I, Aimee M deNoyelles, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Curriculum & Instruction.

It is entitled:
Learning between worlds: Experiences of women college students in a virtual world

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Learning between Worlds: Experiences of Women College Students in a Virtual World

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Abstract

Inspired by social media and multi-user online video games, social virtual worlds such as Linden Lab’s Second Life® (SL) emerge as a unique technological medium by offering the most ‘real’ virtual experience to date, through their capability of simulating worlds (‘places’), and mediating user communication through avatars (‘bodies’). When users are logged in, they are living in the hybrid space between the ‘real’ and virtual worlds. Virtual worlds hold a lot of promise to support and enhance student online learning communities, due to their ability to deliver on several trends: user-centered creation of customizable content, social expression, and construction of collective and collaborative global knowledge (Dieterle & Clarke, 2007).

Although virtual worlds offer innovative opportunities not afforded in other technologies, they also offer complex and sometimes troubling unintended effects due to its capability of presenting a place much like the ‘real world’ in appearance and practice, but with a public, sometimes anonymous population. Considering the ‘real life’ experiences of users and emerging research about online privacy and safety, the issue of gender is difficult to dismiss. Virtual worlds have emerged from video games, virtual spaces that are traditionally male-dominated. In addition, the gendered experience of embodying avatars and inhabiting realistic virtual places is not fully addressed in the literature. It is important to better understand women’s experiences in these virtual world learning communities. Due to the issues of women’s conceptions of identity and interaction in the unique virtual world setting in an academic context, I am pursuing the following question: How do women students understand the psychological and contextual factors that influence their establishment of identity and interaction in a virtual world learning
community? A qualitative feminist methodology was used to analyze the experiences of women in an undergraduate communications class as they explored SL. Voices of empowerment, connection and gender were expressed by the women as they constructed the meaning of their virtual world experiences. Findings suggest that women understood their hybrid identity and interaction in the virtual world learning community through several factors: personal conception of the virtual world, gendered identity, ‘real world’ context, and virtual world context. Individual factors of gaming experience and technical competence mediated this expression. Insights from these findings generate implications for future instructional design and research directions.

*Key words:* virtual world; multi-user virtual environments; computer-mediated communication; interactive learning environments; gender
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Learning between worlds. It sounds like a phrase out of a science fiction novel set in the distant future. When I first began my doctoral studies in Instructional Design and Technology three years ago, I expected to be studying tidy measurable things like text-based discussion boards, the effect of colored presentations on memory, and online assessment. I envisioned my dissertation data would consist of diligently written field notes while quietly sitting in the back of a classroom. If I had been asked about how many worlds existed, I would have proclaimed that there is obviously only one world, the ‘real world’ in which we live. During a seminar on a typical day in the middle of my first year of studies, my world was turned upside down, or rather, transformed.

On that day, I was introduced to the virtual world called Second Life®, (SL) an online environment in which people use avatars (simulated bodies) to customize and explore the three-dimensional world-like space, interacting with distanced others. I vividly remember the guest speaker Marcia logging in on the screen in front of the classroom, introducing her avatar named Professor Sorena (both pseudonyms) navigating around the virtual University of Cincinnati (UC) campus, flying by buildings that simulate (Figure 1) those I walk by every day.

If I could have stepped outside of my body and viewed my facial expression, it surely would have been a mixture of confusion and awe. This was certainly unlike any other online learning environment I had ever previously encountered. Some immediate questions sprang to mind. Is this a video game based on real life? Is Professor Sorena a character or is she a digital version of Marcia? Is it even right to refer to an avatar as ‘she’? Beyond that, what do you do
Figure 1. McMicken Hall in SL.

What can you do here? Do educators actually take this seriously? Fueled by a book chapter offer, a personal background in computers and online communication, and good old fashioned curiosity, I decided to explore these questions, embarking on a surreal journey between two worlds and forever shaping the path of my research.

**Background: Transformations in Human Development through Technology**

My first step toward grasping the possibilities of virtual worlds in education was to first appreciate the big picture and consider how they have emerged at this particular time and place in human history. Virtual worlds have essentially evolved from two currently popular technologies, social media and massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). These technologies have enabled and reflect two vital personal and social transformations in human development. First, they change the way we project identity. Second, they change the way we interact with others. As Qualman (2010) attests, “Social media is not a fad, it is a fundamental shift in the way we communicate.”
Projecting Identity

Identities are projected to others in the ‘real world’ in multiple ways. The most obvious way is through one’s physical appearance, in which social group affiliations such as gender, race and age are visually prominent. Appearance also provides insights into personality, the characteristics that make up how an individual thinks, feels and acts. Bodies ultimately mediate the nonverbal communication such as facial expression and verbal communication such as language that allows others to interpret identity. In online environments, the projection of identity depends on the affordances of the particular medium in use. For instance, in text-based discussion forums, users rely on one communication mode to convey identity; through text, unable to provide authentic nonverbal or visual cues. Because of this sensory limitation, users must find clever ways to convey thought and feeling given the available affordances. For instance, ‘emoticons’, text-based symbols such as smiley faces (😊) are typed to convey the immediate mood of the writer and the intention of the message, typically interpreted by others as a textual version of body language. Despite these innovations, text devoid of the person’s voice inflection or body language can still be misinterpreted by the receiver, who often reads the message at another time.

With the ever increasing development of more sophisticated technologies, two trends have emerged with respect to online environments that are significantly influencing identity projection. First, there is a move from developer-centered software to user-centered services. This represents a change in the role of the common online user, from passive to active. Second, online projection of identity is increasingly being expressed from a private to a more public
sphere. Both of these trends have significantly impacted the realization of human growth, interaction and global community online.

*Developer to user.* In previous years, most online users without superior technological skills could not contribute content, resulting in a clear power difference between developers and users (Madden & Fox, 2006). In recent years, emergence of user-friendly online applications has transformed general consumers of content into producers; “The Web is no longer linking information, the Web is linking people…people sharing, trading, collaborating” (Wesch, 2007). These technologies place the user in control of content creation by simply providing the necessary services to upload information. Online social media applications like Facebook and You Tube are examples of this trend, in that without users contributing content, no content would exist. Enabling dynamic information that is perpetually shaped by users produces a sense of heightened online agency. Individuals now experience an increased sense of presence online, asserting their identity through profile pictures, up-to-the-minute statuses and videos which are changed at the user’s will. In MMORPGs like World of Warcraft, users select and customize dynamic avatars and use them to explore the 3D space and interact with others.

*Private to public.* When the Internet was in its infancy, those without developer skills primarily displayed identity in private spheres, through private communication with others through text-based means like electronic mail. This communication was usually between two people only. Similarly, early video games could only be played by two people in the same room, since the games relied on a physical game console. Current online technologies afford a much more public expression of self. Through social media applications such as Twitter, one’s content is contributed to a selected community, rather than one person. Conversations once confined
between two people are now displayed on Facebook walls, inviting anyone in the community to view and comment, steering the direction. With this recognition that personal expression is now potentially viewed by a public audience, users’ choices are affected. For instance, in her examination of teenagers and social media, Boyd (2007) found that teens often create two social network pages; one for their parents and another page for their friends, determining which content can be viewed by their separate audiences. Because of this move to the public sphere, what we choose to say and how we choose to be portrayed is transformed.

**Interaction**

Just as with identity, in the ‘real world’, people socially interact with others through verbal and nonverbal communication, emanating from the body. Interaction in an online environment is always mediated and hence shaped by the immediate context of the particular technology. Some technologies like e-mail limit expression to text, while others like web conferencing allow users to see and hear each other. In sophisticated technologies like MMORPGs, users navigate and interact in a 3D simulated world-like environment through avatars. Because of the complex affordances, MMORPGs offer rich social cues to help users understand others’ thoughts or intentions. Emotions are conveyed through an avatar’s body language, voice, or text. In these environments, interactions are often synchronous, with users meeting others and working together to accomplish a task in ‘real time’.

With the rise in user-centered services, the focus of the most current technologies is on social interaction. There is no inherent objective to achieve in Facebook; the objective is to socially interact and build connections. Even gaming, which is traditionally viewed as an individual, competitive activity, now largely emphasizes social interaction as the foundation of
play. For example, in MMORPGs, users often must depend on their social networks (‘clans’) in order to experience success, with most players citing ‘social interaction’ as a reason for playing (Yee, 2006). This sense of dependence on others to sustain the game or social application elicits group cohesion, a sense of connection to a community. Terms introduced into the lexicon such as ‘friend’, ‘clan’, ‘group’, ‘follower’, and ‘network’ reflect this trend.

Not surprisingly, identity projection and interaction are interrelated. How one chooses to portray herself influences who she will come into contact with and interact. In turn, interactions with others will affect how one views and projects herself in the virtual environment. This is an iterative process, always depending on the individual, the audience, and the particular technology.

The Emergence of Virtual Worlds

Inspired by social media and MMORPGs, virtual worlds emerge as a unique technological medium. The notable technology transformations of user-centered creation and control of content, public presentation of self, focus on social interaction, and global synchronous interaction are all experienced there. Virtual worlds stand apart from the rest by offering the most ‘real’ virtual experience to date, through their capability of simulating worlds (‘places’), and mediating user communication through avatars (‘bodies’), with the users in charge of creating content with an open-ended social focus.

Place: Virtual World

Virtual worlds are sometimes classified as games, but are usually classified as an example of social media, since the focus is on social interaction (Levinson, 2009). Since media is generally conceived as tools used to store and deliver information, some researchers have argued
that virtual worlds represent a step beyond social media and are places in their own right, inhabited by people (Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2005; R.I. Colby, 2010). The use of the term ‘virtual world’ is deliberate, with virtual meaning “approaching the actual without arriving there. This gap between virtual and actual is critical” (Boellstorff, p. 19). While the virtual world is similar to the actual world in essence, it is not, and will never be in actuality.

Most virtual worlds physically resemble three-dimensional Earth in varying degrees, with typical depictions of land, sky, and water. Some of the land is specialized to simulate a real place, like McMicken Hall in the virtual UC area of SL. SL runs on real time, with a concurrent sunrise and sunset. Like the ‘real world’, there is an economic system, in which people buy and sell goods like avatar accessories and services like rent (although one does not truly need money to survive). Finally, it is persistent, meaning that the virtual world continues to be shaped by others after a user logs off. The main difference between the two worlds is the amount of control and customizability of the environment. While SL follows patterns of sunrise and sunset, a user can choose which they prefer, instantly going from a midnight setting to a mid-day setting. In certain areas, weather patterns can also be chosen. With a mouse click, digital objects can be created, edited, placed, or removed in the world by any user.

In an interesting twist, the two worlds share the same fundamental feature: the design, the content, and the objectives of the worlds are perpetually shaped directly by its users. As the official SL guide proclaims, “You are the one who determines what SL means to you” (Rymaszewski et al., 2008, p. 2). Both worlds are evolving towards an undetermined future, always affected by the intentions and actions of its inhabitants. Considering the complexity of the environment, I join other researchers in classifying virtual worlds as a step beyond social
media. A virtual world is not simply a tool used to store and deliver information, it is the information.

**Body: Avatars**

Virtual worlds are multi-user, meaning that multiple users share the same space and interact in ‘real time’. Users are represented by avatars, simulated bodies in which users sensually perceive the virtual world. As the user directs the avatar through the 3D space, the computer generates graphics in real time to give the user visual and auditory feedback on their position in the environment (Jones, Morales, & Knezek, 2005). Just as humans in the ‘real world’, avatars dynamically interact with objects. For instance, when an avatar bumps into a bush, the leaves rustle. As with physical bodies, avatars cannot lurk in this place; when one is logged in, her avatar is visible to others in the world. This stands in contrast to most other online environments, in which one can view content without others being aware of her presence. In virtual worlds, one cannot simply ‘step away’ because of the nature of the avatar; “Bodies root us and make us present to ourselves and to others” (Taylor, 2002, p. 42). This is further support that virtual worlds are places in which people interact. As R.I. Colby (2010) simply explains, the virtual is real. This makes the use of the term ‘real world’ somewhat problematic, as it suggests that anything other than the actual world is not real. In this paper, I use the term ‘real world’ as synonymous with ‘actual world’.

Compared to other online technologies, there is a heightened sense of user presence due to the embodied nature of avatars. In contrast to an MMORPG in which an avatar represents a character, in a social virtual world, the avatar is intended to represent the user. Loke (2009) explains, “SL is not simply a game where players, detached from their avatars, control the
avatars for pure entertainment…It’s not simply a uniform, but self-representation” (p. 148).
Velleman (2008) conceives avatars as “real minds and fictional bodies” (p. 405). Taylor (2002) places more importance on the virtual body in the overall experience, claiming that “users do not simply roam through the space as mind, but find themselves grounded in the practice of the body, and thus in the world” (p. 42). She extends this conception in a later work (2006) by envisioning users as living between worlds, their embodiment existing somewhere in the middle. This fits in with Boellstorff’s (2008) conception of virtual worlds as approaching the actual without arriving, resulting in a gap.

While similar, avatars are not exact replicas of complex human bodies. While we only have one visual view in the ‘real world’, the view in SL can be manipulated in several ways, most typically from the avatar’s eyes or from behind the avatar’s head, but can also be zoomed very far out in the distance. Avatars can also teleport, instantly disappearing and appearing in a different place. Concerning physical appearance, there is virtually no limit on avatar customization; one can craft it to appear much like her actual appearance or go non-human altogether. In my journeys, the vast majority of avatars I have observed are human, but I have also seen pandas, robots, and even cardboard boxes. These appearances can be transformed instantly. With several clicks, an avatar can transform from female to male, tall to short, white to black, blonde to brunette.

Due to these open-ended possibilities, users may experience a greater degree of anonymity in the virtual world than in the ‘real world’. For instance, while the user gives an avatar a special name (I was introduced to SL by Marcia’s avatar named Professor Sorena), no other personal information has to be shared with others. For this reason, it is impossible to
determine if a feminine avatar is actually represented by a woman in the ‘real world’. To some, this presents an opportunity to explore alternative selves or to express themselves more confidently, less hampered by the largely static physical features of the human body (Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 1995). Others prefer to be very open with their ‘real’ identities, providing pictures and biographies in their profiles.

Regarding interaction, avatars occupy the same space and communication is mediated by the body; written text, spoken voice and body language. Because of this shared experience, common ground can be created and sustained, eliciting a feeling of co-presence, that the user is really with another person (Jarmon, 2009). It also primes social practices from the ‘real world’. For example, items can be exchanged between users both synchronously and asynchronously. The first thing I did upon meeting my ‘real world’ friend in SL was offer him a digital beer. Avatars do not need to drink in order to be sustained, but the act of offering a drink signals a ‘real world’ sense of camaraderie. These virtual experiences with others have been the genesis of ‘real’ friendships and even marriages (Taylor, 2006). Unfortunately, undesired ‘real world’ social practices also occasionally carry over; harassment and prejudice do occur in virtual worlds as well (Boellstorff, 2008; Taylor, 2003; Turkle, 1995).

In conclusion, it is the combination of experiencing a world-like place through a human-like body that elicits the most ‘real’ virtual experience yet. It is not surprising that researchers like R.I. Colby (2010) assert that the virtual is real. By living between worlds, people may explore issues of identity, interact with distanced others, and shape the processes of the environment itself.
The Integration of Virtual Worlds in Academic Contexts

Considering the transformational potential of virtual worlds and the proliferation of social media and gaming in academic contexts, it can be understood why virtual worlds are becoming more integrated in academic contexts. In this section, the promises and concerns of virtual worlds in education are identified and discussed.

The Promises

In his influential examination of how the design of video games can inform educators about learning, Gee (2007) explains that students are motivated to participate in gaming environments because they allows users to assume an identity, take risks in a safe environment, interact with others to co-produce the environment, solve problems in multiple nonlinear ways, and take ownership of decisions. The same points can be applied to virtual worlds like SL. Virtual worlds hold a lot of promise to support and enhance student online learning communities, due to their ability to deliver on several trends: user-centered creation of customizable content, social expression, and construction of collective and collaborative global knowledge (Dieterle & Clarke, 2007). In order to navigate through the environment and customize content, the student must take control and make decisions, leading to immersion in the learning process and positively affecting motivation (Dieterle & Clarke; Malone & Lepper, 1987).

A primary reason for incorporating SL in education is the distinctive ability to simulate authentic learning settings that are impractical or impossible to provide in traditional classroom settings (Gee, 2007). Space can be customized to fit specific learning objectives, with students actively creating and shaping content along the way. Virtual worlds enable complex activities such as role playing and scenario building, allowing learners to temporarily assume the
responsibilities of someone without incurring consequences (NMC, 2007). Participating in a simulation of a realistic situation encourages the user to relate the experience to the overall learning objectives, easing learning transfer (Jones et al., 2005). Through ‘learning by doing,’ they are challenged to gain mastery and integrate new learning with prior knowledge (Gee).

By interacting through bodies in an actual place, students may have enhanced opportunities for social expression and building connections with others. Common ground is forged by exploring or customizing spaces together. In some cases, the ground can be more social in nature. For instance, during a workshop, I planned for students to experience a boat ride in SL. After the students carefully directed their avatars to board the boat, it began to sink unexpectedly. The avatars literally jumped ship, while the students shrieked and laughed together in the computer lab. The ground can also be more cognitive in nature. As in other environments, through discussion, one articulates and possibly revises her viewpoint in the face of multiple perspectives. The virtual world allows users to display their collaborative work for others to view. For instance, college students created a group presentation on the UC island within SL to reflect on the knowledge gained during their ‘real world’ field trip to a museum (Figure 2).

Finally, students can take on multiple identities through different customizations of the avatar. As a student in my exploratory study said, “I have had several bodies with just the click of a mouse.” In the virtual world, a white male student can experience the world through a black female body for the first time. These complex environments provide ‘real’ places for those to examine and possible revise their conceptions of identity (Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2006). This can influence conceptions of ‘real world’ identity, changing an individual’s overall view. In the case of gender, Kennedy suggests that the high amount of customization allows users to
experience multiple subjectivities not available in other aspects of daily experience, possibly rewriting the script of what it is to be a woman in the ‘real world.’

The Concerns

When a new technology is integrated into the academic context, there are likely to be unintended effects on learners that emerge from its’ use (Nworie & Haughton, 2008). Although virtual worlds offer innovative opportunities not found in other technologies, they also offer complex and sometimes troubling unintended effects due to its capability of presenting a place much like the ‘real world’ in appearance and practice, but with a public, largely anonymous population. While exploring the experiences of students in SL in my exploratory study, I observed that women voiced more concerns about the nature of the virtual world. During my own travels in SL, both personal and professional, I have become aware of some of the unique concerns that arise.

One day, I was standing in my office looking at a piece of artwork, when a man approached the open door. I turned to face him and read his name, realizing he was unfamiliar. Since the campus is public, I did not think much of it and considered him a fellow explorer. As I
took a second look at him, I realized that his male body part was sticking out of his pants. I instantly recoiled and was unsure of what to do next. Suddenly, some text popped up on my screen. He wrote, “I’m here for an internship.” A sense of panic rushed into me, my heart quickening. What do I do? He was blocking my way out of my office. I took a breath and pushed past him, getting out into the open air of the campus. I turned around to see him coming out of the office after me. I weighed my options and decided to flee the scene altogether, logging out.

The most sobering element of this story is that one could read it and assume it was happening in the ‘real world.’ As this was unfolding, I felt a ‘real’ sense of panic and vulnerability in my ‘real’ body. I considered my virtual office a safe place and suddenly I was no longer safe there (note I am saying “I” and not “my avatar”). I had no idea who this person was. What was his true intention? Was he just an immature user, kidding around? Was it merely an innocent technical error while he was customizing his avatar (it is not that uncommon)? Or does he derive some pleasure out of anonymously preying on women? Obviously, the last question is what bothers me most. While I will never know his true intentions, my feelings remain the same; I felt like a victim because of my identity as a woman.

It is necessary to unpack the elements of this story in order to anticipate the unintended effects that could be experienced among learners, women especially. Three main elements emerge: issues of anonymity, privacy, and safety. First, avatars present an opportunity for anonymity that is not realized in other academic online environments. For instance, students enrolled in an online course management system are easily identifiable. Anything that they contribute to the site is linked back to their registered name. In contrast, when one creates an account and an avatar in SL, she selects a name for her avatar. Until just recently, the avatar
name had to be different, as one chose from a pre-determined list of last names. Any activity that
the user engages in is associated with the avatar name, and it is impossible to discover the user’s
‘real’ identity unless it is explicitly shared. In my exploratory study, I often heard “Who is
[avatar name]?” in the computer lab. In a closed environment, a teacher can create a list of ‘real’
names and avatar names to clarify all of the present identities. However, a virtual world like SL
is public, meaning that any user with an account and a computer can appear. It is not uncommon
to hold a virtual field trip and end up with a few more avatars than students in the group. The
underlying purpose of public virtual worlds is to socially interact with distanced users, and
students are likely to be approached by unknown others (I will call them “strangers”). This
displays the utterly unpredictable nature of the virtual world, as one cannot predict who
approaches or what they will say.

Beyond the logistical concerns of how to manage students in this context, the potential
for anonymity presents a troubling situation with regards to students’ safety. Issues of predators
and harassment have emerged in other online settings like social media, and are a concern in the
virtual world context as well. These issues are often tied to issues of gender. Examining women
and gaming use, Jenkins and Cassell (2008) share that “Recent rhetoric has even marked
computer use as dangerous for girls who may, so the story goes, expose themselves to predators
by their creation of online personae” (p. 14). It is not surprising that women tend to have more
concerns about online privacy than men (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). In my exploratory study of
students in SL, some enjoyed the interactions (all men and some women), while others (all of
them women) wanted no contact with strangers. In my SL travels, the vast majority of
interactions with strangers has been amicable, and has even created a few ‘real’ friendships. However, the story I shared above still stirs feelings of discomfort.

Along with social interaction, the design of learning activities is a challenge, since SL is a completely open-ended environment. On the one hand, it preserves the complexity of learning and problem solving found in the ‘real world.’ On the other hand, social virtual worlds are still relatively new to the academic context and are not entirely understood by educators. Solid theories about learning in virtual worlds are only just emerging (see deFreitas, Rebolledo-Mendez, Liarokapis, Magoulas, & Poulouvassilis, 2010). Further in-depth research is needed to clarify issues of instructional design, supporting learners as they interact in this unique online community.

**Problem Statement**

Virtual worlds are relatively new to education and offer exciting possibilities and unintended effects. In comparison to other online learning environments, virtual worlds are more technically and socially complex. Instead of logging in and typing a post under an official student name, their experiences are mediated by uniquely-named avatars in a world-like environment. Interaction with others is less controlled in this public sphere. Because of this dramatic difference in identity and interaction, issues of body and place are rendered more salient in virtual worlds. Considering the ‘real life’ experiences of users and emerging research about online privacy, the issue of gender is difficult to dismiss. However, in educational settings, there is a tendency to presume that technologies are gender neutral (Jenkins & Cassell, 2008). This presumption must be challenged in the consideration of virtual world technologies. First, they have emerged from MMORPGs, virtual spaces that are traditionally male-dominated,
meaning they are designed and developed by men and have more men users directing the environment. In addition, the gendered experience of embodying avatars and inhabiting realistic virtual places is not fully addressed in the literature. It is important to better understand women’s experiences in these virtual world learning communities.

**Male-Dominated Spaces**

Jenkins and Cassell (2008) write, “Today, few worry about women’s access to cyberspace…a whole variety of political, economical, social and cultural practices have reshaped the Web so that we scarcely think of it as a male-dominated space” (p. 5). However, they caution that a pressing issue remains 10 years after they first posed it: “the debate about whether girls do and can and should play computer games” (p. 5). Since virtual worlds have evolved from MMORPGs and are similar in nature, this is a relevant topic to explore. In contrast to other Web-enabled environments like social media, 3D virtual spaces continue to be male-dominated.

