

Study Proposal Overview – Deb Wise
Methods of Qualitative Inquiry
May 28, 2009

Dissertation Proposal Overview – Virtual Identity
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The Proposed Topic (problem) of study

Second Life was my first venture into virtual worlds. Previous to this experience, I was not a gamer and was only interested in interactive multimedia for its relevance in learning, not social networking or role-play. I entered this space at the insistence of a university colleague, who was an experienced “gamer” and game tester (as well as developer) because of the value the space might be in virtual learning. Upon entering Second Life, I was taken by how immersive the environment was, and how much a participant was able to craft their own existence.

I quickly became drawn to why some Second Life residents (like myself) created avatar personas that might have been a personal “wish-list” appearance-wise, while some created identities that were extremely unique, even to the point of non-human. While I entered Second Life with a research agenda of examining virtual worlds as learning spaces, I quickly became attracted to understanding how personal identity in virtual spaces is crafted.

Research Questions

Using my own identity crafting (and what was behind my choices) as a guide, I began to wonder if my experience was common, or if I was an anomaly. As I began to interact with people within Second Life and as I crafted an identity as a live music promoter in this space, I had the opportunity to get to know many of the people “behind” the avatars I worked with. What I realized is that my own experience was one of many ways of crafting a persona, and has caused me to develop the following research questions:

- (a) What causes people to choose a particular avatar persona in a virtual world?
- (b) How far removed are those traits from real life?
- (c) How is the real life of the participant changed by their virtual identity and activities?

Data to Collect and Analyze

My desire is to study the identity formation of the people in Second Life I know best—performing musicians. While the backgrounds of the artists I have worked with have been immensely varied, I can generalize them in three categories: Professional musicians who earn their real-life living through the writing and performance of music, semi-professional musicians who continue to hold non-music professions outside of virtual life but are also paid to perform on a smaller scale, and

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those musicians who aren't performing (for compensation) in real-life—Second Life is the only place where they have the identity of a professional musician. People in each of these categories may have very different reasons for being in Second Life, and may have created one or more identities to accomplish their goals. In my initial inquiries, many of these Second Life performers were very open to being part of my study.

Because my work is in a virtual space, I have several built-in tools at my disposal. I plan to collect data using text chat logs of in-world interviews (along with my own notes during the interviews), voice recordings (and possibly video) of my informants, and desktop video capture of the informant performing in Second Life.

Significance of Study

This is the area where I have had the most difficulty. Is my quest to know why people choose to become one thing or another in a virtual world just my “need to know,” or is there a more encompassing, “for the benefit of the academy and mankind in general” purpose for this? And possibly more important, as a student in the Educational Leadership and Innovation program...in the school of EDUCATION, am I remiss in not having a specific educational goal for my research?

What makes my research unique (in my mind) is its application in cross-departmental areas: Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Social Sciences, Business, Media Studies, etc. This is not strictly an education issue; its significance is more in how humans conduct their lives (and business) in a space where they have the latitude to craft their existence. The implications for understanding globalization, activism, learning, identity and communication are endless and my goal is not to choose one area of significance but to study the interplay between real and crafted identities.

My Relationship to the Topics and to the Participants being studied

I have been immersed in the music community in Second Life for almost three years; my role has been as an events promoter and venue owner—not as a musician. I have worked with performers, been on par with them, shared in the struggles of how to increase mainstream attention to what happens musically in virtual worlds, and at times have also been in an adversarial relationship with them, particularly in the whole issue of how much and by what means artists should be paid for performing. The performers I choose to study will be those where a relationship of trust has been established over time, and where their willingness to be part of my research is based on their confidence that any information given will be handled just as professionally and discreetly as they have come to expect from working with me.