking right and left for orientation, any kind of help, finding out ways to interact with installed objects, to be finally verbally approached by someone, only to find out later, that this someone is a tutorial bot.

It is a constant fight to try out to walk, to jump, to fly, to sit, in sum: to gain control over your avatar body and mechanics. It’s a learning process that can be frustrating enough. This island is isolated, and there are no other avatars except the just rezzed ones, so no big help can be expected. Many accounts are one-time visits: avatars created, SL visited and never came back. The “mortality rate” is very high. There are no ‘official’ numbers available, but from the once registered 16 millions (Nino, 2009) logged in 1,45 millions in

the last 60 days (a criteria that is considered by Linden Labs to be accounted as "active user"). This is an overall 9% survival rate. Not all of the disappeared 91% will never come back after the first visit, but there are indications, that most of them never return: compared the amount of registrations between July 08 and January 09 (roughly 2 400.000) and the increase of active users in the same period (240.000), only 10% of the new created accounts turned into active accounts. Again, this is not totally accurate regarding one-time visitors, but there are only a few people who will return to their old accounts in a virtual world after 2 months of absence; that said 90% of all lost accounts happen after the first visit.

"There's a really big turnover in newbies", Teresa explains, "basically it has to do with the learning curve and the concept itself – a lot of people think it's a game, and come here expecting some kind of shoot 'em up. A lot of people have trouble during the first few hours, which is why Linden is trying to improve the "first hour experience."

In Second Life every avatar goes through this stage, without any obligation to stay longer than wished at Orientation Island. Some may stay for minutes (maybe this is their alt creation, a second or 10th avatar), others like me stayed for days to explore every corner of this sim.

Once left, an avatar will never come back to this place. It is like leaving a nest: all avatars are headed to Help Island, the second stage of an avatar curriculum vitae, the circle of avatar life.

2. Life As A Newbie

Sensorimotor sensations

Newborn humans learn about their new world through their movement and their senses (Piaget, 1955). During the so-called sensorimotor stage (0–24 months) they develop a feeling for their body, the coordination of its parts, the perception of external objects and reactions to their own movements. At the end of this phase, infants explore new ways to use objects to get new results. Physical abilities of the newborn determine their extent of interaction and experience with the environment and the extent of identity construction (Erikson, 1994)

In an avatar life, this stage of sensorimotor aspects takes only hours and days. Arrived on Help Island, the first passage of development lies already behind an avatar. Able to walk straight, to sit down and to reach for objects, an avatar has accomplished the most basic skills of a few month old infants. A place like Help Island is a place to conclude this development – to foster skills in experimenting with your body, external objects, the environment itself and its other inhabitants.

During this stage, which can proceed up to thirty days or longer, depending on the intensity and endurance of online time, an avatar is generally known as newbie or noob: *"You can always spot a newbie, he or she is walking into everything",* Teresa told me once.



Illustration 2: avatars come together in Help Island

In contrast to Orientation Island, Help Island is full of other avatars of every age as it is accessible for all residents of SL during their virtual existence. For a newbie, it is an exciting place full of surprises and experiences. People wearing fancy clothes, hairstyles, hovering about the ground, riding horses and even dance to a sound a newbie doesn't hear. Others stay around and chat, obviously quieter than the others, but nicer looking, waiting, sitting, and sometimes approaching the fresh arrived. Some are official mentors, and some just hookers for diverse services as Slex and bars. Dragons are flying in the sky, and people come in white clouds and disappear in a circle of stars. The air smells fresh, and the atmosphere is vibrant. It's a way to say "Welcome to Second Life".

With their arrival, newbies are astonished. Their item library offers only standard objects, clothes and gestures. Every new object and movement attracts them, and they are magically drawn to places that offer free items (freebies), collecting clothes and shiny things, also called "bling-bling". This activity, also often referred as "freebie hunting", is a very popular one. Freebies have an important role in the SL economy: besides providing the first "individual" items to newbies, they will increase traffic to a store, make it known to customers and improve the search ranking of this place in the SL search engine.