Carr (2005) suggests that the entire gaming industry is gendered, explaining “The association of masculinity with computer games is a construct, the result of a series of inventions, trends, practices, and commercial decisions that have settled into a particular pattern” (p. 467). The term “gamer” is often assumed to be attached to a male figure which represents the baseline for gaming practices, while experienced women are often labeled “women gamers” to denote the difference (Taylor, 2006). Because of the male-dominated nature of gaming, women in general participate less. While girls enter gaming in similar numbers to boys, they tend to play less as they get older. This gaming experience gap widens with every year of school, with boys playing nearly three more hours per week than girls in middle school, and over five hours longer than women in college (Heeter & Winn, 2008).
Although women are playing games in increasing numbers (Lenhart, Jones, & Macgill, 2008), they tend to play different games for different reasons in different social surroundings. Most ‘women gamers’ are often consumers of game experiences, playing online card or trivia games by themselves, for reasons such as ‘passing the time’ or ‘relieving stress.’ Concerning MMORPGs which closely resemble virtual worlds, only around 15% of the adult population is female, with the majority being over 23 years old (Yee, 2006). Women that do participate in MMORPGs typically play with male partners and are most often in the same room (Yee). ‘Men gamers’ spend around twice the time on games that women spend, typically engaging in MMORPGs rather than card games, for reasons such as ‘for fun.’ Like virtual worlds, MMORPGs encourage mastery and collaborative exploration with users actively generating content, along with identity exploration through avatars. Men’s gaming practices are more social; public spaces like LANs and arcades are traditionally viewed as ‘for men’ (Lin, 2008), and men are more likely to game together in a group (Beavis & Charles, 2005; Thornham, 2008). In contrast, Lin describes an invisible culture of women gamers, with women often playing alone, seldom with other women or in a group.

These patterns place the traditional college-aged women population at particular risk for being at a disadvantage in a virtual world learning context. In my exploratory study of college students, this disparity was glaring. While all of the men were gamers, only 2 of the 13 women could say the same. The interrelationship between gender and gaming experience largely affected women’s experiences. In a classroom blog, a woman remarked, “Being left to leave the last project undone to just keep up and learn the world is something that I often have to do.” Another exclaimed out loud in exasperation, “I just can’t do anything in here [SL]. I’m just not a
The tendency among educators to presume that technologies are gender neutral must be seriously challenged in the face of these claims.

**Bodies in Places**

The phrase “bodies in places” sounds quite simple and self-explanatory, but upon second glance, it denotes an incredibly complex virtual experience. At this point in time, we do not know enough about this subjective experience. ‘Real world’ bodies and places are gendered, conceived differently in women, and it appears that virtual bodies and places elicit these issues as well. Surely, social norms about femininity come into play, but since the virtual world is not identical to the ‘real world,’ it is still unclear in which ways.

To ensure that virtual world learning contexts do not become male-dominated spaces, it is important to better understand the ways in which gender is expressed and experienced there. The experiences of women need to be shared, their voices heard. In order to maintain a successful online learning community, every member should feel safe and trust others in order to collaborate (Edirsingha, Nie, Pluciennik, & Young, 2009). If this was more understood, principles of instructional design to support a learning community would be more clarified. This would help educators make informed decisions about the selection and design of the virtual world.

**Research Question**

Due to the issues of women’s conceptions of identity and interaction in the unique virtual world setting in an academic context, I am pursuing the following question: How do women college students understand the psychological and contextual factors that influence their establishment of identity and interaction in a virtual world learning community? Instructional
implications generated from the multiple factors that emerge from this line of questioning will then be shared with the idea of supporting the growth of virtual world learning communities.

This study is significant because it will clarify the complex experiences and issues that emerge for women. While participating in the learning community, they will have several roles to negotiate, such as ‘woman,’ ‘avatar,’ ‘student,’ and ‘gamer/non-gamer’ among others. These identities will overlap depending on the context in which they are situated. A deeper understanding of how women students negotiate in virtual worlds will help designers and educators anticipate some of the concerns and accentuate the promises.
Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I will explore the fundamental concepts that underlie my research questions. In order to appreciate the psychological and contextual factors regarding women’s identity and interaction in virtual world learning communities, terms such as ‘learning community,’ ‘identity,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘interaction’ must be further clarified. These terms are far-reaching and are conceived in relation to the immediate context in which they are situated. Exploring the issue of women’s experiences in a virtual world is inherently complex because they are living in the gaps between worlds in a way, simultaneously negotiating the ‘real world’ and ‘virtual world’ settings. This dynamic experience will be illuminated throughout the presented framework.

Learning Community

Ultimately, my research questions hinge on heightening women’s access and participation in virtual world learning communities in academic contexts. Therefore, it is important to first present the concept of ‘learning community’ in order to better identify the elements that support the creation and sustainment of such communities. In this section, I review how learning and learning communities have been conceived in educational literature and will draw connections to the present study.

Learning

Through the deliberate wording of the term ‘learning community,’ learning emerges as the ultimate goal of the community. In this study, I conceive the act of learning as fundamentally relational, meaning that learners develop and construct knowledge within relationships rather
than autonomously (Raider-Roth, 2005). Learners do not exist on an island. The National Research Council (2000) asserts that “Learning is influenced in fundamental ways by the context in which it takes place” (p. 25). Learners are always learning in relation to other people and circumstances in the immediate social context. Contextual factors such as how they relate to what they are learning, who they are learning with, and where they are learning have a significant effect on the knowledge that is constructed. Therefore, meaningful learning requires an attention to one’s active “construction, defining, and refining of relationships” (Raider-Roth, p. 20). The learners’ relationships are central to the learning process, not the information or expert. If knowledge is conceived as something that exists in relation to the people producing it, then activities hinged on basic transmission of information to individual learners is not sufficient to produce meaningful learning. Therefore, learning is less effective when learners are socially isolated and when activities are devoid of social context (Zhu & Baylen, 2005).

This relational conception of learning has implications when extended to formation and support of virtual world learning communities. When a student is logged in to SL, she will be relating to not only the SL context, but the ‘real world’ context in which she is grounded. This ‘real world’ context is not only academic, but social as well. She will be negotiating in the spaces between the worlds, in relation to the ‘real’ bodies in the ‘real world’ (her own, teacher, peers) and the simulated bodies in the virtual world (her own, teacher, peers and others). The way that she interacts with others in SL will ultimately structure the knowledge that can be constructed in the learning community and her connections to this knowledge (Raider-Roth, 2005). Her prior knowledge and understanding of virtual worlds will mediate how she interprets this relational experience. Elements cited in Chapter 1 such as anonymity, privacy and safety may emerge as
potential risk factors influencing relationship and community building in SL. When a student feels unsafe in a learning environment, she may disconnect from the relationships existing therein (Raider-Roth, 2005). Conceiving of the learning process in virtual worlds as relational illuminates the incredible complexity and opportunity of the experience.

**Learning Community**

When learning is conceived as a relational and social act, the learners involved are sometimes viewed as members of a community. A fundamental tenet of learning communities is that they nurture social and cognitive development, providing opportunities to share and revise knowledge with others (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). In any environment, learning communities “provide a setting for participation and presence in the discussion, where learners share experiences and perspectives, and negotiate what they mean” (Stein et al., 2007, p. 104). In traditional academic contexts, members typically consist of peers (students) and experts (teachers), with the setting in a traditional classroom.

In their review of learning communities, Palloff and Pratt (2005) share the elements that comprise a successful learning community. First, members have a shared purpose, with each member having clear roles and responsibilities to sustain the learning environment. They also work collaboratively towards a common vision. Redmond and Lock (2006) emphasize that all members of the learning community carry the role of directing and facilitating social and learning processes, not just the experts. This means that all members need to have equal access to the community and equal opportunities to participate and contribute. Given the stated concerns of women’s participation in virtual worlds, this warrants further investigation.
Virtual Learning Community

Although effective learning communities share the same basic elements no matter the environment, they are ultimately mediated by the context in which they reside. With the advent of sophisticated communication technologies, an increasing number of learning communities have been established and sustained in virtual environments. An advantage of virtual learning communities is that they extend beyond the traditional classroom walls, unhampered by physical boundaries or time constraints. Being able to communicate at any time helps strengthen community connections and relationships (Zhu & Baylen, 2005). Members are not limited to students and teachers, as distanced others may provide additional guidance and support.

The technology that mediates the learning community should be thoughtfully selected, with consideration to the overall goals of the community. A robust technology allows members to seamlessly communicate and collaborate, facilitating the process rather than determining it. Depending on their features, they can help organize information, share resources, facilitate dynamic discussion, and allow learners to manipulate information (Zhu & Baylen, 2005). This encourages an active role for members, as they decide how to participate and interact in the community (Redmond & Lock, 2006). It is important to identify the learning goals of the community when selecting a virtual world, as the environment will ultimately structure how members will communicate and interact. As stated earlier, authentic tasks may be better realized in a virtual world due to the authentic nature of the environment. In addition, sharing the same physical space and interacting in real time through avatars may strengthen community connections (Jarmon & Sanchez, 2008).
**COI framework.** Conceptual frameworks concerning online learning communities are slowly emerging from the literature. To date, the most frequently cited model in educational literature is the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework. Originally designed with asynchronous text-based online learning in mind, the COI framework posits that there are three interrelated presences that must be perceived by learning community members in order to facilitate a successful educational experience: social, cognitive and teaching (Garrison et al., 2000). These presences are ultimately mediated by the technology medium in which the community is present. I use the basic structure of this framework to frame my study, and extend it to consider virtual world communities, as the virtual world is technically richer than traditional online learning communities.

*Social presence.* Social presence is the most widely researched presence and has been conceived in multiple ways, depending on the published year and the relevant technology being examined. In their review of the COI framework, Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) summarize social presence as the “ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally, thereby being perceived as ‘real people’ in mediated communication” (p. 159). In text-based online environments, learners project themselves through text, openly communicating with others and using emoticons to express emotion. This fosters group cohesion, feeling like part of an actual group from behind the computer screen (Garrison et al., 2000). When applied to virtual worlds, text is one way to project self, but the dynamic avatar mediates all communication, including body language and voice. While McKerlich and Anderson (2007) conclude that the essential constructs of the COI model apply to virtual worlds, they suggest expanding the modes of communication to include richer text, visual, and verbal cues, as these assist with meaning
making. Edirisingha et al. (2009) include the concept of ‘online identity’ when considering social presence. They conceive of online identity as a mix of ‘real world’ personal characteristics and ‘technical’ affordances of the virtual environment (an identity that exists ‘between worlds,’ as Taylor calls it). This yields an online identity that is not entirely virtual (McGerty, 2003).

While all online environments foster online identities because of their online location, virtual worlds stand apart by offering simulated bodies that can be customized in nearly limitless ways. Embodying an avatar that is meant to represent social and emotional self in a world-like place may enhance social presence, eliciting a feeling of being ‘real’ and of really being there. Concerning social interaction, sharing the same 3D visual space with others may encourage more communication and group cohesion. Common ground is more easily forged since members are sharing the same space and artifacts regarding a shared purpose of the activity, potentially collaborating on the same project from a distance (Edirisingha et al, 2009). However, considering the concerns mentioned in Chapter 1, identities are not as static as in other environments. In the ‘real world,’ identities are quickly read in physical bodies which do not dramatically change. With the capacity to change avatar appearance, identities are not as quickly identified in virtual worlds, posing a possible hindrance to building meaningful social connections among members in learning communities.

Several researchers attest that social presence is a precondition for worthwhile learning experiences (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Stein et al., 2007; Swan, 2005). This is a reasonable statement, as learning members need to feel personally represented in the environment in order to actively participate and collaborate with others. An establishment of social presence builds the trust and respect for others that is needed to support collaboration in
the community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Feeling socially and emotionally present also enhances a feeling of ownership of the community, allowing one to direct the cognitive and social processes of the group to realize meaningful learning outcomes (Redmond & Lock, 2006). Clearly, fostering social presence is an essential goal in the development of virtual world learning communities. Given what is known about women’s more limited gaming experiences and ‘real world’ experiences when compared to men, this environment needs to be further explored to determine whether it affords an equal, active learning community for its’ members, supporting the establishment of virtual identity and interaction.

Identity

Since an essential part of virtual world community integration is a user’s level of social presence, the concept of identity is discussed in this section. First, theories about how identity forms and is constituted will be explored, followed by theories of virtual identity. Finally, these theories are blended to consider the experience of identity ‘between worlds.’

Identity: ‘Real World’

Many theories of identity have been developed in psychological, social and anthropological disciplines. One feature that cuts across these theories is that identity is conceived as a product of the individual and the social context in which one is situated (Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 1990). For the current study, I will introduce social and personal conceptions of identity, then will focus on Alcoff’s and Butler’s conceptions of gendered identity formation, which challenge the idea of gender, and subsequently women, as a natural category.

Social identity. According to Myers (2005), “humans are a group-bound species” (p. 350). Social identity reflects an identification with a group and the related attitudes and
behaviors that lie therein, always constructed in society (Myers). Classifications such as gender, age, race, class, nationality, and sexual orientation all influence one’s sense of who she is. For example, I identify as a white, middle-class American heterosexual woman, and this profoundly shapes my experiences and views of the world. Various aspects of these social identities are salient depending on the immediate context. One simultaneously behaves as a group member and an individual (Tafjel, 1978).

Not surprisingly, social groups are socially constructed and exist only in relation to other groups which differ in power (Myers, 2005). For instance, the category of ‘women’ would not exist without ‘men’ and ‘black’ would not exist without ‘white.’ Sometimes the individual is born into a category that is rarely changed such as race or sex, and other times it is personally integrated, like having an identity of a sports fanatic. (Tafjel, 1978). Distinguishing categories helps one determine the relative value of her groups. A personal identification with a social group elicits a sense of belonging which is distinct from other groups. Each person has a unique identity since there are many categories to choose from and mix.

Regarding the concept of social identity, women students will not have identical experiences and concerns in virtual worlds, due to the complex influence of other social categories, such as race, age, sexual orientation, and class. The interaction of these social identities will inform issues of identity such as avatar customization and interaction with others. However, it is important to keep in mind the continuing issue of male-dominated virtual spaces, with ‘gamers’ being inherently male. In order for a learning community to be equal, it has to be ensured that the environment does not uphold an unequal difference in power.
**Personal identity.** Personal identity is comprised of the person’s concept of themselves, including individual characteristics and relationships, which essentially set the individual apart from others in society (Myers, 2005). This personal identity forms in relation to social norms, including the individuals and groups in which one interacts. Individuals view themselves in terms of meanings imparted by society, such as women’s roles.

The body is an integral part of personal identity, mediating exploration and experiences of the external world (Meamber & Venkatest, 1999). Body image plays an important role in society as a means of expressing self in society (Vicdan & Ulusoy, 2008). Vicdan and Ulusoy conceive the body as a “project that individuals work on and change as a means of identity construction and reconstruction” (p. 3). Bodies are always constructed within social norms and within relationships with others. When one constructs her body, she is influenced by socialization issues like self-worth, status in relationships, and control over one’s self (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In this way, personal and social identities mutually shape each other.

**Post-modern theories of identity.** The concepts of ‘personal’ and ‘social’ identities acknowledge a complex interaction between individual and society, but also tend to infer that identity is a singular and unchanging entity. For instance, being a woman is viewed as a critical element of social identity, but is not typically viewed as an element that is constantly reconstructed in context. For this study, I am conceptualizing identity in a more post-modern sense.

While post-modern theorists of identity conceive identity as a mix of the individual and society, they extend the conception by emphasizing that identities are multiple, fragmented, and contradictory depending on the immediate social context (Walkerdine, 2007). Identities are
constantly being constructed and re-constructed, never singular or immutable. For this reason, identity can never be understood without consideration of the social context in which the person is immediately situated. In my study, I am invoking Alcoff’s (1988) conception of identity as “a position with particular emphasis on the context in which it is situated” (p. 352). These positions include social categories such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and personal categories such as gamer. According to this view, as the social context shifts (where we are, who we are with, what we are doing), identity shifts. For instance, a woman in a room of other women that look like her will conceive and present herself differently than in a room of strange men. However, identity is not limited to the category of ‘woman,’ as she incorporates several identities at once. Concerning age, a young woman does not experience a situation exactly like an older woman. Overlapping factors such as gender, class, age, and sexual orientation among others affects one’s projection of identity in the moment.

*Gendered identity.* Gendered identity, the “self-attribution of culturally bound concepts of masculinity and femininity” (Condry, 1984, p. 485) is a critical concept in this study since the experiences of women are central. As with other aspects of identity, it is actively formed through interaction between the individual and social context. Since gender is socially constructed, it cannot be studied apart from context; “The terms that make a gendered identity possible are social; they are defined in social norms and the contexts in which such norms are instantiated” (Pelletier, 2008, p. 147). Butler (1987) further explains, “The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one’s body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles” (p. 131). While theorists such as Butler and Pelletier propose that discourse rooted in society structures our identities and experiences, they stress that it does not
completely determine them. The individual does maintain some sense of agency. Butler conceives of body construction as ‘existing’ one’s body, a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms.

Post-modern theorists are critical of the view that gender is essential, with women naturally embodying ‘feminine’ characteristics such as peacefulness, caring, and compassion. In the gaming literature, post-modern theorists (see Carr, 2005; Jenson & deCastell, 2010) are especially critical of the view that women just do not like games, especially violent ones, hence the reason why men dominate. Instead, they focus on the influence of the surrounding male-dominated social context to explain why women play in less numbers and play differently. Since ‘gamers’ are assumed to be men, then the discourse dictates that women are not. They argue that these notions create expectations (social norms) about how men and women should behave, with women less likely to enter gaming environments. Butler (1987) explains that social norms about men and women are strict, and it is impossible act outside of the social boundaries without severe repercussions. This incessant social activity “naturalizes convention and makes it hard to see or hear anything other than the ‘inner truth’ of gender” (Jenson & deCastell, 2008, p. 16). Rather than a core gender, Butler (1990) proclaims that identity is “performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (p. 25). This serves to reinforce inequalities in power with regards to gender. Reflecting on women students in virtual worlds, the possibility exists that some women may feel that the virtual world is just not “for them” because of their gendered status, reducing their impact in the learning community.

Although women do not construct identity in identical ways due to differences in personal and social contexts, some universal themes emerge because of the group affiliation.
According to Lin (2008), “Women’s fear and perceptions of risk are deeply rooted in their bodies” (p. 67). Because of this, women have concerns and act in ways because of their gendered classification, such as avoiding certain places or being alone. This not only influences how women construct their bodies, but restricts their opportunities to interact with the world and others, in a way that does not affect men. Because of the social identity as a woman, personal identity elements such as body construction, control over one’s self, personal status and feelings of place in the world are affected (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Since virtual worlds offer simulated bodies to construct, it is important to discover the personal and social elements that configure into body construction.

Identity: ‘Virtual World’

The above conceptions of identity were developed with the ‘real world’ in mind. Because of the relative newness of virtual environments, it is common to perceive a clear separation between the ‘real world’ and the virtual environment regarding identity. This section describes how virtual identity has been conceived in the literature and how I frame my study of women students in SL. First, the three waves of virtual identity research are documented. Then, the conception of gendered identity in virtual environments, namely gaming and virtual worlds will be explored.

Waves of virtual identity research. Over the years, the conception of virtual identity has evolved. Taylor (2006) organizes this progression into three waves of research. With the advent of the Internet in the 1990’s, first wave researchers touted that the Internet posed an opportunity to equalize social relations, as one could project self without being hampered by ‘real world’ characteristics such as gender and age (see Herring, 1993). By the mid-to-late
1990’s, findings suggested that the possibility of equality was not being realized, as ‘real world’ identities were still perceived by others through text, and men’s domination of discussions extended to the online sphere (see Blum, 1999). The second wave of research acknowledged that the online world was fundamentally tied to the ‘real world’ and could not be completely separated. Much like the psychological concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture,’ the goal became to try to separate the two worlds to determine the effects of one on the other.

In the latest third wave of research, there is an emerging acceptance that attempting to separate the ‘real’ and online worlds in order to better understand identity in the virtual sphere is not possible or even desirable, as it does not help us further understand those spaces (Taylor, 2006). There is an acknowledgement that the virtual world cannot be studied separately from the ‘real world’ because it is “a world in which you take your ‘real life’ identity in with you” (Phillips, 2010, p. 10). Instead of identity influenced by either ‘real world’ or ‘virtual world’ variables, Taylor declares that when people are logged on, they “live in the gaps between the two worlds and negotiate that experience in interesting ways” (p. 123). This conception suggests the yielding of a hybrid identity, one that uniquely emerges and exists “in the gaps”, not able to be understood by examining the sum of its parts.

This third wave of research informs my conception of identity in this study. I am not interested in separating ‘real world’ and virtual world factors to better understand women students’ identities. Rather, the focus will be on how their identity is expressed “in the gaps”, what I will call ‘hybrid identity.’ Although it is anticipated that there will be instances where ‘person’ and ‘avatar’ are compared and contrasted, the results will be interpreted through the lens of this hybrid identity. How do women students negotiate their identities between worlds?
Framing the issue in this way will clarify women’s expression of self in the moment. It also values the virtual world experience as real and meaningful, not directly opposed to the ‘real world.’

**Technology: Gendered identity.** Expression of hybrid identity depends on the simultaneous experience of two worlds, the ‘real world’ and the virtual world. Keeping in mind that identity is conceived in this study as a position with emphasis on the context in which it is situated (Alcoff, 1988), both worlds are essential parts of the immediate social context. This conception extends to the idea of gendered identity; the way one performs gender in “the gaps” is informed by dual simultaneous environments. The two worlds offer social norms, some of which overlap, and some which remain distinct. Boellstorff (2008) explains, “Actual world sociality cannot explain virtual world sociality…it develops on its own terms” (p. 63). Online and offline contextual factors, such as the location of the user, interaction with other users, and the external surroundings affect expression of hybrid gendered identity. I conceive virtual worlds as tools that “individuals use in different and at times contradictory ways to construct a gendered self that is culturally, socially and historically specific” (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007, p. 557).

This conception of hybrid gendered identity illuminates the importance of better understanding how women construct and perform gendered selves in gaps between the ‘real world’ and the historically male-dominated spaces of virtual worlds. For example, Jenson and deCastell (2008) reframe the issue of technical competence by exploring how men and women perform gender through their gaming practices. Noting that girls and women express less technical competence, they declare, “Technological competence has less to do with actual skills
and more to do with construction of a gendered identity – that is, women lack technological competence to the extent that they seek to appropriately perform femininity; correlativey, men are technologically competent by virtue of their performance of masculinity” (p. 54).

This line of thinking suggests the complex issues regarding gendered identity in the gaps between the two worlds. Interpreting women’s historical invisibility from complex virtual environments as simply a problem with women ignores the larger context in which they are situated (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). Taylor (2008) emphasizes, “We go much further in understanding some women’s reticence toward games by situating their hesitations in relation to a particular construction of game culture or specific structural contexts” (p. 57). Considering women’s needs in context will bring critically important elements to light and take the focus off of ‘women’ as an ahistorical, unchanging entity (Jenson & deCastell). By studying women’s identities as particular positions situated between the gaps, these positions “can be actively utilized as a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered” (Alcoff, 1988, p. 349). This perspective elicits a sense of agency in women, becoming fully realized subjects in the context. This challenges the idea of “natural” characteristics of women, encouraging researchers to move beyond what is already known (Jenson & deCastell).

**Conclusion: Identity**

Considering these theories about the nature and formation of identity, it is important to revisit the current research questions. Given what is known at this time in history, women’s complex conceptions of identity in the gaps between worlds need to be further explored. The women in my study will not only identify as ‘women,’ but ‘young,’ ‘students’ and ‘avatars,’
along with their personal characteristics such as ‘gamer.’ All of these positions will be expressed uniquely in the gaps. It is important to better understand the psychological and contextual factors that influence women students’ establishment of hybrid identity in a virtual world learning community. For instance, given Lin’s (2008) description of women’s perceptions of risk rooted in their bodies in the ‘real world,’ a fruitful line of research pertains to women’s perceptions of risk rooted in their avatars in the virtual world. While women students will not have identical experiences because of the complex interaction of individual and social contexts, they are likely to have some overlapping experiences because of their social identities as women.