Experiments: an avatar as the actus of its inventory

Aristotle formulated the idea of potentia (dunamis), the capacity for a disposition, and actus (energeia), the realized status of a being (Beck, 1965). Virtual worlds are places of great potentiality. The entire visual appearance of a being (avatar) is a perfect example of this principle: an actual presentation (actus) can be modified within moments, depending on the skills and creativity of the player (using the appearance editor of the interface) and the

availability of items in its inventory. Skills, creativity and inventory can be considered potentia regarding the variety of avatar look.

Filling up their personal inventory with freebies, potentia is increasing. Players learn to know the side effects of potentia – difficulties to locate certain items in an inventory (which can increase to 15.000 items and more with old residents) – and soon to manage it for a more efficient way to change.

Changing clothes does not mean to change them because they are dirty or old, but to show what you have. *“We all love to express ourselves”* I hear saying Alexandria, and she means that to dress up is to show what we want the avatar to look like: *“And individual style can say a lot”*. Soon, the player realizes that there are many other elements to a visual image of his/her avatar that must comply with the ideas of the avatar owner: hair cut, shoes, tone of the skin, a more sexy walk, an individual style to greet through a gesture, or even an object like a bag or weapon.

At this stage it is like playing with objects, to have fun with them on your body, to play masquerade. There is a satisfaction in these actions as they demonstrate the technical control over the avatar. Only a few will *“mold her [avatar] into my ideal”* as one female avatar recalled as early in this stage. Such cases are symptomatic when a player has had a previous history of creating an avatar, either in SL or in another world.

During the stage of being a newbie, avatars focus on two things: appearance and social contacts. Besides the playful act of experimenting with the appearance editor, the avatar library and the free items acquired from freebie places, other avatars are a main source of inspiration. Others are significant examples (actus) what is possible (potentia). An immense variety of avatar appearance exists, mainly due to the design tools of SL: all virtual items are user generated content. The user feels what else may be feasible. It comes down to the conclusion that the possibilities are endless, and it's up to the user itself to define the visual profile of his / her avatar, or to recreate itself. In Alexandria's words, there is a strong connexion to real life (RL):

“I think that people often dress as they do in real life, or maybe for some as they want to or desire to. Since of course, avatars are created by us, they hold true to who we really are in some way, some part of us.”

When it comes down to form your avatar appearance, the influence of RL in SL is overwhelming.

At the end of the sensimotor phase, players have the ability to control the camera, which enables them to view own avatars from all angles. The normal position to view your own avatar during play is from behind. Therefore, important aspects of a visual appearance like face are not visible in this position to the avatar owner. He/she must first activate the camera view to observe the avatar from the front, a prerequisite to evolve.

Although I met many avatars with daily changes of their appearance (*“Actually, so you know, I don't usually have colored hair. You caught me in a phase! But I'm liking it,”* one female avatar told me, after three days of

continued change of her hair cut), there is something constant about them. Once they found their style, they won't change their body shape and skin for a longer period. It is a way of stabilizing a young identity, which will change again for a few times in the early stage of avatar life. It's a kind of visual uniqueness that must be maintained and improved:

"If they are wearing system clothes I know that they must either be new or a new alt, usually."

After the first hours of rezzing an avatar, players go ahead to define them step by step through days and weeks and playing time. The next section describes this continuing process of giving avatars a distinct appearance. The result is a sense of self.

3. To Develop A Sense Of Self

Creating uniqueness

Media influences our personal behaviour and thinking (Gerbner, 1986). The so-called mainstreaming effect leads to absorption of mediated values, ideas and social roles.

In virtual worlds, appearance of avatars is, besides the personal style of their owners, highly influenced by SL media. Dozens of fashion magazines and blogs exist in and about SL to present and educate residents about fashion and beauty: *"I think that blogs and magazines here can be highly influential here in SL, [...] I think that blogs say a lot and expose people to many great things they might not find otherwise. Take for example Free*Style, [with 1,000,000 visits]. I don't think it was something the owner even had in mind when she started the blog over a year ago but it has evolved into a news source for many people."*

The main message in these magazines and blogs is to cultivate individuality (see also chapter V: "to be perceived"). With so many possibilities to recreate his/her avatar, newbies will seek their uniqueness, sooner or later. As Alexandria states, *"if you put absolutely no effort into yourself then you have not made yourself an individual"*. This includes a less obvious aspect of appearance of an avatar as well: the avatar's body shape and skin. Newbies are not aware of the difference between their and advanced skins at the first moment, but learn soon that residents don't stay with their standard outfit provided by Linden Lab. The sheer amount of skin shops and body forms makes a choice difficult. Some are free, and some are costly. Only experienced residents will tell you the little differences between nice and awesome skins. As with fashion, newbies first experiment with free skins, shapes and body parts. Others will add fox ears and cat paws, and some will attach male or female genitals on their avatar bodies. Obviously, avatars can be anything, but they become finally, what they have found: items, role models, and ideas (compare also Morville, 2005). At the end of the days of a newbie, an avatar will begin to form consciously a unique appearance, based on a first draft of identity.

For Erikson (1973), identity in RL is not something given by birth, and it's not

independent from biological processes of the human body either. It's not the (physical) body itself, and it's not the Super-Ego or the Ego-Ideal alone (compare Freud, 1960). Erikson defines identity as a constant reproduction of images of self, experienced and put together by an individual.



Illustration 3: Mutius after several style changes

The process of identity creation begins even before birth, as one of the first life experiences of the self is the change from inuteral to exuteral life. The newborn will proceed from one identity phase to another, but only if the previous phase is finished (or solved, in Erikson's language). Identity is therefore a continuous work of the self, a work that Erikson describes as a balancing act between different aspects of the self: Super-Ego, Ego, the social structure of the environment and the general picture of reality. Identity is a result of solved identity phases or crisis. For Erikson, identity is a feeling based on two observations: the observation of consistency and continuity of the self, and the observation, that others recognize this consistency and continuity too.

You don't want to look like a newbie

The creation of identity is an active effort, as shown by Keupp for RL identities as well (Keupp, 2006). In virtual worlds, it is not different, but in the early stage of the avatar cycle, identity means appearance. As argued, appearance is not an accidental product; instead, it is a result of psychological (RL imaginations), material (available items) and social resources (influence of media, but as to be shown in part II, also of the social network of an avatar). Claudius recounts about his RL son: "*Oh man... he has the COOLEST AVs. He has a lot of friends, but not many groups....AND he*

started his own group too. He started a fighting group (club). You have to beat one of the current group members in order to get a request to join."

In this sense, the status of a newbie doesn't end with a certain age or date. It does end with a certain appearance. Horatius remembered talking to me in his home: *"One thing, in terms of status, is to make sure you don't look like a newbie. So anything that goes with the appearance (skin, shape, clothe) is extremely important."*

One thing we can learn from this phrase is that a newbie is not considered to have an identity. To be a newbie is a pre-phase of having an identity, or uniqueness. Once an avatar can be recognized by its peers as to have found the sense of self, it will leave definitely the status of being a nobody. But before that, the young resident undergoes different stages of modelling and recreation. Freebies are more and more considered "newbie-style", and fashion is bought at stores where known designers show and sell their creations. Along fashion, skins and body shape are important elements of appearance. A "good" skin offers a nice tone, fine details and an overall good texture. Among body parts (except genitals), skins and shapes are generally the most expensive elements of an appearance:

- Skins, shape: 1.000 – 1.500 Linden\$ and upward
- Dress / Suit: 200 – 500L\$
- Shoes: 200 – 800L\$
- Feet: 200 L\$
- Hair: 200 L\$
- Nails: 100 – 200 L\$

The astonishing amount of stores in SL, which offer fashion and body parts is another indication of the importance of visual appearance of avatars. The fashion and beauty sector is the second largest business field in Second Life (after real estate, which is the main income source Linden Labs), and one of the most diversified. The degree of division of labour is maybe the highest of all in SL: designers, models, fashion journalists, SL tv fashion show hosts, live runway organizers, professional fashion photographers, store owners, store employees and all sort of commercials professionals. All of them work for one goal: to provide appearance (for free or L\$) to residents.