Understanding the complex experiences of women students in virtual world settings will help clarify issues of instructional design. The technical design of the virtual world, the structuring and content of activities, and user support would all be informed by this understanding, helping to support women members become active in the learning community.

**Social Interaction**

Revisiting the notion of learning community, learning is a social act constructed through interaction with others. In this section, conceptions of social interaction in the ‘real world’ and virtual world will be explored.

**Social Interaction: “Real World”**

In this study, social interaction is broadly defined as a kind of action that occurs when two or more people, taking into account the other’s intentions or experience, have an effect upon one another. Although simply posed, learning transpires through this interaction. For instance, through discussion, users revise their viewpoints and construct knowledge based on the
contributing efforts of others. Traditionally, social interaction is typically predicated on physical proximity, but the rapid expansion of virtual communication has transformed that notion.

As with conceptions of identity, how one interacts is grounded in the social context in which she is situated. Social norms vary by context and come in many varieties, always influenced by the surrounding culture. For instance, social nonverbal norms such as engaging in eye contact and maintaining a personal distance from others are culturally western examples of acceptable communication (Benakou & Chorianopoulos, 2010). Selecting what one includes in communication and taking turns in conversation with others are examples of verbal norms. People are not explicitly taught these norms; rather, these norms are embedded in the social context of daily life in the ‘real world.’ Through these repeated experiences, one understands how to interact with others, and recognizes normal and abnormal interactions.

Gender emerges as a significant factor with regards to interaction. In their study of men and women on social networking sites, Fogel and Nehmad (2009) identify gender differences in the ‘real world.’ For example, men engage in more risk taking behavior than women, while women report more need for trust and privacy. Women and girls are typically portrayed as more vulnerable to predators, almost always depicted as men (Lin, 2008). The fear of being alone or conversing with strangers is more attributed to girls and women.

**Social Interaction: ‘Virtual World’**

Like identity, in this study, social interaction that occurs in virtual worlds (through avatars) is conceived as a hybrid form of interaction, always mediated by the offline context in which it is occurring (through actual bodies). Students will interact in the gaps between the ‘real’
and virtual worlds. It is important to understand the ways that students interact with each other in the gaps in order to better support the learning community in both environments.

In some ways, social interaction in online environments transpires similarly to the ‘real world.’ Mediated by the computer (and in the case of virtual worlds, the avatar), two or more people engage in an action with the other in mind. The interaction that is enabled is dependent on the mediating technology (Garrison et al., 2000). For instance, while text-based discussion boards allow asynchronous, textual communication, interaction in virtual worlds occurs through avatars, allowing a shared experience through synchronous text, voice, and simulated body language. Because of these rich affordances, interaction is more similar to the ‘real world.’ Studies suggest that physical body norms, such as eye contact and personal distance are also present in virtual worlds (Benakou & Chorianopoulos, 2010).

Although similar in some ways, it is vital to remember Boellstorff’s (2008) conception that the virtual world “references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it” (p. 63). The rich technical affordances structure the interaction that can be realized. For example, any given moment in SL, a user may be reading several text messages, engaging in voice chat, trading items, and watching avatars move on the screen. This experience may feel chaotic to new users who are not accustomed to managing multiple, non-linear conversations at once (Edirisingha et al., 2009). The relative anonymity and changing appearances of avatars adds an additional complexity to interaction. Warburton (2009) shares, “The fluidity inherent in SL identity construction can be disconcerting and confusing. Building relations can be problematic when identities are never fixed” (p. 422).
Collins (personal communication) expresses in an interview that the social norms of virtual worlds are not nearly as clearly established as they are in the ‘real world’ because the environments are relatively recent in human history. Behaviors that some find acceptable in virtual worlds (such as when a student avatar shot his gun at my avatar) are not acceptable in the ‘real world.’ She explains,

With other people who come here for the first time, knowing that this is an environment where the rules of the real world don’t always apply…it comes with some baggage in that you don’t know what to expect and so when you don’t know what the rules are, and you don’t know what the protocol is, and you’re not sure what the norm is, you’re kind of at a loss for what to do when something happens to you or that you walk into that makes you feel uncomfortable.

This likely possibility of being unsure how to react is particularly troubling with regards to women students engaging in a virtual world learning community. Statistically speaking, most women students are likely to be ‘newbies,’ a slang term denoting new users to the virtual world. This means that they are less likely to be familiar with the social norms, which will be like the ‘real world’ in some ways and unlike it in others.

**Conclusion: Social Interaction**

As mentioned previously, interaction and identity constitute each other. In a virtual world, the particular construction of avatar influences social interaction, and social interaction informs avatar construction. Conceiving of interaction in a hybrid sense, somewhere between the ‘real’ and virtual worlds, it is important to understand how women students engage and interpret their social interactions in this unique context. For instance, women frequently avoid certain
places because of fear of risk to their physical bodies inflicted by others (Lin, 2008). Does the same avoidance occur when women direct avatars in virtual worlds, even though avatars are simply digital images and ‘unreal’? Exploring how women interpret and interact in virtual world learning communities will help clarify to what degree and in what nature the virtual is real.
Chapter 3
Review of Literature

With its brief history of integration in educational contexts, little theory-based or data-based research about gender and virtual world learning communities can be found. Dickey (2007) explains, “The emergence of new tools and technology is continually challenging the field of instructional design to find models and methods for developing engaging interactive learning environments” (p. 254). More educational research on virtual worlds is necessary in order to find models and methods for efficiently designing and facilitating these virtual learning communities, supporting learners’ needs and abilities. With these issues in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to review and critically analyze the literature that has been conducted on virtual worlds in order to identify emerging themes and findings, along with limitations and gaps.

Reviewed here are data-based studies and theory-based books and journal articles concerning interaction and learning in virtual worlds. Since the incorporation of virtual worlds in education has been recent, the literature was published within the last seven years. Women’s experiences in virtual worlds and MMORPGs apart from academic contexts are considered since there has been very little published about gender in virtual world learning communities. Theory and data-based studies examining MMORPGs are also included in this review since they are similar to virtual worlds with regards to avatar identity and interaction, so the underlying design principles may inform instructional design implications. Searched topics include avatar interaction, avatar customization, gender, motivation, learning, and environmental design and allowances. The literature was located through online databases including Education Research Complete, PsycINFO and ERIC databases by using the following key search phrases: “multi-
The literature review is organized around the main concepts posed in the research questions in this study: identity, interaction, and psychological and contextual factors. These will be explored through the lens of three emerging themes identified from the literature: immersion, body (avatar), and place (virtual world). Findings from past articles and books will then be applied to issues of the current study concerning virtual learning community and women. Finally, limitations and gaps will be addressed and the significance of this study will be clarified.

**Immersion: Body in Place**

A constant theme in the literature is the feeling of immersion that the virtual world elicits when users are logged on. The unique combination of experiencing a world-like environment through a world-like body encourages users to feel that they are really there. This suggests that virtual worlds may be an advantageous environment to select for an online learning community, as it enhances user social presence, allowing users to project themselves as ‘real’ in a ‘real’ place (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

**Identity**

As stated in Chapter 2, in this study, identity is conceived as a position situated in a particular context (Alcoff, 1988). When users log in to the virtual world, they are never completely online, as they can never fully escape the context of the ‘real world’ (McGerty, 2003). In this way, they are positioned between worlds, constructing a self that is not entirely
‘real’ or ‘virtual’ (Edirisingha et al., 2009; Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2006). Researchers that study issues of identity often focus on the user embodiment of the avatar.

Some researchers propose that avatars provide a means for users to extend their identities into the virtual space (see Turkle, 1995). For this reason, users often develop psychological and emotional connections to their avatars. When something good or bad happens to one’s avatar in the virtual world, she feels good or bad in the ‘real world’ (Atkinson, 2009). For example, Boellstorff (2008) mentions women users in SL who feel that they act more confidently in the ‘real world’ because of positive virtual world experiences. In their autoethnographic reflections of experiences in SL, Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) share a sobering story to illustrate this user-avatar connection. When Gaden innocently pushed a button in SL, it caused her avatar to assume an unwanted sexual position. She recalled gasping out loud, quickly getting her avatar out of the position and closing SL entirely, avoiding it for days afterward. Although she clearly did not assume this position in the ‘real world’ through her ‘real’ body, she felt violated as a person through her avatar.

Although no studies have directly addressed this, it may be helpful to listen to how users refer to their avatars in order to gain further insight into the user-avatar relationship. In most studies, pronouns such as “I” and “she” were often used in reference to avatars, with “it” seldom used. It is a possibility that those who use “I” to denote avatars may forge stronger connections and feel more presence in the virtual world. For example, when Gaden customized her avatar to appear more androgynous, other avatars paid less attention to her. She confessed in her journal, “I didn't belong... I felt like such a loser. In a virtual world!” (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009, p. 11). In a particularly intriguing example, a non-gaming woman student in my exploratory study who
did not forge connections to her avatar explained, “You are not yourself because you’re in the computer.” To date, very little research has focused on instances of not feeling immersion in the virtual world. One notable exception is R.E. Colby (2010), who noted that women students in a MMORPG academic context were often less engaged with their avatars. In this study, I will listen closely for the ways that women students refer to their avatars to gain insight into the meanings they attach to the virtual world.

Interaction

Compared to traditional text-based online environments, virtual worlds offer avatars that visualize synchronous interaction among community members. By some accounts, the virtual interaction is real. Meeting others through simulated bodies in the shared world-like environment heightens a sense of co-presence, of ‘really’ meeting and being with others (Edirisingha et al., 2009). Concerning academic contexts, Mayrath et al. (2007) found that students preferred avatar-based discussions over text-based because they enjoyed seeing themselves and others in the world. However, Mayrath et al. does not explore this phenomenon in greater detail, so it is unclear why the students enjoyed seeing themselves, and whether discussing through avatars helps deepen the discussion. In addition, activities are judged as more “real” in virtual worlds than traditional online environments (Sanchez, 2007).

Since the identity that projected in virtual worlds is not entirely ‘real world,’ it is not surprising that users generally describe others in terms of their hybrid identity. For example, a student in Edirisingha et al.’s (2009) classroom described other students in SL in terms “somewhere between the real people and the avatars that she met” (p. 474). Later in the article, the researchers judge the social presence in virtual worlds as somewhat of an illusion, with users
projecting “not-so-real identities” (p. 475). Regarding the student referenced above, they explain, “She was getting to know them through conversations between her avatar and other avatars, not between the real people” (p. 474). Through this deliberate use of language, it appears that Edirisingha et al. are privileging the ‘real world’ as the true marker of identity. This raises an important question of whether students learn and connect with others as meaningfully through these “not-so-real” identities.

Literature concerning how users conceive of hybrid identity in interaction is minimal. For instance, in Edirisingha et al.’s (2009) study, although students felt like they were really meeting others, there was an acknowledgement that avatars did not fully convey ‘real world’ identity. At this time, it is unclear which factors encourage acceptance of others’ hybrid identities. Obviously, this acceptance affects identity and interaction with others, and directs the learning community. In this study, I will delve deeply into the relationship between individual conceptions of hybrid identity and virtual interaction in a virtual world learning community.

**Mediating Factors**

Studies that mention immersion in virtual worlds do not often acknowledge the full context of the user, namely the ‘offline’ location. Using the conceptions of hybrid identity and interaction as existing in the gaps between the ‘real’ and virtual worlds, this omission is problematic and may not capture the complexity of the immersive experience. For instance, Edirisingha et al. (2009) studied students in an online context, in which the students never physically met. Perhaps the feeling of really meeting others was heightened because they did not have the ‘real world’ cues to rely upon. Regarding interaction, a student in my exploratory study shared, “I always had my classmates right next to me who I was in full conversation with and it
seemed to keep me out of the virtual world.” Related to this comment, no studies have addressed the possibility or experiences of users not feeling immersed in the virtual world. While Royse et al. (2007) mentions women who do not identify with their characters in a game, they are non-gamers who never play. This contrasts from the women in my study, who are participating in a virtual world context on an academic, mandatory basis. These factors need to be further explored, and will be addressed in my current study.

**Body: Avatars**

In this section, studies that explore the influence of avatars in hybrid identity and interaction will be reviewed. Several themes emerge from the literature, such as the influence of choice and control of avatars on perceptions of agency and ownership in the virtual space.

**Choice and Control of Avatars**

Just as with a ‘real’ body, the way one constructs and controls her simulated body will vary depending on the situated context (Vicdan & Ulusoy, 2008). While construction is accomplished through customization of the avatar appearance, control refers to the user’s ability to move her avatar in the desired way within the environment. According to previous literature, these personal and social expressions greatly influence identity projection and interaction in the virtual world.

**Identity.** When a user chooses an avatar, she chooses how she will be represented to others in the virtual world. A theme that cuts across studies is that when users have a choice in avatar selection, they feel more empowered and perceive heightened agency in the environment (Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2006). For instance, Taylor found that when women gamers were forced to select pre-determined sexy feminine avatars in a MMORPG, they often reported feeling
conflicted with the meanings of their avatars, even ignoring their avatars’ look altogether. This is a troubling finding that may negatively impact the level of social presence a user may perceive in the community. If one does not feel accurately personally represented by her avatar, she may not feel as ‘real’ in the virtual space, distorting her hybrid identity and interrupting interactions. In contrast, students in Falloon’s (2010) study designed avatars that were infused with personal characteristics of the users such as school uniforms, which elicited a sense of agency and social identity. Having many choices in avatar customization supports the potential for users to enhance personal and social identity in the virtual world (R.I. Colby, 2010).

Concerning issues of gender, women almost always choose to design culturally attractive feminine avatars, regardless of past gaming experience or platform options (Beavis & Charles, 2005; Kennedy, 2006, Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2006). At this time, proposed reasons for this choice are anecdotal. In Royse et al.’s study, some women gamers reported feeling pleasure by the ability to create “a character who is sexy and strong” (p. 564), while others downgraded the sexy appearance and explained, “It’s not like women want to play ugly characters. They just want to be attractive on their own terms” (p. 564). R.E. Colby (2010) suggests that gendered performances in women gamers tend to be multiple and conflicting, feeling they have to be ‘assertive but feminine.’ This often places them in a position of negotiation between men gamers and women non-gamers in shared contexts. The choice of feminine avatars is an issue that deserves additional exploration, especially when considering that men customize avatars in more diverse ways (Taylor, 2006). In addition, these studies were all conducted in gaming environments, which differ from social virtual worlds. The emphasis on being assertive and strong may not apply in learning communities as it does in games.
Interaction. As stated in Chapter 2, identity and interaction shape each other. The way an avatar appears to others greatly influences interaction. For instance, Petrakou (2010) compared default avatars and highly customized avatars and found that the default avatars were much less likely to have successful social encounters, not being approached by others as much. In addition, while women avatars were approached more by both men and women, they were more likely to approach avatars that looked similar to their own avatars. Reasons for this are not understood in the literature. It is possible that women, who are more likely to have less experience in virtual worlds, approach those they would prefer to approach in the ‘real world.’

In turn, virtual interaction influences expression and perception of hybrid identity. Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) share that a significant factor regarding their customization choices was their experiences of other avatars in the environment. While personally rejecting the trend of customizing sexy avatars in SL, they expressed that being surrounded by sexy avatars made them feel the familiar ‘real world’ social pressures to ‘fit in.’ Feldon and Kafai (2008) found that their middle-school students did not embed their avatars with deep personal meaning, but rather used them as focuses of social interaction. They observed that students who met in the computer lab mainly conversed about avatar appearances in the class, critiquing avatars and trading avatar parts.

Although unclear at this time, the literature hints that women may be more likely to avoid social interactions with others in the virtual world. For instance, some women students in O’Connor’s (2009) study were not comfortable interacting with others, but she does not offer reasons for this. When Gaden was navigating her avatar in a place with other avatars nearby, she avoided them. She explains, “I’m not sure why. I guess…I don’t want to get myself into any kind
of entanglement with anyone, no matter how innocent” (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009, p. 10). If women are more likely to avoid interactions, it is important to understand the underlying factors, as a learning community is predicated on interaction.

**Mediating factors.** Several possible mediating factors are mentioned in these findings, including social norms of the virtual and ‘real’ worlds, individual gaming experience, and individual technical skill.

First, the social context of the virtual world structures the expression of identity and interactions that can be realized. For example, SL is a heterosexual, gendered world in which most avatars are culturally attractive (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009). It is not simply the users’ personal choices that influence this trend, but the options offered by the technology itself. Dumitrica and Gaden explain, “Our choices in terms of the appearance and to some extent the behavior of our avatars are heavily mediated by the options presented by the platform at the enrollment stage” (p. 15).

Social norms of the ‘real world’ invariably are carried into the virtual world. Regarding the finding that women almost always represent themselves with feminine avatars, Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) explain that their positioning as women in the ‘real world’ was familiar and represented a comfort zone of sorts. When combined with a lack of gaming experience, this customization choice may elicit feelings of vulnerability in women. Dumitrica and Gaden share,

In the new environment of SL, we felt a discomfort and a fear that was both familiar and less

so…This world is unknown to me as a woman, I suddenly feel afraid and vulnerable…It was a feeling of being completely alone in strange surroundings…I was scared (p. 10).
When Dumitrica decided to customize her avatar as a man instead, they explain, “She opted for a male avatar out of fear...of being a woman in a world where she didn’t know what that would entail, but where her (real) life experiences suggested the particular possibility of being rendered a sexualized object” (p. 10). These stories raise some troubling notions about non-gaming women. If they customize as women, they may feel fear; if they customize as a man, they may not feel personally represented. These issues of identity are not experienced by men who participate in virtual worlds. Regarding interaction, Gaden’s claim that she did not want to become “entangled” with others “no matter how innocent” (issues of safety) also suggests that she fears interaction (disconnection from others), although she cannot clearly articulate why. Women’s reluctance to engage with others in the environment must be further explored if members of learning communities are to be supported.

Individual skill also emerges as a contextual factor that is tied to feelings of control and agency. For instance, Petrakou’s (2010) finding that highly customized avatars experience more social interaction suggests that users need to be technically skilled in customization in order to fully participate and have presence within the community. Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) disclose how disempowered they felt in the virtual world in this regard:

Manipulating, or even escaping, very traditional (in a Westernized sense) male/female binary and the stereotypes associated with this, depends largely on our willingness to devote time and monetary resources to learn how to make new skins for ourselves, or to acquire them by purchase... (p. 15).

Finally, the offline context always matters. For example, in Feldon and Kafai’s (2008) study of students in a computer lab, avatar customization was discussed at great length.
At this time, it is unclear whether this result would be found in a completely online situation. At this time, the simultaneous relationship between offline and virtual world contexts and the subsequent effect on avatar customization is not explored. My study will attempt to forge this ground.

**Place: Virtual World**

Virtual worlds are unique in that they are not simply a medium or web application, but an actual place inhabited by people. With this conception in mind, it is necessary to examine the design of these virtual places in order to understand how it structures identity and interaction. Previous studies have focused on the ways in which the social norms of interaction in the virtual world relate to social norms in the ‘real world.’ Issues of body language, harassment, and communication affordances and protocol emerge.

**Social Norms of Virtual World Interaction**

As with identity, the social norms of the virtual world are a unique interaction of the virtual world and ‘real world’ settings. What is acceptable in a virtual world cannot be inferred by referring to ‘real world’ norms, but ‘real world’ norms inevitably influence them. In this section, I will explore how virtual worlds are similar and dissimilar to ‘real world’ norms with special consideration to issues of gender. Issues of communication features and world design are included.

**Similarities to real world.** Because of its’ physical resemblance to the ‘real world,’ the virtual world encourages some ‘real world’ social norms. For instance, users tend to position their avatars the way they would position their bodies in the ‘real world,’ maintaining a personal distance and facing avatars while conversing (Petrakou, 2010; Yee & Bailenson, 2007).
A troubling theme emerging from the literature is that women face the same inequalities as in the ‘real world,’ being harassed in the virtual space because of their gendered status. In her study of women in a MMORPG, Taylor (2003) shared that most women gamers received unsolicited sexualized comments from male avatars at one point or another. One woman shares, “You’re sitting there minding your own business and somebody says, ‘Hey, nice boobs.’ That’s not what my character is…There’s more to my character than her chest” (p. 40). Taylor remarks in her conclusion, “It is unfortunate if some of the positive experiences women can find in games continue to be countered by familiar old offline practices” (p. 40). Unfortunately, instances of harassment have also been documented in virtual world academic contexts. Since some virtual worlds like SL are public, students can be approached by anyone who is logged in. Collins (personal communication) recalled concerns from female faculty members who told her, “Whoa, there are some creepy guys on that [SL] welcome island.” This subjective experience of students, especially women, interacting with potentially anonymous others in a public space has yet to be meaningfully explored.

Dissimilarities. While some virtual social norms resemble the ‘real world’ for better or worse, it also differs in some ways. In SL, for instance, it is entirely acceptable to approach strangers and begin speaking to them. A virtual world like SL offers several communication options that are found in the ‘real world,’ such as text, voice, and body language. However, unlike the ‘real world,’ the social norms of this interaction are still being established. Through a survey, Collins (personal communication) found that most people initiate a conversation with a stranger using text and then move to voice as the relationship grows over time. Regarding people who already know each other from ‘real life,’ voice is often used without discomfort. Voice is a
tool for self-disclosure, acting as a tie to the person’s ‘real’ identity, and indicates trust (Carr, Oliver, & Burn, 2008). However, Collins emphasizes that these only offer potential trends and that the negotiation of social spaces has not been really worked out.

Communicating with others in virtual worlds requires a certain skill in multi-tasking which is not necessary in the ‘real world’ (Edirisingha et al., 2009). At any given time, a user can be participating in public and private text discussions, using voice, observing what is happening on the screen, and moving her avatar to indicate body language. Edirisingha et al. question whether these kinds of interactions truly elicit a sense of social presence in users. While rich, they describe the social presence as something of an illusion. For instance, while body language is often enacted on a subconscious level with people, avatar body language is conscious. Avatar facial expressions occur after the communication has been made instead of ‘in the moment,’ for instance, because the user must select the right buttons. Edirisingha et al. argue that the body language afforded through avatars offer limited social cues to understanding others’ thought processes and intentions, a critical element of maintaining a meaningful conversation. This is concerning when thinking about a learning community.

**Mediating factors.** Several mediating factors emerge, namely familiarity with virtual world social norms, gender, time, and the offline context.

Since interaction with others in virtual worlds proves to be a complex process, a user must be skilled in managing this process. Those with more experience in similar environments like games may be at an advantage with regards to community access. For instance, being approached by strangers is not an unusual experience to gamers. It stands to reason that the more experienced users will also be better able to handle potentially uncomfortable situations with
others. In my exploratory study, for instance, a man was approached by a naked male avatar. Instead of feeling panic, he quickly offered the avatar some clothes as a way to send him a subtle message that he was not interested in that particular type of interaction. It is unclear whether new users would have reacted in this way.

Again, gender emerges as an area of concern. Unfortunately, a virtual world like SL may unintentionally support harassment of women. First, the technical design options encourage the customization of culturally sexy feminine avatars. In their study of ‘real world’ gender harassment, Hitlan, Pryor, Hesson-McInnis, and Olson (2009) found that women were more likely to be harassed by men when they were first primed to be viewed as sexual objects. Several studies have explored the sexualized nature of feminine characters in video games, usually portrayed as attractive, sexy, innocent, and supplemental to masculine characters (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Miller & Summers, 2007). Dumtrica and Gaden (2009) relied on their personal conceptions of male-dominated gaming environments when entering SL; “An awareness of past experiences of women being targets of hate-speech and flaming in such environments accompanied our first steps into SL” (p. 10).

Gender and gaming experience may interact to produce a unique combination. For instance, Edirisingha et al. (2009) found that a student (woman) that wanted to communicate with others was unsure of what to do when first approached by strangers. She thought, “What shall I do now? I wanted to go away and hide somewhere” (p. 474). I found a similar situation in my exploratory study. Britney, a woman student who was interested in communicating with others, said “I had my first virtual chat with a stranger and I felt so much anxiety. I didn’t know what to say or who to respond to.” Collins (personal communication) suggests that a lack of
knowledge of social norms may be a factor; “Being uncomfortable may relate to security in a self-conscious sense. They don’t want to be rude and step out of line.” Along with a desire to engage in socially acceptable ways, safety issues also may be a factor. For instance, Britney shared, “I told a girl I went to UC and I was afraid she could come find me or something.” To date, no study has explored issues of safety in virtual world learning communities. Past literature does suggest that college-aged women voice more concerns about revealing personal information over online networks than men (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Peluchette & Karl, 2008). While neither researcher directly addresses why, Fogel and Nehmad suggest a tie to the ‘real world’; men are often more comfortable disclosing private information than women. Considering the relationship between safety and connection with others, this is area of vital concern.