One of my informants, Alexandria, estimates around 200 serious fashion journalists / editors in SL (but this includes also shops who blog about their own creations); there are 4–5 top agencies with 20–40 models, and a lot of people behind the scenes for the runway shows. It's difficult to estimate the size (several hundreds, maybe a thousand), but it's widespread.

Developing a sense of self

Frey and Haußer argue that identity is the result of a self-reflecting process (Frey, 1987), which is triggered by sensual experience. Identity is a concept, which consists of self-concept, self-esteem and self-control. Both suggest that the individual must develop an own identity out of a process. At the end of the avatar identity process, the now mature resident will be an unique

(virtual) being, recognisable, individual. It will have developed an own style, a true sense of what to be – a sense of self.

The following graphic (illustration 4) illustrates this process and gives an overview about two important elements of avatar identity and their relation to the development stages of an avatar. Each stage (starting at the top) has a dominant activity (dark yellow, bold font type), which must be accomplished to proceed to the next level. In SL, the “new born”–stage is related to the arrival and stay at Orientation Island: figuring out how to move is the first objective, but not exclusively. Regarding appearance, a race must be selected (human, neko, furry or others). Other activities take part too (which will be shown in the following chapters), but are marginal as well.

	Sensomotomics	Appearance			
NEW BORN	Walking	Defining race			
NEWBIE	Using camera	Experimenting with appearance			
YOUNG RESIDENT	Using new gestures	Forming appearance			
MATURE RESIDENT	Using animation overrides	Having a sense of self			
ROLE MODEL	Exemplifying new animations	Ruling appearance			

Illustration 4: sensomotoric skills and definitions of avatar appearance develop over stages and mark the age of an avatar.

A stage can be transcended when the main point of activity is mastered. A newbie will become a young resident after an avatar can modify its appearance at will. It signals the beginning of an intentional recreation of the visual identity (“forming appearance”) and flows into a quasi-stable appearance of a mature resident (“having a sense of self”).

I talked to Alexandria about appearance and what it makes so important to avatars and SL to understand what a sense of self may mean. „*When I look at an avi, you see the 'wealth' of their character, but not necessarily that they have a lot of lindens, you know? But that somehow they have invested time in their look.*“ Alexandria refers here to the connections of appearance and experience. Experience is something newbies can't have yet per definition: „*I can recognize where a lot of the more popular items come from. Many who've been around from the beginning or years, you can see they have knowledge of lots of people, creators; many have went on to create themselves, and yes they have character that has developed, so some are very unique people here.*“

Appearance (as well as sensomotoric skills) is a way to tell others about the age of a specific avatar identity. Very unique people are older residents or even leaders in their fields (not only in the fashion sector but in all business and social activities) and sometimes become role models to others. Avatar identity is not a received status when an account is created, but a process of continuing formation: *“Just like anything, it's what you make of it now. So it's not a given. The more you put into yourself, well anything, the more you get out of it. When I look at a character, I SEE what they've put into themselves. When I speak to them, it becomes clearer. When they show me what they've created, even clearer. And then you get to recognizing what is important to them.”*

Social interaction and the avatar's inventory are ways to express your sense of self or what Frey and Haußer call an identity. Recreating themselves is a constant actus of potentia: *„Yeah I think that [fashion, appearance] tells a lot. I think for me what I wear goes with my mood, like showing all my layers as an onion.“* As well as a home: *„Yeah that too, especially a home tells a lot“*.

Metamorphoses

Developing an identity is a complex process and depends on many factors. Erikson suggested that identity (“ego-identity”) forming either is successfully finalized at the end of adolescence, or failed, referred by Erikson as identity diffusion (Erikson, 1973). Identity diffusion means that the individual does not own a set of firm, binding and obligatory relationships, values and orientations.

As Erikson's model of developing an identity is based on the values of north-american culture of the 1950ies, Marcia have shown how much such a model can evolve when the underlying cultural values change (Marcia, 1989): the characteristic element of identity of modern western individuals is their high portion of identity diffusion. Marcia interprets this result not as a pathologic symptom of our society, but as a cultural adaptive strategy. In many cases it makes sense to remain flexible and not to commit oneself to a certain value. Modern man lives in and obtains elements of his identity from different (economic, privacy, social, cultural) spheres and adds it continually to create a so-called patchwork of identities (Keupp, 2006).