Time and practice appear to be factors which support technical competence and knowledge of virtual world social norms. For instance, Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) mentioned that they noticed the sexualized nature of avatars less as time went on, and better knew what to expect in their explorations. In her study of an after school club for girls, Carr (2005) found that as technical competence increased, more preferences for participation emerged among girls, increasing activity and feelings of confidence. In the studies of Edirisingha et al. (2009) and O’Connor (2009), students learned how to technically communicate over time.

Finally, the physical design of the offline and online contexts is also influential, along with the content of tasks. Sanchez (2007) suggests that just as in a ‘real world’ academic context, students need a purpose in the virtual space so they can meaningfully interact. In Sanchez’s study, students met in SL but had nothing to do and not much to interact with (empty campus were described as ‘hell’ and ‘isolating’) so they pushed each other off of cliffs. He jokes, “They
were literally dying for social interaction!” (p. 3). Offline contexts are influential as well. If students are sharing a computer lab, the social norms of the ‘real world’ may be more salient, since they can converse in the traditional classroom space.

**Gaps and Limitations**

Given that the literature about virtual worlds is only around seven years old, there are some significant gaps and limitations in the research to be addressed. These include the absence of acknowledging gender in virtual world academic contexts and an incomplete understanding of the contextual and psychological factors that influence women students’ identity and interaction in virtual worlds.

The most glaring gap in the literature is that no study has specifically documented the gendered experiences of male or female students in a virtual world. For example, Edirisingha et al. (2009) explored the experiences of college students in SL, but no mention was made concerning gender. For example, in the case of the female student wanting to run away from a virtual stranger, they explained that she was a ‘newbie’ and coming to terms with her own virtual identity. While this could certainly be a factor, as literature does support it, this interpretation alone ignores the larger context of this particular student who has lived a lifetime of gendered identity. In another case, O’Connor (2009) noted that some women in her study were not comfortable talking to others in SL, but chose not to address it, instead reporting, “the author did not find any patterns…that appeared to suggest significant differences in how males or females valued and interpreted their experiences” (p. 217). In their review of gaming research studies, Jenson and deCastell (2010) found that a common methodological limitation is to dismiss gender as a significant variable, which impedes the progress of moving past what is already known.
They assert, “The very real need for research on gender and gameplay that more carefully reports on, documents, and troubles identities of players, especially in relation to gender, cannot be underestimated” (p. 64). The present study aims to fulfill this call. Judging from the literature regarding women and gaming use, gender does play a factor in women students’ experiences in virtual worlds. Including this as a significant factor will generate thoughtful principles of instructional design that can support future students.

Among the studies, few deeply explore the mediating factors that influence women students’ identity and interaction in a virtual world. For instance, it is unclear why women almost always choose to design feminine avatars and why only women have been mentioned in the literature as avoiding interaction. Psychological factors such as feelings of safety may be present, such as in Dumitrica and Gaden’s (2009) reluctance to become “entangled” with others in SL, “no matter how innocent” (p. 10). In addition, the complex interaction of the ‘real’ and the virtual contexts is rarely documented. Dumitrica and Gaden provide the most in-depth consideration of dual contexts by explicitly addressing how their ‘real life’ identities as women impacted their experiences as avatars. Although this study identifies some overarching factors, the researchers were adult women who self-selected the environment for purposes of research, which differs from students who must participate in virtual worlds for a grade. In addition, very few studies attempted to draw connections between immediate offline and virtual contexts. Ignoring the ‘real world’ context produces a distorted vision of what is observed, as users are never offline. In a classroom, surely the physical presence of peers will influence how students construct their avatars and interact with others in the virtual world environment. It is important to better understand how these contexts shift in order to better support students as they negotiate
between the two. An in-depth understanding of mediating factors such as classroom context and virtual world context will clarify issues of instructional design, supporting students, shaping activities and the design of the virtual world itself.
Chapter 4

Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to explore the psychological and contextual factors which influence women students' establishment of identity and interaction in a virtual world learning community. Considering that women students are the focus of this inquiry and emphasis is on a potentially gendered social context, I have selected a feminist qualitative methodology, which supports these unique conditions. In this chapter, epistemology, methodology, and methods will be clarified and described with regards to the present study.

Epistemology

Every research question is informed by the researcher’s particular epistemology, a theory of the nature of knowledge and how it is produced (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This theory derives from the basic set of assumptions the person holds about the social world. In this section, I will contrast positivist and feminist notions of epistemology in terms of general philosophy and the role of the researcher.

**Positivist.** The positivist conception of knowledge is that knowledge is an entity that exists on its own, outside of the human mind and apart from the context in which it is situated (Morawski, 2001). Therefore, the quest of positivist researchers is to essentially separate the knowledge from the individual in order to discover ‘objective’ knowledge that can be generalized to the larger population. In the case of participation in virtual worlds, a positivist researcher may explain the students’ actions by attempting to identify the social patterns that invariably exist in the virtual world, which is conceived as an independent entity, beyond the participants’ personal control (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). From this epistemological viewpoint, the
researcher-participant relationship is one of general detachment, as a relationship may bias the results. This produces subjective rather than objective knowledge, viewed as distorted from this perspective.

**Feminist.** Feminist epistemology generally assumes a ‘relational’ view of knowledge construction, that learning and development occurs in relationship with others (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). This means that knowledge is never traditionally ‘objective,’ universal, or static. Morawski (2001) explains, “Knowing can only be realized with various gazes back and forth” (p. 64). Applying this philosophy to research, knowledge is not simply discovered, but constructed by participants (Alcoff, 1988). Therefore, the objective of feminist research is to put the participants in the center and track how knowledge is constructed by in the moment. This approach is intended to preserve the complexity of the nature of knowledge.

In addition, feminist research often places women in the center, as some feminist researchers claim that positivist epistemologies, “whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be ‘knowers’ or agents of knowledge” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). The researcher acknowledges that she too is human first and foremost, and that knowledge is produced within relationships. Therefore, bearing relationships with participants and experiencing subjectivity is not only encouraged, but crucial (Morawski).

This school of thought provides a solid foundation for the research questions posed in this study. First, the research problem emerged from the results of my exploratory study about gender in virtual worlds, along with my personal experience as a woman in a virtual world. Therefore, it is appropriate to place women at the center of the study; “If one begins inquiry with what appears problematic from the perspective of women’s experiences, one is led to design research
for women” (Harding, 1987, p. 8). Given that virtual worlds are historically dominated by men in terms of design, participation, and research, along with the fact that women face issues of body image and harassment, this inquiry seems especially relevant. It is important for feminist researchers to ask the questions that women want answered (Harding, 1987). Second, given the complex interaction of ‘real’ and virtual worlds, it is vital to keep social context in mind. In my conceptual framework, I define identity as a particular position with emphasis on the immediate context in which the person is situated (Alcoff, 1988). In this study, women students will be present in the classroom with peers and in the virtual world with peers’ avatars and strangers of all varieties. Because of this, women participants will define themselves in relation to others (such as men students or strangers in SL), sometimes resulting in a connection and other times in opposition (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Therefore, it is important that I listen for the subtle ways they define themselves and others in their language in order to preserve the complexity of women students’ experiences in this unique context. Documenting the ways the identities and interactions shift as the context shifts may help to understand how women construct their experiences in the gaps between the two worlds.

**Qualitative Feminist Methodology**

Epistemology invariably influences the selection of methodology, the manner in which research should proceed (Harding, 1987). In this section, qualitative feminist methodology will be explored with regards to knowledge production, data interpretation, and research rigor.

**Knowledge Production**

Feminist researchers strive to understand the social context of knowledge production, namely what is being produced, who is producing it and how it is being produced (Moss, 2006).
Issues do not emerge independently of human thinking or in a clear, logical order; rather, they are investigated in a particular point of time by particular people because insights are ultimately grounded in the social world (Bhavnani, 2004). This idea inspired my detailed look in Chapter 1 about how virtual worlds emerged at this particular time in human history. Gaming environments are typically male-dominated spaces, affecting who becomes interested in studying them (traditionally men), who is studied (typically men), the concepts employed, and the results that can be generated (Jenson & deCastell, 2010). Because knowledge is never neutral, issues of power must be acknowledged and assumptions not taken for granted.

**Data Interpretation**

The data that emerges from a feminist qualitative study is acknowledged as subjective. Several factors will shape how the data is interpreted, such as accountability, partiality, and positionality (Bhanvani, 2004).

**Accountability.** Feminist researchers are accountable when they actively question taken-for-granted discourse, thereby disrupting the subtle reproduction of inequalities (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). It is important to listen to the participants in order to understand not only what they are saying, but what frameworks and relationships they are using to tell the story. It is important to keep this context in mind in order to “unpack invisibility” (Taylor, 2006, p. 100).

This seems especially relevant to the current study, given that the historical and social context of gaming, in which virtual worlds originate, is masculine. When a researcher is acutely aware of the terms used in research, it helps to ensure that they are not simply discovering the social norms that already exist (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). For instance, in gaming studies, the terms ‘competition’ and ‘cooperation’ are often defined in opposition, the terms typically defined
in masculine terms (Jenson & deCastell). Because of these definitions from the outset, women are commonly found as less competitive and more cooperative than men. Jenson and deCastell write, “If we define the matter from the outset in terms that describe only what happens on male turf, we are unlikely to illuminate much about the situation as it is possible for women” (p. 17).

A way to combat this is to let women’s voices help define the matter. In order to break from the typical gender stereotypes about women in gaming and virtual environments, research must “explicitly and actively take prior differences and contextual factors into account” (Jenson & deCastell, 2010, p. 60). This is the approach I am taking in this study. Put simply, I am interested to discover how women participate in SL, when they participate, and who they participate with. This outlook helps to overcome the taken-for-granted assumptions that women just are not good or interested in these types of environments. Taking these factors into account helps make women’s varied and multiple experiences more visible and less framed in opposition to men.

**Partiality.** Partiality is an expressed acceptance that the researcher is not going to collect the complete truth, no matter how many methods or analysis techniques are employed (Bhavnani, 2004). In an interview, for instance, a woman is not going to share her whole self, simply what she chooses to bring in response to the questions asked and the relationship with the researcher.

A common methodological flaw of virtual studies is the assumption that asking girls and women about their gaming attitudes and practices produces completely objective, accurate information (Jenson & deCastell, 2010). For instance, when Jenson and deCastell (2008) interviewed students about their gaming practices, almost all of the girls replied that they played
with male relatives, while none of the boys said they played with female relatives. It is unlikely that both of these accounts are entirely accurate. The researchers explain, “These discrepancies only make sense if we presume that what we have are not informative answers to our questions, but informative performances of gender-normativity” (p. 21). In another instance, inexperience with gaming may produce partial answers. Taylor (2008) explains that women may not know what games they could enjoy when they have not personally experienced them, and so they give answers based on limited experience. Designing virtual environments or structuring activities solely based on these answers without question will only “structurally re-cite and re-entrench the very inequities they seek to re-mediate” (Jenson & deCastell, 2008, p. 23). Certainly, asking women about how they play, who they play with, and why they play are important questions. However, the answers should not be accepted as objective truth, but rather an insight into the ways they construct partial meaning in a primarily masculine domain.

**Positionality.** Phillips (2010) explains, “The ways in which the different collaborating actors position themselves and each other…in processes of negotiation shape the kinds of knowledge produced” (p. 7). For this reason, it is important for the researcher to acknowledge her own position in the study (reflexivity), and also document the relationships that emerge from the study.

**Researcher.** A particular research question emerges in a particular time and place by a particular person (Bhavnani, 2004). It is important to acknowledge this person’s social position within the context of the study and the larger context of the world. For instance, I exist not only as a researcher, but a person – more specifically a white, young, middle-class American heterosexual woman student who has a penchant for virtual worlds. Because of these overlapping
affiliations, I am personally grounded in particular contexts that will inevitably affect how I select and interpret the data. To date, only one virtual world study (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009) has been found that conveys positionality. Concerning their initial explorations of SL, they articulate:

It is important that we recognize how we approach this infrastructure from our own situated perspectives – in our particular cases, as white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, European, women, and professionally as academics – and how this situatedness frames our interpretation(s) of the environment…a self-reflective awareness of these (partial) positions is central to our efforts to understand our own processes of observing and performing gender in SL. We argue that these situated perspectives frame our interpretation of a new (to us) environment, helping us to make sense of, and act within it (p. 6).

Through this statement of positionality, Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) acknowledge the utter importance of their own perspectives on the research results they find. Applying this to the present study, I too must be aware that my subjective experiences as a woman, and a woman in SL, will influence what is found, and the results are not ‘value-free.’

*Relationships.* Relationships are central to the dimensions of feminist research design (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). While traditional research strives for a neutral relationship in the interest of avoiding biased responses or results, feminist researchers accept that relationships are never neutral or static. For example, I will be interviewing women, and our shared social identity as women will influence the content and direction of our discussion, and the knowledge that is ultimately produced. Taylor (2008) highlights that “gender is always being
produced by our participants and us, with regards to the greater social and cultural conversations” (p. 56).

The researcher-participant relationship is complicated by the differences in social power. For example, in the current study, the women students and I are both positioned in the context together, but in different ways. Traditionally, the researchers are seen as the ones in power. In addition, I am also older and viewed as more knowledgeable about the subject in question. This relationship will ultimately shape the process of kinds of knowledge that is produced. To counteract this, it is important for the researcher to immediately foster a sense of an equal, respectful relationship with the participant. After all, the researcher has things to learn and the participant has knowledge to offer. In feminist research, relationships do not stop once consent has been obtained, but develop throughout the process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Trust is key in order to create a common ground and come to an understanding with others (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2004). This is realized by showing the participants that their particular interests and knowledge is valued; for instance, interview questions being crafted to each individual’s responses.

**Research Rigor**

There are several measures of the rigor of feminist research, namely generalizability and validity. Feminist conceptions of generalizability pertain to issues of common social experiences. By detailing the rich experiences of particular people in particular contexts, embedded meanings emerge that are essential aspects of human experience. For example, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) say that “in the particular resides the general” (p. 189). For instance, not everyone who logs into SL will find themselves in a situation of harassment, and others may never log in.
However, they can still identify with the rich themes grounded in the story I shared in Chapter 1 – of panic, of feeling like a victim – that are universally human.

From a positivist viewpoint, validity means that one is measuring what was intended. For qualitative feminist researchers, validity is conceived as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 87). This validity of a study depends on the relationship of the findings to the ‘real world.’ Because of this fundamental tie to the ‘real world,’ a certain combination of research methods will not ensure validity (Maxwell). Maxwell proposes several ways of obtaining validity in a study. It is important to collect a complete, rich description of what transpired in observations or interviews, and triangulation of sources helps to balance out the limitations that inevitably exist within a particular research method. Soliciting feedback from others, those that are both internal and external to the study, also helps identify taken-for-granted assumptions in researcher interpretations. In feminist research, validity is largely realized within the relationship of researcher and participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Methods**

Methods, ways of collecting and analyzing data, are selected based on the embraced methodology. A debate continues about whether certain methods can be labeled ‘feminist.’ While Harding (1987) emphasizes that the epistemology grounding the research is what makes it feminist, Moss (2006) stresses that epistemology informs methods, and methods in turn shape epistemology; what is ultimately important is how feminist researchers make the methods integral to the research. In this section, methods for this study will be described, including the selection of academic context, participants, research design, data sources and collection.
procedures, and data analysis. For each, connections will be drawn to support the selection of a qualitative feminist methodology.

**Selection of Academic Context**

Since my focus is on college-aged women in virtual world academic contexts, participants were recruited from one undergraduate liberal arts course section at a large Midwestern university during the winter quarter of 2010. This class was selected because SL was to be used to accomplish learning objectives, and the instructor was supportive of this line of research, as she was the instructor of the class in the exploratory study as well. In the beginning, I visited the class to explain the research study and obtained consent from those who wished to participate. The class is described in more detail below to illuminate the ‘real world’ context in question.

The course was in the area of communication and technology. According to the syllabus, integration in SL was intended to fulfill the learning objective of exploring “how people use digital media in contemporary society, in what context and what effect different media messages and platforms have on users.” For 3 of the 10 weeks, the focus of activity and discussion was on SL. Students physically met twice a week, once in a traditional classroom and once in the computer lab. Regarding the three computer lab days, activities consisted of a basic orientation to SL, avatar customization, collaborative exploration, and a session with distanced guest speakers.

From this class of 27, I sought consent from both men and women in the interest of preserving the complexity of the context, since women’s experiences in the computer lab and virtual world experiences would be with men. Also, since identity is conceived in relation to others, including men’s ideas in the analysis may prove fruitful in better understanding the ideas
of women. I received written consent from each person, although they agreed to various levels of participation, which will be explained further. All in all, 14 women and 13 men agreed to participate in the study.

Data Sources

In this study, a survey, blogs, interviews, and observations were collected in order to provide multiple ways for women to express voice and to preserve the dual contexts of the ‘real’ and virtual worlds.

Survey. A survey was distributed in the beginning of the class in order to assess gaming experience and attitudes. Gender and gaming experience emerged as major factors in my exploratory study, so for this study it was important to be very clear about their gaming experience from the beginning. Survey items covered contextual issues of gaming, such as game preferences, frequency of play, who they play with, their perception of technical expertise, and how their general perceptions about games and virtual worlds. The full survey is located in Appendix A. Survey responses helped clarify which women would be most appropriate to select for interviewing. I wanted to include women with a diverse range of gaming experience in order to better understand the relationship of gender and gaming.

Blogs. I collected blog entries that were composed by the participating students. A blog is essentially a website that “allows users to reflect, share opinions, and discuss various topics in the form of an online journal while readers may comment on posts” (Wiktionary, 2010). Blogs are a powerful data source because they help to capture the thoughts, ideas and meaning of participants (Lichtman, 2006). The advantage of examining these in research is that the participant is firmly in control and has the freedom to present what they want and what they
know in a first-person narrative. Blogs also allow the learners to reflect on their experiences and deliberately craft it in their own time, as opposed to interviews which occur in the moment. Levinson (2007) adds that blogs combine the personal control of email with the public sphere of mass media. Since blogs are read by others in the class, they offer a unique window into how students present themselves and share meaning in public. However, the element of researcher-participant relationship is absent from blogs, so it is impossible to be sure that one is accurately interpreting the blog separately from the author.

Students were given structured prompts from the professor to address in their blog entries. For this class, one blog pertained to SL. For this particular blog assignment, I designed the prompt, inspired by photovoice methods. Photovoice is a process of taking, sharing, and comparing photographs taken by individuals in the community (Meyer & Kroeger, 2005). Photovoice allows the individuals (researcher included) to see how realities are constructed. For this blog assignment, students logged on to SL on their own time and explored an area of their choosing, taking at least one digital snapshot of their avatars. In their blog, they shared the picture, writing about what they saw and how they felt during the immersive experience. This activity occurred after the final session in the computer lab. The full prompt can be found in Appendix B.

Observations. I conducted observations, attending the three SL-focused computer lab sessions. Observations are effective data sources for this study because they occur in the immediate context, which is vital to document (Lichtman, 2006). As a researcher, I can see or hear things that may escape the participants at the moment, which can be followed up by other data means (Lichtman). For instance, one of the women students, Ramona, exclaimed out loud in
the lab, “I hate this game.” I questioned her about this in the interview and she did not remember voicing it.

Regarding my observer role, I was an active participant in the class, helping to run the three sessions with the teacher. Sometimes I was leading the class and other times I was supporting them technically. Throughout the sessions, I had a notepad in hand and furiously jotted down my emerging thoughts. I also took several snapshots from within SL, in which my avatar was present. I found that in contrast to my exploratory study in which I was a passive observer, the students in this class were more open with me. I think my position as researcher was less intimidating since I was also a teacher of sorts and a supporter of their learning. Forging these relationships in the computer lab helped to build the common ground that was later realized in the interviews.

**Interviews.** Interviews are particularly meaningful because they allow the researcher to view a window into the participant’s world, getting a clearer idea of how they interpret reality (Lichtman, 2006). Concerning this study, I believe interviews are the most vital sources collected. From a feminist research perspective, it is appropriate to view these women students as bearers of knowledge. Since I want to explore how women students interpret their identity and interactions in a virtual world, I need to better understand the meanings they assign to their experiences.

Twice throughout the quarter, I interviewed five women in the course. The first interview was conducted before the first SL class session, in order to gauge their initial perceptions of SL and of online communication in general. The second was conducted after the last SL class session, to see how their perceptions had developed and to hear how they interpreted their virtual
experiences. These audio-recorded interviews were conducted face-to-face in my cubicle and lasted 30 minutes on average. These particular women were selected based on the gaming and virtual world survey results, since my exploratory study suggested that gender and gaming experience both influenced women students’ experiences in SL. I selected women with varying virtual experience, from little, to occasional, to those who play every day, in order to identify the differences that may emerge.

The guiding approach to the interview was inspired by the qualitative feminist approach called the Listening Guide. The basic tenet of the Guide is that voice is central to our way of working – our channel of connection, a pathway that brings the inner psychic world of feelings and thoughts out into the open air of relationship where it can be heard by oneself and by other people (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 20).

The language one uses does not reflect objective reality, but rather shapes the way she understands experiences (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). For this reason, it is important to deeply consider who is speaking and the words they use to tell the story. Using methods proposed by the Listening Guide, the researcher intently listens to the person, paying particular attention to the way in which words and silences are expressed, as they are voiced within a particular relational context (Raider-Roth, 2005). For example, Anderson and Jack (1991) explain that a woman’s discussion of her life “may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men’s dominant position in the culture; and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman’s personal experience” (p. 19). Listening for these contexts proves especially important in this particular study, considering that the women students are forging into traditionally male-dominated space.
Ultimately, the goal of the Guide is to render the complexity of the person’s thinking and to get to the heart of the complex questions one is asking. It supports the feminist view that what is explored should yield useful results for the participants as well as researchers. For this reason, my interview guide offers basic questions such as gaming status and feelings of safety, but the direction of the interview depends on the negotiations between the participant and me (Mishler, 1986). The Listening Guide “requires the active presence of the researcher and an acute desire to engage with the unique subjectivity of each research participant” (Raider-Roth, p. 159). The full interview guides are located in Appendix C.

Immediately before and after each interview, I wrote down my thoughts, hunches and feelings concerning the particular interview. In these “reader responses,” I noted my ideas about our developing relationship, individual personalities, personal feelings about her responses, and questions I wished I had asked or will ask in the future. This reflexive process helps to maintain validity, as it provides a more complete picture of the interview. This helps to ensure that the story I am listening to is hers, not mine (Maxwell, 1996). In addition, I engaged in member checking during the analysis phase of my data in order to help rule out misinterpretation of data (Maxwell, 1996). This was conducted through e-mails.

Data Analysis

Since I am approaching these data sources from a qualitative feminist perspective, I have selected two implicitly feminist data analysis methods. For the blogs and observations, I am using a grounded theory approach. For the interview, I am going to use the voice-centered relational Listening Guide.
Grounded theory. Grounded theory is a widely used analysis method in qualitative research (Clarke, 2006). While there are several branches of grounded theory, generally it means becoming immersed (“grounded”) in the data so that embedded meanings and relationships between concepts can emerge (“theory”) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This is a suitable analysis in this study since I am interested in the psychological and contextual factors that influence women student’s identity and interactions in the virtual world. This is a complex subject, which will result in many overlapping relationships between variables. Grounded theory will help clarify the relationships in the complex, rich data.

In this study, I am using grounded theory techniques proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2008). There are three basis coding phases of their grounded theory: open, axial and selective. During open coding, concepts are identified from the multiple sources of data and are coded and sub-coded, eventually being organized into categories. Coding begins immediately during the study. Once codes, sub-codes and categories were selected, axial coding commenced. In the axial coding phase, data is put back together and connections are drawn between codes and categories (Corbin & Strauss). As these connections were being drawn, I wrote memos about the concepts themselves and explored the relationships between them. I would then return to the data and search for additional evidence to support the developing diagram. Finally, the selective coding phase builds upon the connections drawn in the axial phase, allowing one to make overarching statements about the data. In this stage, the relationships between the data are presented as an emerging model.

Although grounded theory is qualitative, it is not always labeled as feminist. However, Clarke (2006) argues that this grounded theory is an implicitly feminist approach. First, it
emphasizes the lived experiences and meanings held by the people involved. It assumes that knowledge is given meaning by the people producing it, so it “involves the commitment to represent those we study on their own terms and through their own perspectives” (p. 348). Through this commitment, it is understood that knowledge is always partial and situated (Clarke). It also helps to make differences more visible and the silenced get voiced. In this study, women who are generally peripheral to gaming environments are instead placed at the center.

**Listening Guide.** The Listening Guide is a powerful analysis technique because it allows the interviewer to listen to the interviewee from several different perspectives, prompting researchers to consider data “through multiple, overlapping layers of analysis, discerning multiple voices in a single text” (Rogers, 2000, p. 80). Written transcripts must captured exactly as the interview transpired, including ‘um,’ silences, laughter, and times when we are talking at the same time, as these all say something about what was voiced. When analyzing, not only are transcripts read, but the recorded interviews sometimes listened to again, as voice inflection is important to convey meaning and revisiting the experience may introduce new perspectives.

There are generally four listenings of the interview transcript, although additional listenings may be necessary. After relaying the surface story (‘plot’) in the first listening, the researcher listens for the second time to ‘self.’ This is done through ‘voice poems,’ a look into how the participant uses pronouns in the story. For example, a person may use ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘they’ to denote experiences, which provides an insight into how the person defines self in relation to others (Gilligan et al., 2003). Since I am also listening for the ways in which women relate self to their own avatar, I include an ‘avatar’ category in the voice poems. For instance, if a woman says, “I had on a dress” when referring to her experience in SL, “I” is in reference to
both her “I” and her “avatar.” This helps illuminate the ways in which women situate their identities in the gaps. In the third listening, the researcher listens for the voices (‘themes’) that emerge. Finally, the voices are considered separately and together in the fourth listening to see how relate. Using this method, multiple perspectives and meanings are ‘heard’ separately and together, to form a more complete view of what the interviewee is saying (Raider-Roth, 2005). For example, in a previous use of the Listening Guide for an interview about women in SL, I found that themes of ‘safety’ and ‘gender’ overlapped when it concerned ‘real life’ issues women face, such as being harassed. This relationship could easily have been overlooked if not for the in-depth listenings required of the Listening Guide. In addition to using the Listening Guide, I will participate in an interpretive community with two fellow researchers, in which we will discuss the interviews and my analysis. Through consideration of their interpretations, my emerging findings are challenged and alternative insights offered, strengthening the validity of the findings (Maxwell, 1996).

The Listening Guide is a powerful analysis method in this study. For possibly the first time, women students’ voices will be made central and explored in relation to others and the virtual world. Given that virtual worlds have historically been male-dominated, listening for relational themes is especially relevant. In addition, it presents a rigorous method for the researcher. By listening to the data in various ways and times, repeatedly stating my position, and considering the views of others and the students themselves, the complex questions I am asking about contextual and psychological factors may be answered. Understanding the rich ways that women students negotiate the virtual world context offers powerful insights into future instructional design.
Chapter 5

Chelsea

I remember Chelsea strolling into the conference room on our first interview day. Our connection began right away as she greeted me with a big smile and then immediately started talking about how her mother is getting involved with SL. In the “reader response” that I composed following our first interview, I took note of her physical appearance (“tall, thin, white, shoulder length auburn hair”), body language (“smiles a lot”) and personality, which I described as “friendly” and “open to reflection.” The very first point I jotted down immediately after our interview concerned my relationship with Chelsea, being struck with how well we connected. This feeling of connection is confirmed as I read, listen, and think about our interviews again. More than with any other woman, we often talk over each other, finish each other’s sentences, and laugh together. In my reflection, I mused, “I sense that we could have a friendship under different circumstances.” From the perspective of other research methodologies, this relationship could be viewed as a hindrance to the objectivity of my findings. However, the Listening Guide requires “a desire to engage with the subjectivity of each participant” (Raider-Roth, 2005, p. 159). Because of our relationship, Chelsea and I explore issues of the virtual world together as we self-disclose thoughts, feelings and actions we might not share with everyone, an example of the partiality using this methodology (Bhavnani, 2004).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, my intention was to select women who exhibited a range of gaming experience. I turned to Chelsea for help in answering my questions about virtual world learning communities because of her survey results. Put simply, gaming is not a significant part of her daily life. She says she has played games since elementary school but her use dwindled in
high school, and now she does not currently play much, less than an hour every few weeks or so. Her responses largely support the trends that are identified in past literature on women’s gaming practices. When she does play with others, it is with those she knows in ‘real life’ and they are in the same room. Her gaming preferences consist of puzzles, strategy, role play, racing, and rhythm games, rather than action, survival, first-person shooters, or sports games. She has never participated in a MMORPG or a social virtual world, indicating a self-reported lack of interest and time. When given a list of words related to virtual worlds and games (“avatar,” “teleport,” “BRB”), she does not indicate that she can explain any in detail.

I also had an interest in interviewing Chelsea because there were a few items from the survey in which I needed additional clarification. One concerned her relationships with others in games and virtual worlds. I was intrigued by her agreement that she has made new friends through virtual worlds and/or games. These responses seem to contradict with her earlier description of what she plays (card and puzzle games) and how she plays (alone), so I wanted to explore this further in an interview. Considering upcoming class experiences, Chelsea neither agrees nor disagrees that she is interested in communicating with classmates and others in SL.

Given her limited gaming experience, lack of knowledge and experience about virtual worlds, and neutral expectations of future SL class activity, I thought it was important to listen to how Chelsea understands the factors that influence how she accesses the SL learning community. Compared to the other two women I am examining in more detail (Ramona and Marla), Chelsea has the least working knowledge and personal experience with regards to gaming and virtual worlds. I want to better understand how a woman with little gaming experience negotiates
From our interviews and class interactions, I learn several important lessons from Chelsea. Namely, three main voices (themes) emerge and flow with one other: empowerment, connection, and gender. These voices are also present in the other women’s interviews and are significant in my analysis, so I will define them more clearly here. I adopt Talay-Ongan’s (2004) conception of empowerment as “the ability of individuals to be aware of their powers to be a capable decision maker and feeling in charge, often facilitated by personal experiences and interpersonal relations” (p. 2). This conception is appropriate for this study since it can be extended to the factors which contribute to the effectiveness of online learning communities: members having a shared purpose, working collaboratively, and directing social and learning processes equally (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). It also supports the relational view of learning and development, that empowerment exists within relationships. By ‘connection,’ I mean the subjective experience of the woman being linked with others, the dual contexts, and themselves. For ‘gender,’ I include specific references to gendered identity and instances that are related to gender, such as certain gaming practices or attitudes.

Chelsea spoke with a largely disempowered voice, especially in the beginning of her SL encounters, due to a lack of knowledge (namely not understanding the nature of the world or of avatars) and lack of experience in similar environments. This inexperience led to her facing technical challenges (“It was more difficult than I thought it would be”), most notably issues of identity (“Yeah, she was crazy”) and interaction (“He’d be gone and I’m like, but I still don’t know what’s going on!”). At times, she speaks in connection with her avatar (“a reflection of
me”), but it is often disempowering (“I’m sitting there without pants on”). Other times, she speaks in disconnected ways from her avatar, namely when she does not feel accurately represented (“She took off her hair one time”). She is not empowered to connect with others when she does not have meaningful relationships with them in ‘real life,’ citing factors of privacy (“If I don’t know you, then no, I’m not gonna be your friend”), trust (“they can hide behind the avatar”), and safety (“I was intimidated”). Over time and experience in the SL community, her competence grows and she begins to develop her own understandings of the factors that influence her identity (“It is more personal to have your own person there”) and interaction (“I was familiar with who was who”) in the gap between the worlds.

What is most striking and memorable about Chelsea is the voice of gender that she uses to filter and understand her experiences. She often invokes it to examine and interpret her own (“I did my best to make it feminine and pretty”) and others’ (“I’m sure he wanted to win”) hybrid identities and interactions. I want to listen to this voice closely, and see how it relates to empowerment and connection.

**Chelsea’s Position in Gaming Context**

It is important to track Chelsea’s position in the larger gaming context, as it is likely to provide clues to how she will position her self in the virtual world context. Chelsea uses the gendered discourse of gaming as a framework to tell her story, positioning her identity in opposition to the prototype ‘male’ gamer. When given a list of adjectives to associate with gaming (“fun,” “frustrating,” among others), she selects “boring” and then writes in her own association; “I just think of my brothers and friends who could be considered gamers.” When I ask her in the interview what kind of games she thinks she has played the most or liked the most,
she first offers, “Um, I haven’t really played…like in the past five or so years, five six years…” This supports past gaming research about women’s game play, that while girls enter gaming in similar numbers to boys, they tend to play less as they reach adulthood (Heeter & Winn, 2008). Regarding her current game play, she says, “I haven’t gotten much further than like Solitaire on my computer…” Sharing this particular game with me is very indicative; not only is it a solitary activity, but she subtly downgrades it, suggesting that her game play is not advanced (“I haven’t gotten much further”).

Tracking the transformation of Chelsea’s gaming practices is interesting, as it illuminates how her position and identification within the gaming context has shifted in her lifetime. Immediately after she says that she has not played much lately, a landmark occurs in our interview. She shares, “I used to play a lot of The Sims for hours (A: mmm) and hours, I loved The Sims…” First released in 2000, The Sims is a groundbreaking game that has universal appeal with boys and girls. Beavis and Charles (2005) describe The Sims as a game in which “players have the power, like gods, to create their own universe and direct the lives of the characters who inhabit it…” (p. 356). Incredible popularity of the game with girls has been researched at length, with some explaining that girls prefer it for several reasons, such as the focus on social interaction in a domestic sphere (Jenson & deCastell, 2010). Later research instead focused on the ways that girls engaged with The Sims, acknowledging that the game provides a setting where boys and girls can perform gender in various ways (Beavis & Charles, 2005).

In line with this idea, Chelsea constructed the space in gendered ways. She recalls, “I mostly just liked…I don’t know, building houses or like creating this couple that was like
absolutely perfect…” In her self-imposed narrative of game play, she describes, “What I would usually do is… I don’t know, they would just, they would get married and live in the same house and have babies…” She firmly places this relationship in the larger discourse of gendered identity and domestic spheres (social norms of marriage and family), although she subtly challenges this play over time, saying, “Then I’d get bored with them and move on to the next lot,” followed later by “I don’t know, it was… I don’t…and then eventually it got to where I didn’t even play with the people, I just built homes.” After many versions of this gendered experience, her preferences and pleasures became more varied, as she turned to customizing the environment itself (Carr, 2005). She explains,

I think I really enjoyed… like I loved floor plans… as the games got more advanced, you had so many options for how you could build your house and I knew all the cheat codes to get all the money I ever needed to build this magnificent house…

Her ‘I’ voice is stronger here (I think, I really, I loved, you had, you could, I knew, I ever), indicating greater empowerment in the environment when compared to her domestic storyline (I don’t know, I don’t know, I’d get bored). She is keenly aware of her power to affect what occurs in The Sims.

Based on Chelsea’s Sims gaming practices, she certainly appeared to exhibit characteristics that are associated with gamers. She invested considerable time in it (“hours and hours”), had a passion for it (“I loved The Sims”), and exhibited expert knowledge and skills (“I knew all the cheat codes”). Listening to her use of voice, she was empowered to negotiate and direct the processes within the game. Yet she never refers to herself as a gamer in the past, and in fact stops playing The Sims altogether in the beginning of high school. Noting the literature that
boys continue to play in high school and college while girls’ play tapers off, I ask Chelsea why
her Sims play dwindled. She explains,

I think, I kind of became more social…on the computer, I started using like AIM [AOL
Instant Messenger] and stuff at the beginning of high school, end of middle school, so I
was spending my time building real relationships, I think, than the relationships I was
building in the games.

While boys and men’s game play tends to be more social in nature (“building real
relationships”), girls and women tend to play alone (Thornham, 2008). The relationships she was
building in the game were through digitized Sims characters, not ‘real’ people. In our interview,
she talks about how her frequent use of instant messaging and social networking sites maintain
her “real relationships” with friends, even saying that going without Facebook would be like
“committing social suicide.”

Given that Chelsea indicated on her survey that she has never made new friendships
online and has never participated in a virtual world, I was puzzled by her response that she had
made new friendships in this setting. In the interview, she explains that she interpreted Facebook
to be a kind of virtual world. While this highlights her lack of knowledge about the distinction
between the two environments, it is still important to hear how she makes sense of the question.
She has made new friends in Facebook, but stresses that she connected to them through people
she knows from ‘real life.’ She gives an example of

one girl that I really know, um I know her brothers, they live in Costa Rica, I know her
brother, so she added me when she wanted a conversation partner and so we talk all the
time and we’re actually really good friends now…
Her repeated use of “know,” “really,” and “actually” are interesting here, perhaps used as a way to emphasize her connection to ‘real life.’ She explains that when that type of connection is not present, she is not interesting in friendship; “Yeah, I’m really hesitant, like I don’t…if I don’t know you or have a really good reason to add you as a friend, then no, I’m not gonna be your friend.” Listening to her voice supports this notion, as Chelsea asserts herself to an imaginary someone (I’m really hesitant; I don’t; I don’t know you; I’m not gonna be your friend).

In addition to issues of privacy, safety issues also emerge. Chelsea discloses, “I guess, I d--., it just sometimes bothers me, I don’t feel like I trust the intentions of a lot of people who would add me randomly.” I take notice of the word “bother” as she uses it in two occasions, both when people whom she does not perceive a meaningful connection (“randomly”) attempt to forge a relationship with her. It is interesting that she says, “I don’t feel like I trust” rather than “I don’t trust,” perhaps showing the emotional tension that comes along with mistrusting someone.

Chelsea’s position in the gaming context is a complex one. Presently, gaming is not an important part of her identity. While once engrossed in The Sims (a game with ties to the domestic sphere), she stopped playing to build “real relationships,” while boys by and large continued to play. “Real relationships” continue to be the focus of her online interaction, as she relates feelings of trust with her perception of the depth of ‘real life’ relationship with the person.

“They Choose To Use Avatars Which I’m Still Trying To Figure That Out”

To open our first interview, I ask Chelsea if she has ever heard of SL before. To my surprise, she says that her mother participates in SL in order to see how it can be used for educational purposes at the college in which she works. Since Chelsea has personally never used
it, I ask her what her mother has told her about SL. She mildly complains that her mother keeps trying to get her involved in it:

I was just thinking, eh-em I don’t know what an avatar is, I don’t know, I can’t tell you if, I would get kind of annoyed with her because she would always ask me all these questions, she’d be like, ‘My avatar, I just went and like opened my account or whatever and she has no clothes on, I don’t know why!’ So she just does goofy stuff like that.

Although we giggle throughout this story (I can personally relate to times I have dealt with my technology-challenged mother), this passage reveals Chelsea’s partial knowledge about avatars, an integral aspect of negotiating in the virtual world. She uses a disempowered voice with respect to her knowledge (I was just thinking; I don’t know; I don’t know; I can’t tell you; I would get kind of annoyed). When she does not have knowledge about SL (“I don’t know”) but is expected to act (“she would always ask me all these questions”), she disconnects from the relationship (“I would get kind of annoyed”). This passage also reveals the experiences I have observed numerous times, of women users not having the technical skill to fully control their avatar, ending up in embarrassing situations. Chelsea has witnessed this secondhand through her mother.

Chelsea’s other exposure to SL is through a Dateline episode on emerging technology that was shown in class. When I ask her about her first impressions of SL, she references this episode:

I mean, I don’t really understand – really…why (voice up)...I don’t, I mean when I watched the Dateline thing that was just on (A: yeah! I saw part of that)...yeah…and it was really interesting, but just like that these people would meet with their avatars and
they’d be like, ‘Oh let’s go sit by this nice window’ or you know, ‘before this meeting, I want to change my clothes,’ and I’m just thinking, this is kinda weird, I don’t know, I mean…like you, I don’t, I feel like use Skype or something and actually see their faces, but they choose to use…I don’t know, just…they choose to use avatars which I’m still trying to figure that out.

Due to the several silences (occurring when she is trying to understand the purpose of using SL to interact) and use of multiple shifting voices, I wanted to listen more closely to the way she speaks of her self in a second listening (Table 1). It may help to clarify where she positions herself in relation to others.

This is a fascinating internal dialogue to read and listen to. Her I voice is disempowered in the beginning when trying to explain her impressions (I mean, I don’t really, I don’t, I mean). She introduces the example from the Dateline show to ground her thoughts, and I am excited since I saw it as well. She acknowledges this excitement (“yeah…and it was really interesting”) but maintains her hesitations (“but just like…”). She draws a distinction between herself and “these people” who would “meet with their avatars”, suggesting a subtle disconnection in the relationship between users and avatars (for instance, I would say “meet through their avatars”). She tries on their identities in a way by trying on their voice (“I want to change my clothes”) but draws a distinction by switching back to her voice (“I’m just thinking, this is kinda weird, I don’t know”). Similar to her claim that “I don’t feel like I trust” in the earlier passage, she brings “feel” into this passage, sharing, “I feel, like use Skype or something and actually see their faces…” Framed in opposition to her feelings and preferences, “they choose” differently, and
she is at a loss to explain why one would choose a simulated face over an actual one. This uncertainty is also voiced in her blog entry. She opens with,

I must admit that I was pretty skeptical when I found out that we were going to be participating in Second Life. I had not heard much about it and I just could not understand the concept of virtual realities. Why wasn’t real life good enough?

Chelsea enters this experience with little solid knowledge about SL and constructs a binary of “real life” (actual faces) and “virtual reality” (simulated faces). Not only does she not understand why one would choose this kind of experience to interact with others, but there is an emotional

Table 1

*They Choose to Use Avatars*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>They</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td>These people would meet with their avatars</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t really</td>
<td>They’d be like</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t</td>
<td>You know</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I watched</td>
<td>‘I want to change my clothes’</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m just thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
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<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Like you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel</td>
<td>Actually see their faces</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They choose to use</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
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<td></td>
<td>They choose to use avatars</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m still trying to figure that out</td>
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component as well; she is “pretty skeptical” of the choice and finds it “kinda weird”. This is a perspective that I have encountered many times with women in my virtual world research experiences. Bayne (2008) suggests that the emotional hesitations often experienced in virtual worlds are due to the “peculiar commingling between the familiar and the unfamiliar…a crisis of the proper and natural” (p. 198). Given Chelsea’s gaming experience, it may be a more unfamiliar experience when compared to other students.

Given this viewpoint, it is not surprising to review Chelsea’s survey responses that she has not participated in a virtual world like SL because of lack of interest and time. However, when I ask her to explain these responses, Chelsea reveals a hesitation that I did not expect:

I’m really hesitant because there’s a good chance that I’m gonna really like it and that’s all I’m gonna want to do (A: laughs, yes) and so it’s kind of like, uh, (A laughs, stay away from it), wait until maybe, yeah, to forward to invest a lot of time into something like that so, because I have kind of a, I don’t know, addictive personality when it comes to that kind of stuff, so…

This response certainly complicates Chelsea’s earlier mentioned skepticism about SL, as she positioned it in opposition to the ‘real world’ and judged virtual interaction as ‘weird.’ She says she does not understand why people would choose avatars to communicate, but perhaps she is more genuinely interested in developing this understanding than I originally thought.

Chelsea’s prediction that “there’s a good chance that I’m gonna really like it” also complicates her survey response that she has not participated in virtual worlds due to lack of interest. Perhaps she claims she is not interested precisely because she is aware and concerned that she is too interested in such environments. Although I did not ask her directly, considering
her past gaming experiences, it is very possible that Chelsea is comparing SL to The Sims, which she loved and played for hours at a time. Unlike her middle school days, however, that prospect at the present time is not as alluring, given her perceived ‘real world’ constraints. For instance, she explains, “Well I definitely like have a very busy schedule – I’m double majoring with two jobs (A: oh wow) and campus life (A: oh yeah) so like time is an issue…” Royse et al. (2007) found that women non-gamers tend to reject gaming because it “takes too much time, a commodity they perceive as already limited and better spent on social activities” (p. 573). She worries about having an addictive personality when it comes to “that kind of stuff.” She worries, “I don’t want to add another thing on to my list quite yet ‘cause I don’t know how I will handle it.” While men gamers often nurture social relationships within their gaming practices, this activity would be “another thing” to add to Chelsea’s busy schedule. However, she admits, “I’m sure I could make time if I really cared to.” From this admittance, it seems that Chelsea has the potential of being an active, interested user in SL but is “really hesitant” to immerse completely. This could have an effect on the learning she constructs in the community.

Our connection is interesting in this passage and exemplifies the constant tension for women in gaming contexts. For instance, I say, “yes [you’re going to like it and it’s all you’re going to want to do],” but when I see her start to hesitate, I instantly switch to “stay away from it.” Trying to alleviate her concerns, I then say, “Well hopefully our sessions will be fun but not too (C: No, I’m sure), not so fun that you (C: I’m sure it will be fine)…” I wonder if Chelsea is reassuring me or herself. I also think about how my response subtly reinforces the gendered discourse of gaming, that women can take pleasure in these environments but not so much pleasure that it becomes anything more than a casual activity in their lives.
As our first interview winds down, I wonder what Chelsea’s experiences will be like in the virtual world learning community. Given her past pleasurable experiences and expertise in the customizable world of The Sims, there is a possibility that she will have equitable access to the SL learning community. She likes socializing online with those she knows from ‘real life,’ as she will with her classmates in the lab. However, she claims to not possess any knowledge about avatars and lacks an understanding of why people would choose to use virtual worlds and avatars for purposes of interaction. Given that “knowledge is power” (Talay-Ongan, 2004), this could be a powerful barrier to community entry. In addition, a significant feature of SL is interacting with others through avatars that one may not know or connect to people from ‘real life.’ Judging from her hesitations, it seems likely that this mode of communication could trigger issues of privacy, trust and safety for Chelsea. Given that these elements are essential to supporting a learning community, she may elect not to fully participate. Finally, while she acknowledges that she may take great pleasure in SL, she is concerned with having an “addictive personality when it comes to that kind of stuff,” so she may willfully keep out of the community.

“I Just Didn’t…Want To Be a Boy”

We meet for our second interview on the day after the final class session in SL. To open our interview, I ask Chelsea to log in to SL so I can take a snapshot of her avatar (who she names Chel) for my records (Figure 3). During this log-in process, she speaks out loud, “Well, I am always so bad at putting in my [password]…I’m not sure, maybe it’s a Z, I’m so bad.” Chelsea has several instances of talking about her technical incompetence, which Jenson and deCastell (2010) question as a performance of femininity. I notice myself performing with her in the moment, saying, “Well, it’s hard because you have to remember the name and a password.”
When her avatar appears, Chelsea sarcastically announces, “She’s pretty fancy” and critiques, “Those are goofy shoes, like.” Having observed Chelsea in the computer lab, I knew that my first question, “How did this avatar come to be like this?” would be anything but dull. She begins her story by sheepishly answering, “Well, I think it had a lot to do with the fact that, she was a boy.”

On the first SL class session, there were more students than computers (an error in room scheduling), so Chelsea did not get to create an avatar. She began the second SL session quickly creating it. She recalls:

I don’t remember specifying it like any kind of gender sex, like it didn’t ask me (A: mmm). Either that or I didn’t see it (A: yeah) and it just like gave me the, the male. So then when I like changed her back to being a female, like she had the female body but she still had the male like hair and outfit (A: like features?). Yeah.