In virtual worlds, identity is a similar step-by-step forming process. As shown, the creator itself defines predominantly an avatar in its initial stages. The user determines the main elements of visual appearance as he/she tries to realize his/her ideas of a fitting virtual representation. But soon, role models, the environment or the avatar society in general gain more influence how an avatar should look like and that it is necessary to be unique. As Teresa said: *“I've gone through various metamorphoses since I've been here.”* Even experienced role-players with a firm identity that continued to be, even during changes from one realm to another (sim to sim, but also synthetic world to world), tested other waters: *“In WoW I played a blood elf hehe. They look like your regular elves, but are evil. Yes, and that inspired me to take a darker path for this character for a very long time. 2 years I was evil.”*

Metamorphoses are triggered by many factors as new friends (see chapter II), migration to a new society (see chapter III) or professional challenges (see chapter IV), but as a consequence of changes of personal interests and motives as well. A world like SL, where exploring is one of the main activities,

is predestined to offer a multitude of new and interesting objects and avatars to interact with. In this sense, "*what we find changes who we become*" (Morville, 2005).

Migrating from IMVU, another synthetic world, Gladius decided to explore SL on his own (he was introduced to SL by a contact from IMVU, but never really liked her). His very first station was a beach at Lampedusa, a vibrant community consisting most of newbies. At that time, Gladius was a newbie himself, asking questions about everything related to SL. Mostly it was about how to get freebies (a nice guy gave him a halo outfit for free, like he did when we first met at Arthus) and to earn money. So one of his first goals was to use the halo outfit to travel to the moon. As with others, Gladius' first job was camping (in a casino), which he describes as a boring experience, because many other campers went afk (abbr. for 'away from keyword'). On the other side, Gladius was looking for a girlfriend, and a casino was a chance to meet with some potential candidates. He had some luck, but after one week or so she dumped him.

Gladius kept looking, and since then he had a few relationships: "*SL love is normally short lived*", he says, married twice. That was his second goal, to marry, and that's where he started dating with Florentina. She had a house in SL, so they stayed at her place most of the time, constructing and creating things on their land. They adopted a boy and a girl during that time and "played" family (the two kids were played by other players). So both, Gladius and Florentina, took care of the family, went with their kids to amusement areas, skate parks and shopping malls. Before they had kids, they used to go to nightclubs a lot. Sometimes they met with other families for a beach day or birthday party. The relationship ended as Florentina couldn't devote time to SL anymore, so practically he became a widow. "*I moved on*", he explains. After Florentina didn't come back to SL, both kids started to avoid SL too, so the family finally fall apart completely. Finally, the rent ran out on Florentina's house (she was a paying member, Gladius a free loader) and the house and land was lost to the sim owner. Nothing remained with Gladius, except a few pictures he stored in his inventory.

In his profile, Gladius doesn't show almost anything from his past. He wanted a "fresh start" for a new relationship. He found one, married, became a DJ in SL and worked as one. Now, after he's back online (the PC was broken and it took a while to get a new one), his ultimate goal is to rebuild his SL life: get his DJ job back and to find a way to convince his current wife that it was his PC fault and not his to be absent for weeks. He wants also to revive their nightclub they had, but he fears she gave up on him and the club. At the end of the meeting I asked for what is Gladius best known in SL. He answered: for his transformations and morphing as well as his collection of avatars. Because he is so active and curious, he's been everywhere, and many know him.

George Herbert Mead explained this process of identity formation as a result of social experience (Mead, 1973). Thinking about actions of others enables reflective thinking about myself. The capability of observing my own acting

from the perspective of another individual is the precondition to develop an own identity. This relies to visual appearance as well. The precondition is to be connected to others of the avatar society.

4. Notes

Based on a several months field trip into Second Life, the author collected socio-cultural information about avatar identity in Second Life. He used ethnography as the main methodological approach – participative observation as well extensive interviews of informant creates the base of the data used in this paper.

All avatar names and SL locations have been coded and replaced by pseudonyms. Quotes are changed and expanded [in square brackets] for ease of reading.

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