From the very outset of creation, Chelsea is not in control, positioning herself as disempowered in relation to her avatar (“I don’t remember specifying it”) and the world (“it didn’t ask me…it just gave me”). Yet she also acknowledges that it could be her technical incompetence that led to the disempowering situation (“either that or I didn’t see it”), which I
subtly reinforce (“yeah”) since I know that the user makes the determination of avatar sex. The
voice of gender comes in loudly here, since she experiences a significant tension between what
she intended for her simulated body (woman) and what she was given (man). A fascinating
insight emerging from this story is that Chelsea forges a feminine gendered connection to her
avatar from the very moment the avatar is “born,” even though it technically was born male
(“she was a boy”). She perceives the transformation from masculine to feminine as “changed her
back to being a female.” This suggests that the position of ‘woman’ is a fundamental component
of Chelsea’s ‘hybrid’ identity and she does not “see or hear anything other than the ‘inner truth’
of gender” (Jenson & deCastell, 2008, p. 16). This passage also reveals the ways Chelsea uses
“gender” (boy) and “sex” (male) interchangeably, again supporting that she views gender as a
natural, unchanging entity.

While she does take some action to customize her avatar as feminine, it was not entirely
successful due to her lack of technical expertise. The unsuccessful transformation from male to
female resulted in an avatar that was androgynous in appearance (“female body but male hair
and outfit”). In the interview, I recall that her avatar had a feminine shaped face but masculine
brow ridge and thick eyebrows, and Chelsea replies, “Yeah, she was crazy.” While I figured she
was disturbed by the androgynous avatar because she did not feel it projected her ‘real’ gendered
identity, the contextual factor of the computer lab emerged as a significant influence in Chelsea’s
interpretations. She explains:

I don’t think I would have cared, but the fact that I was like interacting with my
classmates, like I want them to see, kind of like a reflection of me and not wonder like,
‘why is she dressed like a boy?’ because that would be just…*weird*, do you know what I mean (A: yeah)?

Conceiving of avatars as a projection of ‘real’ identity into virtual space (“reflection of me”), she wanted to make sure that her avatar was a proper reflection to the classmates in which she was interacting in the lab. For Chelsea, gendered identity is an integral element in this reflection. Chelsea thinks that being “dressed like a boy” falls outside of gendered boundaries (“weird”) and asks for understanding from me (“you know what I mean?”), to which I give confirmation (“yeah”). In a member checking email, she suggests, “It might raise some questions if the girl sitting next to you had a boy avatar.” This reminds me of the writings of Butler (1987), who explains that social norms about men and women are strict, and it is impossible to act outside of the social boundaries without severe repercussions. It appears that similar boundaries exist in the virtual world. I also think of Feldon and Kafai (2008), who noted that students in the lab often critiqued each other’s avatars and used them for purposes of social interaction. This is certainly not the kind of interaction Chelsea desires or intended.

She cites understanding and choice as factors in her discomfort. About her classmates, she explains, “I don’t think they’d really understand that…I don’t know, I just didn’t wanna be the girl who…I feel that they would misunderstand the situation…you know (A: mmm).” She is not comfortable with her gendered identity being questioned, especially when this was never her intention in the first place. This situation reminds me of one of the proclaimed advantages of virtual worlds in education mentioned in Chapter 1, that they offer rich social cues to help users understand others’ thoughts and intentions. What I learn from Chelsea is that when she is not in control of the cues, others may misunderstand her thoughts and intentions. She continues,
If they knew like that’s the body that I was just given (A: right), if they were all there for that, then I wouldn’t care but like the fact that they would think that I would choose to dress like a boy (A: right, right) bothered me.

Without their understanding, she perceives herself as “the girl who” is choosing to trouble the social boundaries, which causes her distress.

“The Boys Want to be Funny, The Girls Want to be Cute”

Chelsea often filters her understanding of the purposes of avatar customization through a primarily gendered lens. She relates customization to a kind of gendered presentation. She explains, “You know, you want to look a certain way so just like you, they want to present themselves, I’m sure their – the boys want to be funny, the girls want to be cute.” I wanted to listen to this more closely since she shifts her voices from “you” to “I” and then makes a broad declaration of gender (Table 2).

Listening to this passage through the use of voice, Chelsea is empowered in her knowledge of why boys and girls customize their avatars the way they do. She begins with an internal dialogue of sorts (you know, you want to look) and quickly extends this understanding to Table 2.

*Boys Want to Be Funny, Girls Want to Be Cute*

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<thead>
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<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You know</td>
<td>You want to look</td>
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<tr>
<td>Like you</td>
<td></td>
<td>They want</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present themselves</td>
<td>Boys want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m sure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Girls want</td>
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</table>
others (like you, they want), ending with a confident I (I’m sure) before declaring their gendered intentions. It is interesting that she is talking for others in a way, almost distancing herself from the story by using little ‘I’ (like you, they want). Judging from her earlier statement, she wants others to see a “reflection” of her while she talks about others more in terms of “presentation” (a gendered performance, perhaps?) for others.

In a member checking conversation, I ask her why she thinks the boys wanted to be funny and the girls wanted to be cute. She relies on her gendered conceptions of the ‘real world,’ asking, “Isn’t that the way it is in real life too?” Speaking for girls, she explains, “Of course we want to be cute.” She notes that in both worlds, girls want to construct their bodies in physically attractive ways. This is not something that is even needs to be questioned (“of course”). She continues, “Second Life allows you to portray yourself in any way you’d like. My avatar was first set up as a boy. Ha. But I did my best to make it feminine and pretty.” While she acknowledges that the virtual world offers limitless affordances (“portray yourself in any way you’d like”), she makes a humorous point while distancing herself from the masculine avatar she had, maintaining the traditional gendered stance on feminine beauty.

Bodies are always constructed within social norms and within relationships with others (Vicdan & Ulusoy, 2008). Again, Chelsea brings up the contextual factor of being in a lab with classmates, noting that it made her “care more” about the appearance of her avatar; “I wanted to be portrayed in a good way.” To her, good means a feminine performance of gender. Comparing the virtual world to the ‘real world,’ she explains, “In real life, I will never be a petite woman with an amazing collection of dresses and perfect hair…but my avatar can have all of that in no time.” This sounds similar to the kind of game play she experienced in The Sims, of the
“absolutely perfect couple” who had everything the social norms indicate that we should desire and value. What she does not mention in this passage is that she never did have the power to craft her avatar in this image due to her technical inexperience; rather, her avatar was “crazy” and then wore “goofy shoes.”

This suggests that for Chelsea, her avatar is not so much a reflection of her as an individual situated in the ‘real world’ context, but rather a gendered body (petite woman, dresses, perfect hair) that she works on as a means of identity construction in the virtual context (Vicdan & Ulusoy, 2008). Kennedy (2006) asserts that virtual worlds provide real places for those to examine and possible revise their conceptions of identity, and that the high amount of customization allows users to experience multiple subjectivities not available in other aspects of daily experience. While Chelsea is experimenting with subjectivity that is not available in her daily experience by viewing the relationship to her avatar as somewhat complementary (“I will never be…but my avatar”), she is keeping strictly within traditional gendered boundaries. Later in the interview, she does acknowledge the possibility of multiple subjectivities, explaining that, “I mean, I could go on Second Life and like…you know, be a man and like try to like be this whole like, I could be like a black man, you know (A: yep).” While her voice sounds intrigued and almost encouraged (I mean, I could, you know, I could, you know), considering her strong voice of gender, I am not sure that this is an identity she would examine and experience on her own volition.

While “girls want to be cute” when presenting their avatars, “boys want to be funny.” Chelsea explains:

Many boys like the attention they receive when they are comical. I think that Second Life
allows them do things that are funny they wouldn’t really do in real life, like wear leopard print bell bottom pants like my partner did. It is easier to do things like this because they can hide behind their avatar. It is fun for them to run around a virtual world and do ridiculous things that they might not really do in real life and say, "I'm personally not acting this way or not wearing a bright pink spandex shirt, it's my avatar."

Sensing issues of deception with regards to men’s identities (hide behind their avatar), I wanted to listen for this tension between person and avatar in a second listening (Table 3).

Listening to this, I hear both deception and disconnection in Chelsea’s interpretations. In the ‘real world,’ boys like the attention that comes with being comical. They are trying to be comical in SL too, but they are comical in ways that they could not be in ‘real life.’ Wearing leopard print bell bottom pants is typically out of the social boundaries for a man college student, for instance. She thinks boys negotiate this dissonance by drawing a distinction between their ‘real selves’ (personally not acting) and their ‘virtual selves’ (it’s my avatar). Chelsea says they “hide behind their avatar,” which sounds deceitful. When they “hide behind their avatar,” they

Table 3

They Can Hide Behind their Avatar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I think</th>
<th>They/Them</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They receive</td>
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<td>They are comical</td>
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<td>Allows them</td>
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<td>They wouldn’t really do</td>
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<td>They can hide</td>
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<td>Fun for them</td>
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<td>They might not really do</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I’m personally not”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It’s my avatar”</td>
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</table>
take pleasure in it, “it’s fun for them.” From this, it sounds like she does not think the boys are projecting ‘real’ identity since they are customizing and interacting in ways that would not happen in the ‘real world.’ Her I voice is nearly silenced completely here, suggesting a disconnection of herself from them. In fact, she speaks for them in a group sense (they).

Upon first glance, I was puzzled by her statements; aren’t girls hiding behind their avatars in a similar manner? After all, Chelsea says that “I will never be a petite woman…but my avatar can have that.” Perhaps the difference comes down to ‘real world’ factors. Being petite, having dresses and perfect hair are attributes that Chelsea thinks women actually want to possess in the ‘real world.’ Using Chelsea’s viewpoint about men’s avatar, women are not hiding behind their avatars, but rather portraying themselves as they would want in the ‘real world’ if they had the chance, as opposed to men who do “ridiculous things” they “wouldn’t really do in real life” and “they might not really do in real life.” Be acting unreal, men are being deceitful, they are hiding. Avatars “allow them” to do that. This understanding helps to explain Chelsea’s hesitation to interact with people online.

“Um, But He Was Like Completely Different Then…”

Given her interpretations of how men and women negotiate in the space between the worlds, I wanted to listen for how she interacted with others, especially men. For the scavenger hunt activity, men and women students were paired up and positioned in two different computer labs, forcing them to interact only through SL. Chelsea’s partner was John, whom she mentioned in the earlier passage, his avatar donning bell bottom pants and a Darth Vader mask (Figure 4). She was not positive of his ‘real world’ identity until he returned to her lab after the activity and confirmed it.
Figure 4. Chel and her partner on the hunt.

The first thing Chelsea mentions is how his identity shifts when the physical context shifts. While she notes that the men tended to “show off” for each other in the lab, she explains,

Um, but he was like completely different then, then he was like…trying to help me figure out like how, what we were supposed to be doing, like I didn’t know how to fly, I didn’t know how to land (A: right), you know what I mean…

In this collaborative activity, he was no longer acting in ridiculous ways; he was helpful. He was personally acting through his avatar, and no longer hiding, so she perceives a connection. In relation to herself, she defines him as more of the expert in the space and more in control of the activity. It is difficult (rather impossible) to feel empowered when not in control of the body (how to fly, how to land).

Chelsea thinks part of the reason he was acting in this way was because of his motivations in the activity:

So he was trying to help me, um, he was on a mission, like he was gonna win you know what I mean, and like telling me what to do and was like really like leading like our effort, whatever (A: Was he helpful?). He was really helpful, really nice…so I feel like
that was, that was a lot different because it wasn’t a show for everyone, but I think it’s also competitive too (A: yeah yeah) so I’m sure he wanted to, he wanted to win and (A: yeah that’s an element too).

Hearing a definite difference in the way she positions herself and him in the activity, I wanted to listen to this passage for a second time (Table 4).

Chelsea thinks the reason he was being so helpful was because of his drive to win the hunt (the pair that found the most items would receive a prize in their SL inventory). Even though she does not personally know him, she emphasizes his desire several times; “he was on a mission”, “he was gonna win”, “I think it’s competitive, so I’m sure he wanted to win”. In the literature, “competition” is usually defined as a masculine pursuit (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). She defines herself in opposition, calling the hunt “silly” earlier in the interview and saying

Table 4

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apathetically, “Leading our effort, whatever.”

While I perceived Chelsea saying “telling me what to do” and “leading our effort” as being a bit dominating on John’s part, she interpreted it as him being “really helpful, really nice.” I turned to the actual textual communication generated in SL to see if I could see a clearer picture of the context. John does in fact tell her what do to at times (“Scavenger hunt time. Come to the bookstore.”) and leads the effort (“OK, follow me.”). There are a couple of instances of him being what I would call helpful, like when he teaches her to fly by typing, “hit page up, like a lot of times.” He is also friendly, agreeing with Chelsea when she declares that they are the most attractive pair; “I agree, our colors are raw, ha ha.” However, there are instances of him not being particularly helpful, like when he told her to follow him and then wrote, “LETS FLY ITS FASTER”. Given Chelsea’s declaration in the interview about not knowing how to fly, she frantically writes, “Why are you so high!!” “I don’t know how to do this,” and finally, “ha, I’m sorry.” At first, she subtly accuses him (why are you so high!) but then takes the blame because of her personal lack of competence, apologizing (I don’t know how to do this, I’m sorry). In our interview, she also notes the multi-tasking necessities of SL as being a hindrance. She recalls, “I would be saying something like trying to like ask him a question but then he also be like sending me messages like, ‘I’m going here’ and he’d be gone (A: OK ) and I’m like ‘But I still don’t know what’s going on!’” These instances of disconnection hindered Chelsea’s experience of the activity.

What she does not mention in our interview is that appears that she did exhibit some agency in the hunt. For instance, when they cannot find a particular landmark, she writes, “I have no idea,” but spots it a minute later; “It’s the other way…behind us.” John remarks, “I’ll follow
you.” With her now in charge, she responds, “All that I know is that the sign says ‘village’. Ha. Is this where we want to be?” She hands the lead back to him.

“I Feel Like I Really Experienced Second Life for a Different Thing…”

In our second interview, we talk about the final session in SL, in which three distanced professional guest speakers logged into SL and talked about communication, using both voice and text. This conversation took place in a virtual classroom on campus, and closely resembled a typical ‘real life’ classroom (as pictured in Figure 4). Chelsea thinks that the modality of voice is significantly different from text in two ways. First, it is a tie to ‘real life’ gendered identity (“I could be like a black man, you know, and then someone hears my voice, and they’re like, ‘that’s a little white girl’”). Second, it is more efficient in having a coherent conversation (“If it was all in text, so then everyone’s text keeps coming up like on top of it, I would be like, what is this person talking about anymore, I have no idea, so”). Managing and reading multiple, non-linear conversations is not an experience in which Chelsea is accustomed.

Right after this assessment of communication features, a landmark occurs in the interview, as she relays a new understanding about SL:

But yesterday, I feel like I really um, experienced Second Life for a different thing, like I…didn’t really understand like wwwwhhyyyy you would do that, when there’s so many other like other things you could do (A: yeah)…but it was like more personal to have like your own person there and then like you see other people who are there maybe who aren’t even talking (A: right).

In our first interview, Chelsea did not “really” understand why people would interact through simulated bodies (“do that”) when there are “other things you could do.” She finally developed
this knowledge during the final session. Being represented by a body (“your own person,” “other people”) and sharing a space (“there,” “who are there”) is more personal to her. This is a fascinating insight, since in Chapter 1, I state that what makes virtual worlds unique from other technologies is that they provide the most ‘real’ virtual experience to date. She cites this as the highlight of her experiences, explaining, “I don’t know, it was just everyone was there, and I was familiar with who was who (A: right).” Given that Chelsea is hesitant to speak to others she does not know online, it makes sense that she would enjoy it when she does know who is there.

Chelsea acknowledges the contextual factor of time and experience in explaining this progression in outlook, saying, “But that, that was after like the most experience so far with it, so who knows what could’ve, what could’ve been.” Considering that her Sims play became more diverse as she gained experience, this gained experience in SL now encourages her to think of the opportunities in SL; “I was thinking even like going with Second Life to visit Costa Rica, like that would be so fun to go back and see the virtual places of what I’ve actually, where I’ve actually been.” While before she was drawing clear (and borderline hostile) distinctions between the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ (“why wasn’t real life good enough?”), now she seems to position them not in opposition, but complementary. She is connecting with the virtual world (even saying “going with Second Life”), and now she thinks of connecting with others she knows from the ‘real world’:

Like what would I do if I saw like, you know, so-and-so standing on the beach where I used to see them every day, only in Second Life, that would make me really excited to see them (A: definitely), even though it’s not really them, it’s their avatar…but it would just like, it-it would just be so great, you know.
Her vision reminds me of Boellstorff’s (2008) conception of virtual worlds as “approaching the actual without arriving there. This gap between virtual and actual is critical” (p. 19). While Chelsea recognizes that this encounter would take place in the gap (“where I used to see them every day, only in Second Life”) and would be through hybrid identities (“even though it’s not really them, it’s their avatar”), she is no longer skeptical (“it would just be so great”).

Blog: “Don’t Talk to Strangers”

For the blog assignment, which occurred after the final classroom SL session, the students explored SL on their own for the first time. They were instructed to visit any place they liked (I provided links to places that I deemed safe, but they could choose any place), explore, take a digital snapshot of their avatar, and then interpret the meaning of the image in the blog. After conveying skepticism about SL in the beginning of her blog, Chelsea writes, “After a little experience with SL, I have learned to appreciate it a little more.” She then shares her personal exploration time in SL:

My independent time spent on SL was pretty fun. I could see how the program could get to be very addicting. I visited Costa Rica and Spain. My time in Costa Rica was lonely. No one else was around. I just walked around other peoples houses and I felt a lot of anxiety about it, as if someone was going to catch me breaking and entering and I would really be in trouble. In Spain there were more people around and they were speaking Spanish which was really fun.

As I was reading this entry, I was happy to see that she was empowered enough to accomplish something she had envisioned, as it showed she had enough technical competence and motivation at that point to search and travel to places. Confirming her earlier worry that she
would really like SL and want to spend all her time on it, she does acknowledge that it “could get to be very addicting,” but does not explain why. In her Costa Rica visit, she was “lonely” and anxious about getting into trouble for exploring others’ houses, something socially acceptable in SL but certainly not in the ‘real world.’ Given that we had not done much traveling outside of UC’s campus, this is not a surprising reaction. Things pick up when she travels to Spain, where she mentions more of a social aspect, which she interprets as “really fun.” Given that she exhibited a mistrust of people online in our first interview, this is hopeful. However, in a member checking email, I write, “You said it was fun because the avatars were speaking Spanish. Do you remember if they were using text, or voice? Did you join in on the conversation?” She answers:

The avatars spoke to me using text, but I did not respond. I think that I was intimidated. Even if they spoke to me in English, I am not sure that I would have responded. I am cowardly when it comes to meeting people over the Internet. I am a very outgoing person in real life. I think that I question the intentions of people who use virtual worlds to mingle. I guess that maybe it is the ‘don’t talk to strangers’ rule from elementary school that still lingers in the back of my mind. Who knows…

Thinking about this answer, it certainly seems different from the public declaration in her blog that experiencing the people speaking Spanish was a really fun experience. Between being intimidated by people and being afraid of getting in trouble, it does not sound like much fun.

My initial reaction to this answer was disappointment. I was encouraged by her reactions to the final class session and her insights into the possibilities of SL and avatars. However, her positive reactions were always with reference to people she has connections with from ‘real life.’ Issues of mistrust and privacy return regarding strangers (“I question the intentions,” “don’t talk
to strangers”). While the students had to use SL for class, she remains skeptical of those who use it to “mingle” and disconnects from them. She positions her hybrid identity as fragmented between the two contexts; she is openly friendly and responsive in ‘real life’ (as confirmed in our interviews), but shamefully timid (cowardly) online.

**Thinking about Chelsea**

I walk away with some important lessons that Chelsea taught me. Compared to other online environments, SL is incredibly powerful because of the use of the body. Although simulated, it is grounded in ‘real world’ practices and steeped in social discourse. Each person is going to interpret their SL experience having lived a lifetime of ‘real world’ gendered identity. These social norms are incredibly strong and exist even when faced with complete opposition (such as Chelsea’s assertion that her boy avatar was a ‘she’). When the norms are questioned, it can produce real feelings of distress. These norms also color how Chelsea interprets others’ identities in the space. She sees men as hiding behind their avatars when they do not look or act as they would in the ‘real world.’ Regarding strangers, she does not know them in the ‘real world’ and trust emerges as a factor. This sense of mistrust produces quite a disconnection within the learning community.

The classroom context is a significant factor in how Chelsea interprets the meaning of her avatar and judges interaction with others. Because she is sitting next to people in the ‘real world,’ people have the opportunity to compare avatar to the person, possibly being critical if the two do not match up. Because of this immediacy, gendered identity may be more salient in this social context. Although she does express some interest in experimenting (I could be a black man), she wants her classmates to see a reflection of her. Regarding interaction, the ways she forms
connections with peers is influenced by the computer lab set up (connecting with her partner Jon when they were in separate labs) and the given task (John was motivated to win, so he was more helpful).

Technical competence emerges as a significant factor that strongly mediates empowerment in SL. Chelsea did not express much technical competence concerning her avatar, which led to a lack of control over it. Lack of competence takes away intentioned choice (“I would choose to dress like a boy”). She also faced difficulty keeping up with her partner and navigating around the virtual world. Over time and practice, she did gain enough technical competence to travel to places she desired and also developed an appreciation for the uses of avatars (“more personal to have your own person there”). This insight is miles from her initial bewilderment about why people would choose to use avatars when they had other options.

Personally, I think if she had more time in SL, her preferences would have become more varied and her interactions with classmates would have been developed more. I would also have been able to see if Chelsea’s concern about getting addicted to SL would have come to fruition.

Curious about this, I e-mailed Chelsea after our last interview and asked if she ever revisited SL after class was over. She wrote back, “I honestly didn’t give it much thought after class was over. Maybe had I invested more of myself into creating my own place on second life and actually built relationships I would have spent time with my avatar.” Given her interest and ability in creating personal places in The Sims and her emphasis of relationships, this is not a surprising answer.
Chapter 6

Ramona

I remember Ramona strolling into the conference room on our first interview day, her long blonde hair peeking out underneath a fuzzy sky blue winter cap. In the notes I took right after our first interview had taken place, I had written "quirky" to describe her personality. At first, she seemed a bit shy or apprehensive, as I noted her tendency to shift her eye contact from me sporadically and to occasionally cross her arms. However, after feeling moments of connection throughout the interview and seeing evidence of it in the transcripts, I came to realize that this is simply Ramona. In my notes, I jotted, "Eyes averted, arms crossed, but friendly." My times with her during the class sessions were very much the same. She was quiet in the class and generally kept to herself, but was actively participating in the experience.

I turned to Ramona to help answer my questions about virtual world learning communities because of her survey results. In some ways, she exemplifies gaming practices more typical of women (Heeter & Winn, 2008). She played games in elementary and middle schools, but tapered off in high school; she plays strategy and puzzle games; when she plays with others, it is with those she knows in ‘real life;' she feels that her gaming has not helped make new friendships or improve existing relationships. This is similar to Chelsea’s indications. Yet she also shows some signs of challenging the norms. She games on a weekly basis, owns a gaming console and has played first-person shooter games which are traditionally masculine. To Ramona, games are fun, challenging, and frustrating. With regards to virtual worlds like SL, she agreed that she would like to use SL to communicate with peers and others, but has never
participated in a virtual world due to lack of interest and computer requirements. She has never used an avatar before. Given a list of virtual world-related words (“avatar”), she does not have confidence in her ability to accurately explain what an avatar is. In these results, I hear some contradictions: she is not interested in virtual worlds, does not know what an avatar is, and feels her past gaming has not enhanced her relationships, but she would like to use SL for communication in the class.

Given her adequate gaming experience and mixed feelings about virtual worlds, I thought it would be interesting to listen to how Ramona understands the factors that influence how she accesses the SL learning community. From our interviews, I learn a lot about Ramona’s position with respect to her SL learning community while listening to the three main voices: empowerment, connection, and gender. Identification of these voices within Ramona’s words is significant because it examines the interactional factors that influences how she establishes identity, communicates, and relates to the group in the virtual space – essentially, how she finds her place in the community.

Ramona often speaks from a place of disempowerment regarding her knowledge and skills to fully participate in the world, due to a lack of technical competence (“I was having big problems, who knows”), which is linked to a lack of previous experience (“I haven’t really like tried to do anything like that before”). Sometimes she feels a personal connection within the world (“When I was in there, I could see everyone”) and other times disconnected (“It was hard to see except for where I was, I guess”). Although much more subtle than Chelsea, she speaks in gendered ways (“I’m not really a gamer myself so I guess that could explain why I wanted to make it look like me”). Although Ramona begins to envision the transformative possibilities SL
can offer (“It can be as real as you want it to be…I can see how it could be fun”), she experiences barriers in identity (“I was trying to change my hair and it wasn’t working”) and interaction (“I didn’t even know who, I didn’t know what his real name was and I didn’t know him at all”). These findings are influenced by Ramona’s position in the context of the masculine discourse of gaming and the ‘real world’ academic context as well. It is necessary to fully explore these elements to understand how to support women like Ramona in the classroom to gain access and direct the processes of the virtual world community. It is important for women to be able to do this so they are equal members in an environment that has evolved from one that is male-dominated.

**Ramona’s Position in Gaming Context**

In line with the popular discourse of gaming as a masculine practice and the face of gamer as male, Ramona positions herself in opposition. In our first interview, we talk about the games she plays, and then I ask if she considers herself a gamer. She replies, “I would say noooooo just because…uh, my idea of a gamer is someone who, like that's a main hobby of theirs, like they collect games and stuff and systems…” Offering up her prototype of a gamer, she cites her husband's little brother "because he spends like half of like waking hours playing games." In her article about gender and game preferences, Carr (2005) notes, “The association of masculinity with computer games is a construct, the result of a series of inventions, trends, practices, and commercial decisions that have settled into a particular pattern” (p. 467). For Ramona, being a gamer means that gaming is an important part of identity and lifestyle, with the person devoting significant amounts of time and money to the practice. While she plays on a weekly basis and plays different kinds of games, she does not consider it a major part of her
identity. Her conception supports Carr’s description of the gaming discourse: “A hard core gamer would play on an everyday basis and self-identify as a serious gamer – and such players are more likely to be male, due to the resources involved” (p. 468).

In contrast to her vision of ‘gamer,’ Ramona explains, “…I really don't do that [main hobby, collect games and systems] so I don't really consider myself a gamer, like I'm a very, very casual player of games.” I am intrigued by the words she chooses to repeat which serve to strongly distinguish her from gamers, namely the words “really” and “very”; “I really don’t do that,” “I don’t really consider myself,” and “very, very casual player.” In the literature, women (and men) tend to define women's playing practices as 'casual,’ while men are the 'serious' players (Taylor, 2006). However, Carr (2005) stresses,

Hard-core gamers might be more committed, but it does not follow they are more representative or more credible than their casual counterparts…[they] will differ in how they engage with games and gaming cultures and, as a consequence (whatever their gender), their preferences are also likely to differ (p. 468).

Given this, it is important to understand how Ramona engages with the gaming and virtual world cultures.

Although Carr (2005) acknowledges ‘casual’ gamers as credible, I sense that Ramona is not altogether confident about her gaming preferences, sometimes seeming embarrassed about what she likes. For instance, I ask her what games she plays on the computer. She looks down, laughs and admits, "Nancy Drew…yeah I know that makes me sound like I'm 12 years old but really they're actually like fun for adults too I think." She tends to downgrade her abilities in some games. For instance, she told me how she played the Wii Fit games a few times:
I don’t know, I was bad at it, it told me I was unbalanced (A laughs, that would probably be what they say about me too). Well like I couldn’t figure out at first how to play some of the games, like there’s this one where you have to like head soccer balls by like shifting your weight very slightly (A: Oh) and like after a little while like panda heads and soccer cleats come flying at you and if they hit you, you lose points (A: laughs, oh my gosh), yeah so I was not very good at that one (A: right).

When I hear this story again, I am reminded of Jenson and deCastell’s (2008) assertion that girls and women often express less technical competence because it is in line with an appropriate performance of femininity, with actual skills not as salient. Regarding research, Taylor (2008) emphasizes that the researcher and participant are always producing gender in the moment, and I can see that when revisiting this passage. When Ramona expresses lack of competence, I chime in with her (“That would probably be what they say about me too”). Interestingly, we both appear to give the gaming console a kind of personal authority over our performance (“it told me I was unbalanced”; “that would be what they say about me too”). When she says how she was not very good at that one, I answer “right.”

One reason I chose Ramona to interview was because she indicated that she owned a gaming console in her survey, which I took as a sign that she is more experienced with games. When I ask about this, Ramona downplays her ownership of the console, explaining, "I guess you could say that, we kind of, we found an old NES [Nintendo Entertainment System] in my in-laws and we took it home because they weren't using it, so I guess that counts." When I ask her what she plays on it, she answers, "Well, actually, I don't usually play that um, when I play games, I usually play them on my computer." While she owns a console, she does not spend time
playing with it and does not collect games for it, therefore once again positioning herself in opposition to the ‘gamer.’ She does have an interest in the Wii gaming console due to the Wii Fit games, but explains, “I just don’t really have access to it all the time, but it seems like it would be fun.”

Ramona firmly positions her game practices in line with Lin’s (2008) conception of the invisible culture of women gamers. In this conception, women tend to play alone, and when they play with others, it is often with men. Ramona almost always plays games alone, meaning that she is physically alone, and the game only requires her participation in order to complete. Unlike the traditional conception of ‘competition’ as direct and having a winner and loser, she does compete with her friends in Facebook games, since she looks at the scores of her friends and wants her score to be on top. The only time Ramona mentions competing directly with others is during her few times playing a first-person shooter game with her husband. She recalls, "That's the only one I can think of that we really played together." I was interested to hear more about this experience since first-person shooter games are traditionally played by men more than women. In the game, she thought it was “funny to like run around and like shoot each other." I was interested to hear why she thought it was funny, and in a member checking conversation, she explains, "It's funny to see little characters running around shooting each other because you wouldn't do that in real life. It's so unreal it's silly.” Not deriving pleasure from competition or aggression, she instead derived it in a humorous way. Positioned as a casual player, she is engaging with this game in a different way than intended by the developer when considering the official tasks embedded within. This is an important finding when thinking about how she will interact in a virtual world that has no embedded objectives.
Ramona has never played online games where she interacts with others who she does not know from ‘real life.’ I ask her why, and she answers, "Not, I don't know, that's not really something that I've really been super interested in or like...had time to do I guess." I decide to go with the clearer of the two options and ask her to clarify what she means by time. She responds, "Yeah I mean it, time is one factor and also I guess...yeah I'm not really that super interested in...playing games that way." Through her ability to only provide partial answers, I get the sense that she is not altogether sure why she is not “super interested.” Taylor (2008) acknowledges this occurrence, citing that women who are inexperienced with a game genre often have difficulty explaining their preferences when they have not personally experienced the genre, not knowing what they could enjoy.

Sensing this in the moment, instead of asking her why she is not super interested, I ask her why she thinks others play online games in which they interact with unknown others. She answers, "Well...why...I guess...I don't know, maybe because it's...it's funny to like see other people out there and you don't really know where they're at but they're like playing the same game as you." The four long silences in her sentence actually speak volumes concerning her lack of understanding of the purpose of this game play (she finds it funny rather than fun or challenging), although she does hint at issues of co-presence (see other people out there; playing the same game as you). She then cites her ex-roommate who would play card games on Facebook with "like random people...like, like I don't know, I don't really know why she, I guess she just thought it was fun to, you know, play against real people instead of a computer." Again, she does not confidently explain why her ex-roommate preferred to play this way (I don’t know, I don’t really know why, I guess), but hints at co-presence factors (real people), although it
seems that she does not regard these interactions as meaningful (random people). Listening to the recorded interview, the way she says ‘random people’ suggests a negative judgment, like it is not a socially acceptable form of communication. This is informed by her personal gaming practices. Ramona does not play with random people, but people she knows from ‘real life.’

“I Know Pretty Much Nothing about Second Life”

To open our first interview, I ask Ramona if she has ever heard of SL before. While she has heard of it, her knowledge of it is "on a very limited basis, like I know pretty much nothing about Second Life," as she chuckles. She often chuckles in these instances, perhaps engaging in an “appropriate performance of femininity” (Jenson & deCastell, 2008, p. 54). I ask what she thinks SL is and she surmises, "I think it's like - it's like a game where you can create a character and like have it do things but that's really all I know about it." This conception of SL reflects the a common misconception about it, that it is a game with pre-determined objectives and that the avatars are characters, or as Loke (2009) describes, simply uniforms rather than self-representations.

When we talk about her past experience using avatars to represent self, Ramona stresses her inexperience:

Yes, on a very limited basis…um…my in-laws have a Wii and one time, me and my mother-in-law were like playing around with it and made Miis [avatars for the Wii Fit games] for me and my husband…I’ve played the Wii but like very, very little so um, I don’t know…I guess I would say not (A: not much), yeah, not to a great extent.

Drawing a connection between access and experience, Ramona (and I) place an
emphasis on how little competence she has with respect to avatars. This is not unusual when considering gender in the literature. Women are less likely to participate in virtual worlds and MMORPGs in which avatars are simulated bodies meant to represent the person. Ramona is “playing around” with avatars (on a casual basis, perhaps?), rather than taking them seriously, truly embodying them.

Noting that we will indeed be interacting with people through avatars in SL, both those known and unknown to her, I ask Ramona if she thinks that will be weird for her. To my surprise, she says no, since she has communicated with those she does not know online (like Facebook groups), just not in games. Since she perceives prior experience (and therefore competence) with this skill, she thinks she knows what to expect and does not find it strange or foreign. With the personal knowledge that communicating through avatars in SL is much different than communicating with others in Facebook, I ask her if she thinks there will be a difference. Ramona responds, "I don't (laughs), I don't know I mean, I guess it's hard for me to say since I haven't really like played games like that very much (A: right).” Since she lacks the experience of participating in environments where one embodies an avatar, she does not have the knowledge about what to expect. When her lack of experience and knowledge is brought to the forefront, it is ultimately disempowering, with Ramona losing her voice in a way; “I guess it’s hard for me to say.”

As our first interview winds down, I think (and am concerned) that Ramona has little knowledge about what awaits her in SL. While she plays games on a regular basis, she does not play games that are like SL. She does not understand the basic nature of the virtual world (“like a game”), of avatars (“characters”), and the underlying purposes (“have it like do things”). She has
very limited experience embodying a simulated body in real time with distanced, unknown others. She is not sure why others would be interested in participating in “games that way” and “games like that” (games that rely on online communication with strangers). Since she has not had the experience herself, she is not empowered with knowledge. However, she seems somewhat open to the experience, indicating that she would like to communicate with others, including strangers. She also plays games on a weekly basis in her personal life, so she may have an advantage with regards to competence.

“It Was Like I Wasn't Even Really There”

I open the second interview by asking Ramona to log into SL so I can take a picture of her avatar for my records. She sarcastically retorts, "Good luck getting a snapshot of it." On the first SL class session, she was in the computer lab with the others for the orientation, customizing her avatar who she names Ramona. She recalls, "At first, there wasn’t any problem but…I don’t know, I…the second day I logged in, I was having big problems, who knows.” During the second SL session, Ramona experienced a disruption which permanently affected her hybrid identity and interaction in the virtual world community.

I ask her to tell me the story of her elusive avatar and she recounts, “I think I was trying - well for one thing, I was trying to change like my hair or something like that and it wasn't working, so I tried logging out and then when I logged back in, then I looked like that." In this instance, "that" was an image that resembled a cloud of smoke (Figure 5). This smoke image occurs when one first logs in to SL and indicates that the avatar is still loading. In moments, the avatar typically emerges from the smoke, and the smoke disappears. In Ramona's case, Ramona the avatar never emerged and the smoke cloud remained. Because of this, the smoke cloud was
Figure 5. Ramona the avatar, minus the avatar.

her avatar in a sense. To make the situation more complex and fragmented with respect to identity and interaction, others in the virtual world could see Ramona the avatar, not the smoke cloud. This was the first time I had ever seen such a case. Not having prior experience of this occurrence, I figured that there some glitch with the computers in the lab or the SL server. Logging out and in was the best option I could come up with at the time, since I was busy running the sessions and assisting the 26 others students in the lab. I never sat down and put the effort in fixing this issue, a decision that I regret in hindsight. Apparently, this does happen in SL from time to time, and indicates that the user needs to clear her cache, a rather simple action to take (incidentally, another woman in the class, Marla, taught me this).

In SL, when a user chooses a body, she chooses how she will be represented in the virtual world. In this case, Ramona had no body, or rather, she had a body that she could not personally experience, and therefore no choice. Given that women are more empowered when they have choice in avatar selection (Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2006), I knew that Ramona's negotiation of the experience in the gaps between the two worlds would surely be a tenuous one in which I
wanted to better understand. I ask her how this development affected her experience of SL. She says:

    Well, I mean, I definitely wasn’t expecting that, I mean, ‘cause at first, everything was going fine, like I could see myself and like, you know, I thought I could figure out how to do other things but since I couldn’t see myself, it made everything else really difficult like I couldn’t, I didn’t really…

    Intrigued by the heavy use of her “I” voice and the reference to her avatar as “I” and sensing a tension between when she could see herself and when she could not, I wanted to listen to this passage in a second listening for clues to how she understands her place in the virtual world (Table 5).

    Concerning her hybrid identity, she speaks of the connection to her avatar when the avatar acts as an intended representative. Turkle (1995) envisions avatars as ways for users to extend their selves into the virtual space, and Ramona’s description of “I could see myself” supports this. Her avatar body signifies a presence in the world. When she is present in the world and can feel the connection to her avatar body, everything is “going fine,” it is expected. This makes her believe in her technical competence (“…I thought I could figure out…”) and feel empowered to act in the world (“…how to do other things…”). However, when her avatar disappeared unexpectedly, she lost the connection to her avatar (“But since I couldn’t see myself…”), which disconnected her from the virtual world (“…it made everything else really difficult…”) and her voice switches to disempowerment (“I couldn’t, I didn’t really…”). After this passage, Ramona does maintain that she still has some sense of connection with her avatar
Table 5

*I Couldn’t See Myself*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I mean</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>Avatar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I definitely wasn’t expecting that</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could see myself</td>
<td></td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You know</td>
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<tr>
<td>I thought</td>
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<tr>
<td>I could</td>
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<tr>
<td>I couldn’t see myself</td>
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<tr>
<td>I couldn’t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I didn’t really</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

and the world (“I mean, I was able to like go into the [virtual] classroom and like sit down and stuff …I could move around”), showing that she could still participate and was still present in the community. However, her perception of her presence in the classroom was tenuous at best (“…but it was really weird because I would look like a cloud or something”). Lacking a body, she lost some connection to the world (“It was kind of hard to see except for where I was, I guess”). She tries to re-establish the connection to self but lacks the technical competence to fix the problem, which affects her participation in the class activities:

When I, when I was trying to – I couldn’t even really do the scavenger hunt because I was trying to see if I could fix it and it wasn’t working so I don’t know (A: so that kind of took you out of it a bit), yeah, it really screwed me up, I guess.

Once Ramona lost the connection to her avatar body, she became an unequal member of the community. The way she refers to herself in the story switches from somewhat empowered (I mean, I was able) to disempowered (I would look like a cloud, I was trying, I couldn’t even
really do, I was trying, if I could fix it, I don’t know). I subtly reinforce this perception, suggesting that losing the connection to self “took you out of it a bit,” in which she agrees. It is interesting to think of the double meaning here. It took her out of the class activity, but took her out of the world as well.

I ask Ramona how the smoke cloud appearance affected her feelings of presence in the virtual world. She answers,

It was like I wasn't even really there. I didn't really, yeah, I mean, I couldn't tell what I actually looked like, like I had to look on other people's screens to see if I was even visible. I don't know, it was just really weird.

Considering her use of “I” to denote both her ‘real’ self and her avatar, I wanted to closely listen to this passage for a second listening in order to understand how she negotiated this experience (Table 6).

When reading this voice poem down the line, it is striking to hear the voice of disempowerment (I wasn’t, I didn’t, I mean, I couldn’t, I don’t know) with regards to her hybrid identity. Her hybrid identity became fragmented when she lost the connection to her avatar body, not knowing what her avatar “actually looked like.” The only way Ramona experiences her body is indirectly through others (I had to look, if I was even visible). She speaks in disconnected ways to the world (“It was like I wasn’t even really there”) when the connection to self is not present (“if I was even visible”). This is not surprising, given Taylor's (2002) notion that "bodies root us and make us present to ourselves and others" (p. 42). While her virtual body was present to others, it was not present to her.
Unfortunately, Ramona formed a fragmented connection with the smoke cloud, beginning to somewhat identify with the image. For instance, in her blog, she declares, “It was hard navigating my avatar since I’m still a ghost, wherever I log on, even at home…” Not being empowered with choices, she instead internalizes what she is given, an image that resembles a ghost. She has no control over this; no matter where she is, even in the safe space of her home, she is “still a ghost.” This is terribly concerning, considering that a ghost is defined as a disembodied soul! This hybrid identity affected her interactions with others in the class. She instant messaged her male partner who was in another classroom and explained, "I’m a ghost on my screen.” He replied, “Weird, I can see you fine.” A few minutes later, she wrote, “I'm not supposed to be like that." Taylor (2004) found that women were often conflicted with the meanings of their avatars when they did not have a choice in customization, and Ramona certainly seems conflicted here. This point is exemplified in Ramona’s self-declared ‘lowest point’ of SL participation:
When I was trying to do the, we were supposed to be doing the scavenger hunt and I couldn't see myself and I looked on someone else's computer and…I had done something that had like taken all my clothes off and I was like, and I didn't even know that it had happened so I was just like, OK, what do I do, you know?

Reading this passage, it is striking (and concerning) to hear the presence of hybridity between worlds. Ramona’s avatar is her body in this space. It is not her avatar, but Ramona who had no clothes on. This is the ultimate disempowering experience concerning matters of the body; being naked in public and not realizing it, and then being unable to change it. Interestingly, she internalizes the issue as something she did, although she is not sure what (“I had done something”). It is very likely that she did not do anything to make this happen, given the unpredictable avatar issues, but the fact remains that she perceives it is her lack of competence that brought on this social embarrassment. This has major implications for equal participation in the learning community, regarding the ability to communicate and influence the cognitive processes of the community (“I was trying…we were supposed to be doing…”).

The way that Ramona positions herself in broader gaming context influences her position in the classroom. She walked into this class experience with very little experience (and hence knowledge) about SL, avatars, and the norms of virtual game/world-like environments. While she does not invoke gender, women are less likely to have experience in these matters. Part of her disempowerment stems from this lack of knowledge and experience. She relates her present difficulties with her lack of prior experience:

I-I thought it was pretty difficult, like it was, it was, I haven’t really played any or – I know it’s not really a game, but I haven’t really like tried to do anything like that before,
like I didn’t, I didn’t have any previous knowledge about the program or anything like that, so eh, I don’t know, it was difficult to get used to, I guess.

Ramona acknowledges that games that resemble SL may help build the skills necessary to become technically competent, and she has not had that experience in her games. Lacking knowledge and experience, she has a hard time acclimating to a new environment, leading to a feeling of disempowerment (I thought it was pretty difficult, I haven’t really played, I know, I haven’t really, I didn’t, I didn’t, I don’t know, I guess). This makes me think of her earlier statement, “I was having big problems, who knows.” Unfortunately, she does not, and this prevents her from really having an active presence in the community.

“It Seemed a Normal Response to Try to Make my Avatar Sort of Like Me”

Although Ramona’s story about her disappearing avatar fascinated me and illuminated some insights into how she understands her experiences in SL, I was curious about her original intentions concerning her avatar. When Ramona did have choice and control over her avatar during the first session, she customized her avatar to look like her ‘real world’ appearance. I was not surprised at this choice, since it is a consistent trend in the literature that women typically choose feminine avatars, regardless of level of gaming experience (Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2006). In the class, while the women's avatars all resembled women, the men's avatars ranged from men to fantastical characters (a dancing zombie who resembled Michael Jackson; a warrior with spiky armor; Darth Vader wearing a halter top and tight pants). Since it is still unclear why women consistently choose feminine avatars, I wanted to listen closely to the reasons Ramona gives about her intentions.
The conversation comes up in our second interview when I ask Ramona about her current conception of SL, since she has now had some personal experience with it. While she once conceived of SL as “like a game where you can create a character and like have it do things,” now she has accrued some knowledge about the nature of the virtual world, explaining:

So I guess my idea of what SL is, it’s like a virtual community where you can, you know, be someone, you know, you decide to create and um…I understand there’s a lot of things you can do, like I know people can get like jobs in SL…so I guess it can be as real as you want it to be or you know, or you’re, it’s not realistic, I don’t know.

In this revised conception, Ramona ties the virtual world to the people in it. It is a community in which the members ultimately affect the direction of the world. Avatars are not “characters” but embodied by the users (“you can be someone”). She ties avatars to ‘real’ self closely in her mentioning that “people can get jobs in SL.” However, she hints at the formation of hybrid identity (“you decide to create”), acknowledging that avatars will not be exact replicas of the users. This is because the virtual world offers certain fluid possibilities, being realistic or not realistic, depending on the user. Interestingly, this is a sentiment that is noted in the official SL guide; “You are the one who determines what SL means to you” (Rymaszewski et al., 2008, p. 2). Through her academic experiences in SL, Ramona forms this appreciation.

Although her conception is certainly closer to the developers’ intended nature of the virtual world, she still maintains a relatively uncertain voice, as if she is still trying to come to terms with the nature of the world and users. Noting the shift in the use of “I” and “you” voices, I wanted to listen to this passage for a second time to better understand her personal conception of the world (Table 7).
A very interesting pattern emerges, one that did not pop out at me during the first listening. When I ask her for her conceptions of SL, she begins and ends with uncertainty (I guess, I don’t know). In the middle, she switches to the ‘You’ voice when considering the possibilities in identity experimentation (you can, you know, you know, you decide to create), engaging in a self-dialogue of sorts. She switches back to the ‘I’ voice when talking about her newly formed knowledge about SL (I understand, I know). However, is it when Ramona is talking about the relative ‘realness’ of the virtual world that she speaks in less certain terms. Reality is more fluid in SL (as real as you want, it’s not realistic), sandwiched by “I guess” and “I don’t know.” She is still coming to terms with this new space. A statement Ramona makes in the interview helps to explain this pattern. She says, “Getting more familiar with it would have, would determine kind of how you want to use it, um (sigh).” If she had been more familiar with the world, she would have more options to experience it. This coincides with Carr’s (2005) note Table 7

Or You’re, It’s Not As Realistic, I Don’t Know

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td>You can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You decide to create</td>
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<tr>
<td>I understand</td>
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<td>I know</td>
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<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td>As you want it to be</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Or you’re, it’s not as realistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that when one gains experience participating in a game, multiple preferences begin to emerge.

Since I felt she was subtly interconnecting issues of identity to the nature of the world ("you're, it's not realistic"), I ask her if she thought some of her peers were more realistic than others. She says, "One person who comes to mind, when PJ put on the uh, armor and was like running around and I was like cracking up 'cause I was, like he obviously didn't seem to be taking it very seriously…" She continues, "I guess for him it wasn't really as you know, as real, I mean I know some of the other um…students made their characters, or their avatars I'm sorry, look really realistic or like more like they actually look." She thinks PJ decided to be someone fantastical because of his take on the virtual world; he did not take the world seriously and so formed a somewhat unreal connection to his avatar. For those students who made their avatar look realistic (like their ‘real’ selves), it was more real of an experience. Using Ramona’s reasoning, the way one feels about the nature of the virtual world affects the way she makes her avatar body appear.

Considering that Ramona customized her avatar to look like her ‘real’ self, then it stands to reason that she took it seriously. I ask why she thought there was a disparity between the 'unreal' and the 'real' looks of the students' avatars, and she answers:

I-I don't know, I guess like, I don't know, for me it seemed a normal response to try to make my avatar sort of like me, I guess (A: mm-hmm) 'cause you know, if you're starting out with something new, I mean the, yeah to me that seemed like a logical way to…do it, um…obviously for other people, their first, you know, response was to just make it look as crazy as possible or you know, just mess around with it and not necessarily make it
look like themselves which, you know, is uh, is expected I guess also from, just depending on the person.

I noted a lot of uncertainty in her "I" voice, and a comparison drawn between herself and other people, so I wanted to listen more deeply in a second listening (Table 8). She begins with uncertainty (I don’t know, I guess, I don’t know), and makes one revelation; it was “normal” and “logical” to make her avatar like her, because she was new to the environment and the experience of being embodied by an avatar. It is important to note that she does not say “make my avatar sort of look like me,” but rather “Make my avatar sort of like me.” She is bringing herself into the environment the way she knows how, the way she is familiar with, through a body that looks like her ‘real’ one. The voice poem then switches away from her and focuses on the “other people,” signifying a distinction she holds between them. While her response was normal and logical, their response was without much thought (“first response”) and not serious (“crazy as possible,” “just mess around with it”) since they did not “necessarily make it look like themselves.” From this, it seems that Ramona thinks that if the avatar does not look like the user, then the connection is not as true. For instance, she refers to their avatars as ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’ (make it as crazy as possible, just mess around with it, make it look like themselves).

For Ramona, it is normal and logical to rely on familiar social norms when exploring a new place (for the others, it is not a new place). She closely ties identity to her ‘real world’ appearance, as did the women in my previous exploratory study. In addition, she names her avatar Ramona as well. Since Ramona has no experience embodying an avatar in games, she assumes that one cannot infuse ‘real’ characteristics in a body if the body is unfamiliar.
Table 8

For Me, It Seemed a Normal Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>He/She</th>
<th>Avatar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For me, it seemed a normal response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make my avatar sort of like me</td>
<td></td>
<td>My avatar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td>You know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you’re starting out with something new</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To me, that seemed like a logical way</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other people</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Their first</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
<td>Make it look as crazy as possible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
<td>Just mess around with it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
<td>Not necessarily make it look like themselves</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
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</table>

(fantastical). It is interesting to hear how her conceptions of avatar and identity influence her interactions with others in the community. Although she clearly draws a line between her and the other “realistic” avatars and the ones that look “as crazy as possible,” she does not appear particularly reluctant to interact with them. In fact, she was quite entertained by PJ, one of the students mentioned above who customized his avatar to look like a warrior. She shares how his
look and actions (running around in armor) made her laugh; “it was really funny.” During the final session in which the students met in a virtual classroom in SL for a lecture, Ramona initiated communication with him. Although amused by his running around, she writes (in a joking manner) in the public chat, “Hey armor guy, sit down.” It is interesting that she is attempting to connect with him, but almost as a challenge to what he is doing. Perhaps in a way she wants him to take it seriously, or wants to let him know that she takes it seriously, but on the other hand is amused by his actions.

In these instances, the academic context of the ‘real world’ cannot be ignored. For instance, during this final session, the students were all sitting together in the computer lab, accessing SL at the same time. PJ, the main class clown of the group, would often speak out in the lab as he directed his avatar, so his intentions were much clearer than if he were only online. While the warrior appearance could be interpreted as being intimidating in a completely online environment, Ramona was not threatened because she knew “he wanted to be funny or something.” This reminds me of her earlier statement that shooting people in the video game was funny because it was so unreal.

“We Could All Go Like Put our Avatars, Like One Room”

Considering Ramona’s harrowing experiences with her disappearing avatar, I ask her for the highlight of her SL experience, hoping to hear an uplifting story. She cites the final class session, in which I invited three distanced guest speakers to visit our virtual classroom and discuss how SL influences interaction and identity (this is the time that she tells CJ to sit down). She explains:
I mean, I guess I thought it was interesting how you could, you know, we could all go like put our avatars, like one room, like sort of have like a virtual class, like I thought that was interesting. Also like when I was in there, I could see everyone who was actually um…in class that day, I guess, so that was…kind of nice. I mean, we were, I guess we were all like there together we, whereas like being in various places throughout the map or whatever, um…uh yeah, so I guess that was kind of cool. I mean, you, I guess even though the students didn't really do, we didn't really do anything while we were in, in the room except like listen or ask questions but, I guess it was more like an actual class (A: OK, that makes sense.).

When I listen to this passage again, several issues emerge. First, her story speaks of positive immersion and co-presence, of connection with self and others in the virtual world (“we were in the room”). Although she pads the positive words with some uncertainty (kind of nice, kind of cool), she speaks with more empowerment than ever before. I wanted to listen to how she spoke of herself through the ‘I’ and ‘You’ and ‘We’ lens in this situation (Table 9). Part of what makes this experience a highlight for Ramona is that she feels some ownership of community, some group cohesion (connection to others). For instance, she starts out with some uncertainty (I mean, I guess), but then a more confident ‘I’ emerges (I thought it was interesting). She then switches to a self-dialogue (you could, you know) before speaking as a member of the group (we could, our avatars). This makes her feel connection to the world (I was in there) and connected with others in the world (I could see everyone). From this point, her ‘I’ voice and ‘we’ voice go back and forth in dialogue. Her ‘I’ voice is very uncertain (I guess, I mean, I guess, I guess, I mean, I guess) when she talks about the collective virtual space (we were all there
Table 9

Put Our Avatars, Like One Room

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I mean</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>We</th>
<th>Avatar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I thought it was interesting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You could</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You know</td>
<td></td>
<td>We could</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Put our avatars</td>
<td>Put our avatars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought that was interesting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I was in there</td>
<td>I was in there</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could see everyone</td>
<td>I could see everyone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td>I mean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>We were</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td>We were all like there together</td>
<td>We were there together</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td>You</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td>We really didn’t do anything</td>
<td>We really didn’t do anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>While we were in the room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
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</table>

Together) and what they did in the space (we really didn’t do anything…more like an actual class). Ramona is still negotiating her position in this new space with others in the community.

Considering the real-life academic context, she is empowered when she can connect peers to their avatars (I could see everyone who was actually in class that day so that was kind of
nice). She felt that she was sharing the same virtual space (we were all there like together; while we were in the room) and the same lab space at same time (in gaps). And not only does she feel connected with others, but it shows through her interactions. When PJ chats in the SL window 'there's no security issues while Roic [his avatar’s name] is here,’ Ramona jokes in text, "Well, he is a football player." He writes back, "How did you know?! Lol." Perhaps sharing the same space allows Ramona to learn more of the students’ ‘real’ characteristics. She is getting to know PJ by integrating his avatar’s characteristics (being forceful) with PJ’s characteristics (football player), resulting in a hybrid identity.

Another factor that supported her that day was that the distanced guest speakers communicated using voice instead of text. She explains:

I think hearing their voices was a little more personal, um…otherwise, I guess it might have been a little difficult to keep up with the typing, um…I think they did a pretty good job of like answering questions or like you know, taking turns talking, so I guess it was - hearing people's voices was a little more meaningful, I felt, than if they were just typing.

I ask if it made the guest speakers feel more present or real, and she answers, “Yeah, I mean ‘cause hearing more of like a human, you know, aspect to a virtual world.” Ramona feels more connected to others when they are exhibit characteristics unique to being human. This virtual conversation was much more like a typical ‘human’ conversation (answering questions in complete sentences, taking turns). She finds this more personal (one definition of ‘personal’ is something carrying on between individuals directly) than typing, which is non-linear. Another meaning of ‘personal’ is ‘having the qualities of a person,’ and voice applies here. Voice is realistic. She contrasts voice and typing, saying “hearing their voices” versus “the
typing,” and then “hearing people’s voices, than if they were just typing.” She emphasizes the human physical qualities of this conversation, saying ‘hearing their voices,’ ‘taking turns talking,’ ‘hearing people’s voices,’ ‘hearing more of like a human.’ I am intrigued by her last sentence of “Hearing people’s voice was a little more meaningful, I felt…” This was the only time in our conversations that she said “I felt” instead of “I think” or “I mean.” My hunch is that Ramona perceives more emotional connection to others when their ‘real life’ personal characteristics are projected in the virtual space.

**Blog: “I Remembered That You Could Go Underwater, So I Did”**

Ramona's final adventure in SL was a solo one, as the students had a blog assignment to explore on their own. I created this activity with photovoice techniques in mind (Meyer & Kroeger, 2005). I wanted them to explore a place, take a picture of something and then interpret the picture. I wanted to see what caught their eye in SL and to better understand how they experienced the world on their own terms.

In line with her previous experiences, Ramona shared highs and lows in her story. On a positive note, she spoke with more empowerment than ever before. She opens her blog with:

I went to the ocean island from our scavenger hunt. There wasn't anyone around, so I walked around and noticed there were a lot of chairs. This island was apparently meant for relaxation and there were a lot of trees. I remembered that you could go underwater so I did.

Comparing this passage to those that came before, it is striking to hear the increase in competence. She speaks with more empowerment and less uncertainty in her ‘I’ voice (I went, I walked, I remembered, I did), supporting the idea that she had gained technical
competence over time and practice. She exhibits some control of her avatar (you could, I did) and can connect with the world, interpreting the meaning of the island based on her explorations. After our class experiences, she better knows what to expect from the virtual world. For instance, she knows she can go underwater without danger and that there are animals there.

However, Ramona's smoke identity still plagued her and colored her experience. It affected her connection with the world and connection with self; “It was hard navigating my avatar since I'm still a ghost wherever I log on, even at home”, but she showed more resilience this time around; "but I was able to take a snapshot underwater in front of an octopus” (Figure 6). Concerning interaction, she shares, “This wasn’t a very meaningful visit to Second Life because I didn’t meet anyone.” This is not a sentiment I expected, since she had not previously expressed an interest in interacting with others, beyond her survey results. She continues, “I really didn’t want to, anyway…” and my first thought was that she was not comfortable in doing so. She finishes, “…because my avatar seems to be permanently messed up and I can’t change my appearance.” Ramona is willing to talk to unknown others in SL, but she needs to have control of her avatar’s appearance. Because of her lack of ability to modify her avatar (I can’t change), she

Figure 6. Ramona and her underwater trip.
does not want to interact (I really didn’t want to). Given that bodies make us present to others (Taylor, 2002) and she does not know what her actual avatar looks like, this is an understandable point.

**Listening to Ramona**

There are several lessons that I have learned from listening to Ramona. First, while Ramona engages in games more regularly than Chelsea (a few times a week versus less than every few weeks), she also positions herself in the larger gaming context as ‘other.’ She is not experienced with 3D games and virtual worlds, and she does not understand why people play games online. Her relative inexperience with these environments has some implications, namely issues of technical competence and virtual world norms.

With little prior experience in similar environments, technical skills presented a significant barrier for Ramona. Although the ‘ghost’ issue was more of a SL problem than a Ramona problem, there was a solution (that another woman figured out) that she did not discover. Because she felt she could not change her avatar’s appearance, she reluctantly accepted the hybrid identity that emerged. However, she did not want to interact with others because her avatar was not the way she wanted. It also interrupted her participation in class. She shared in another blog entry that she had no idea what she was doing in the scavenger hunt, and in the interview she explained how she was trying to fix her avatar during the hunt. This positions her as less empowered in the social and cognitive direction of the community.

While those with more experience in similar environments may figure out the world and its’ norms quickly, Ramona is developing her conception from scratch. Ramona has to multi-task during her SL class time in a way, as she is actively negotiating the nature of the virtual world
and of avatars. The most striking story she shares about this is about her conception of SL now that she has personally experienced it. While it used to be a game with characters for her, now it is much more complex. It has the capacity to be both real and unreal, and it is the individual who determines the nature. This is a major point to think about with regards to the academic context.

Each student interprets the nature of the world in a different way, given their previous knowledge and experiences. While some male gamers like PJ may interpret the space like a game or a purely fantastical place because he is familiar with the format, women like Ramona may interpret the space by more ‘real world’ standards. This can produce a real disconnection in the community, especially with the goal of co-constructing knowledge in an academic context.

For Ramona, SL is a community in which people have affordances that they do not have in the ‘real world,’ where they can actively ‘be someone’ that they ‘decide to create’ through the use of avatars. She speaks with certainty when asserting that it can be “as real as you want it to be,” but loses it when she acknowledges that “you’re, it’s not as realistic, I don’t know.” This is not surprising, given that she is familiar with the “real” through her life experiences, but has very little experience in similar environments. It is not surprising that Ramona chooses to go the ‘real’ route, finding it “normal” and “logical” to create her avatar in her ‘real life’ image. Others were ‘unreal,’ and she found their appearances ‘crazy.’ It is also not surprising that she noted that people can have jobs in SL, and the virtual class was the activity that supported her the most, the one in which she interacted with others and heard their voices. However, the more time she spent in SL, the more she dabbled in ‘unreal’ circumstances. By the final blog, she was posing in front of an octopus and skillfully taking a picture to capture the hybrid experience.
At the conclusion of our second interview, I felt that Ramona’s developing conceptions of SL were favorable and that if she had been immersed in SL for a longer period of time, her conception would have been more complex. This comes across when I ask her if she prefers games or SL more:

I-I-I don’t know if I can say which one I like better because I haven’t really, I don’t really like I’ve had sufficient experience in Second Life to really like make a good judgment on it (A: yeah yeah). Um…but I….I can see, I mean, I can see how Second Life can be fun. I guess if you had the time or you know the…brain power to (A laughs) figure it out, whatever, I just don’t really.
Chapter 7

Marla

The first time I saw Marla, she was sitting in a chair in the hallway, Nintendo DS [gaming device] in hand. With this glance, I realized I had seen her before, as this was her common place during the school week. I remember that the day of our first interview was a fairly hectic one. I passed by the conference room in which our first interview was to take place and saw people in it, looking to be in no hurry to leave. After learning that the room had been double booked, I panicked and had to quickly come up with Plan B, finding an empty cubicle not far from my own where we could have the interview. I walked out in the hallway to try to intercept Marla. She greeted me with a big smile and we headed to the cubicle. Although I was a little thrown by the last minute change of venue, it may have worked out even better in the end, since the cubicle was cozier than the formal conference room.

In my reader’s reflection immediately after this interview, I jotted some notes about Marla’s physical appearance (“tall, slender, African-American young woman”), body language (“smiled a lot”) and disposition (“friendly, very open, and honest”). I also noted a challenge I felt as we were talking. The main principle of the Listening Guide and of feminist methodology in general is that the participant is at the center of the research (Gilligan et al., 2003; Harding, 2004) and the researcher actively engages with her, making meaning together (Raider-Roth, 2005). While I had this in mind, there were several moments during the interview where I felt like I was running to keep up with Marla’s train of thoughts. For instance, when we were talking about her previous experiences talking to peers in a virtual world, I ask her if she and her peers agreed to
log in at the same time or if it was coincidental. She answers, “Oh, this pers – I got into a Spanish one by accident once and they were all speaking Spanish, like, ‘what did I do wrong?’” Instead of directing Marla back to my original question, I decided to follow her thoughts (“Were you shocked? Did you just get out of it?”) to let her know I was truly listening to her. I never really knew where my interviews were going with Marla, which was daunting but exciting. In fact, we continued our relationship through e-mail after class was over, talking about her identity in virtual worlds and styles of game play. In the most special moment to me, she shared some very important troubleshooting advice about SL, which I continue to keep in mind. This supports the feminist point that I can learn from these women, and what they have to teach me impacts not only research findings, but also my daily life.

I turned to Marla for help in answering my questions about virtual world learning communities because of her survey results, primarily the extent of her gaming experience. She was the only woman who indicated that playing games was a part of her daily activity. She currently owns two video gaming systems and plays both regularly. She has played games since elementary school and her game play has not waned. Marla finds games “fun,” “pointless,” and “time consuming.” Concerning relationships, she finds that her participation in games has not helped her make new friends or enhanced her existing relationships, but also has not hindered them. In line with past research on women and gaming (see Lin, 2008), she usually plays alone but when she plays with others, it is typically in the same room with men like her boyfriend or her sister’s boyfriend. She has never participated in a MMORPG, but is one of several women who indicated that they have participated in a virtual world, for academic rather than personal
reasons. While she neither agrees nor disagrees that she is interested in communicating with her peers in SL, she is interested in communicating with people besides her classmates.

Given Marla’s extensive past and present gaming behavior, along with her previous academic experience in a virtual world, I knew that she would provide a unique perspective when compared to other women in the class. In our first interview, I wanted to hear about her past experiences in a virtual world and better understand how they relate to her gaming experiences and attitudes. It is possible that Marla will be better able to access a virtual world learning community because she is familiar with similar gaming environments. However, virtual worlds are not games, and the academic context of participation is different than her usual personal context with regards to objectives and requirements.

From our interviews, emails and class interactions, I learn several important lessons from Marla regarding her experiences of empowerment, connection and gender. Marla mostly speaks with an empowered voice (“Pretty simple to navigate…not really hard to figure out”), influenced by her already existing technical competence derived from gaming (“It was more difficult to figure out how to play Spyro [a game] than to figure this [SL] out”). When she speaks with a disempowered voice, it is related to the choice and control of her avatar but it does not affect her feelings of equality (“I felt like an equal member of the class”). The voice of gender is subtle in Marla’s words, customizing her avatar to have a feminine appearance with issues of ‘real world’ gendered identity in mind (“I thought it was less deceiving [to make it look like me]”). Concerning interaction, she feels connected to her male partner (“I guess we were one of the good pairs”) but voices a disconnection with regards to others’ abilities (“It’s not that hard to realize what we are doing”). Although her language indicates she frequently felt immersed in SL,
she ultimately deems it too similar to the ‘real world’ and not worth the time. It is necessary to fully explore these elements to understand how women gamers like Marla participate in the learning community.

**Marla’s Position in Gaming Context**

While gamers are typically conceived as men in the popular discourse about gaming, Marla self-identifies as a “gamer.” This positionality emerges during a provocative moment of negotiation in our first interview. It begins when Marla shares that she feels that socializing online with those she does not know in ‘real life’ is a “waste of time” and does not understand the allure of virtual worlds; “It’s like an extra amount of time you have to sit in front of your computer, I could be doing other things, like I work full-time, I go to school.” Inferring this to mean that she privileges ‘real life’ over virtual environments, I say, “So I’m gathering that you wouldn’t consider yourself like a gamer or a techie or…” I can still picture how Marla’s facial expression changed to one of confusion when those words left my mouth, letting me know that I had just lost our connection. She asserts, “Oh I like, like games, like I have a DS [Nintendo] (A: OK), I like games like that (A: OK)…” In my reader’s reflection after the interview, I express anger at myself for posing such a negatively framed, leading statement. After all, Marla had not really offered much at that point in the interview for me to conclude that she would not identify as a gamer. As I presently reflect on this, it is necessary to unpack the elements of the story that led up to the selection of that particular choice of words. Two ideas emerge: first, how my positionality concerning gamer status influences the frameworks that I use to tell her story; and second, the influence of the women that I had interviewed before Marla.
Feminist researchers are accountable when they actively question taken-for-granted discourse, thereby disrupting the subtle reproduction of inequalities (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). Concerning positionality, I do not identify as a gamer in my personal or professional life and often have to remind myself to keep aware of the powerful gendered norms of gaming. Women’s gaming practices are commonly structured in opposition to men’s, viewed as casual (Carr, 2005; Taylor, 2004). At that moment in the interview, I was silently thinking, “Gamers don’t think like Marla...they don’t think that talking to others online is a waste of time...they don’t view this as extra hours sitting in front of a computer.” In the moment, I was not aware that I was inadvertently conflating games with virtual worlds. With this view, I position her in opposition, as not a gamer. When I suggest this position, Marla resists it and asserts her identity as a gamer, supporting the status with two criteria: she plays them and she likes them. At this moment, we are using different discourses, and our understanding is no longer shared. I quickly try to elicit understanding again by saying “OK” and delving more deeply into her gaming experiences. Thankfully, this impasse does not appear to negatively impact our burgeoning relationship.

The frameworks I use have significant effects on the direction of the research findings. For instance, right after Marla says she plays and likes games, she qualifies her game play; “But I usually play my DS in between my class breaks or something when I have nothing else to do or (A: OK – so that fills in time but it’s time that) I would be sitting watching television.” At first glance, this means to me that she does not consider gaming a valuable use of time (as reflected in my reply), and she is a passive consumer rather than an active customizer of games. Upon second glance, however, I realize that this line of thought is not encouraging me to move beyond what is already known about women and game play (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). Considering
Alcoff’s (1988) suggestions for researching identity, I aim to focus on understanding how Marla constructs meaning, rather than attempting to discover the frameworks that are already known, that women are only ‘casual’ gamers. While her practices appear casual in some ways (“nothing else to do”), it is crucial for me to not view this in a negative way, but rather view it as a valid and credible experience. If it was not an experience that held some meaning for Marla, she would not continue to play every day. This approach opens up and provides insight on what it means to a woman, a student, and a gamer to Marla.

In addition, I think that I jumped to conclusions because I was influenced by the order of the interviews. Marla was the fourth woman I interviewed, after Ramona and immediately after Chelsea. Ramona and Chelsea both strongly positioned themselves as non-gamers and expressed either disinterest or mistrust concerning online interaction, and I think this subtly influenced what I heard from Marla. When Marla talked about online communication in certain environments being a “waste of time,” it reminded me of the women that had come before, and I assumed that she was more similar to them regarding gaming status than she actually was. In their chapter on interviewing techniques, Anderson and Jack (1991) share the dangers of this type of assumption:

As a researcher, I have learned that critical areas demanding attention are frequently those where I think I already know what the woman is saying. This means I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema, and therefore I am no longer really listening to her. Rather, I am listening to how what she says fits into what I think I already know (p. 19).
In this instance, I already think I know what Marla is saying and stop listening, fitting her into my earlier interpretations of the other women and labeling her ‘non-gamer.’ Marla snaps me back into awareness through her active resistance of such an identity.

After this interchange, together we explore the contextual nature of her gaming: what she plays, how she plays, where she plays, and who she plays with, so I can better understand Marla’s position in the context of gaming. Marla shares that she prefers multiple genres on multiple gaming systems and plays for multiple reasons, a practice often associated with experienced gamers (Carr, 2005; Royse et al., 2007). For instance, she explains that she likes task-based games, games from her childhood like Super Mario Brothers (I chime in that it is my favorite game), and fighting and first-person shooter games on her gaming console at home. Marla also reveals her own unique way of engaging with particular games. For instance, she plays Grand Theft Auto, a game in which the player assumes a character and chooses tasks (often violent in nature) to propel the story forward, with the goal of rising through the ranks of the criminal underworld. Marla explains with a smile on her face,

I don’t do tasks, it’s just I run around and shoot everything up and then I get all the stars and then I put the code in to like get rid of my stars and then just do it all over again, that’s how I play it.

Personally not familiar with the specific objectives of the game, I ask her if she chooses not to do the tasks because are unappealing. Marla answers:

I used to do it, I had the book and everything, and I just gave up like you know, it’s just taking too long so (A: yeah) ‘cause then like, then you’d have to do everything, like I’m the kind of person that I’m gonna do it all or I’m gonna do it my way…Eh, whatever…
I make my own game (laughs).

It is fascinating to listen to how Marla refers to herself in relation to gaming. While the beginning sounds rather disempowered (I used to, I had the book, I just gave up), she considers the requirements of the game (you know, you’d have to do) and then asserts her own empowered position (I’m the kind of person, I’m gonna do it all, I’m gonna do it my way, I make my own game). When faced with “all” or “my way,” Marla is “gonna do” the latter. While a statement like “I just gave up” would typically sound disempowering, Marla means giving up on the official way (“I had the book and everything”) and defining the game for herself.

Due to its violent nature, Grand Theft Auto is generally conceived of as a masculine game. Some researchers explain that these are alternative spaces for women to take pleasure in challenging the gendered norms by exploring their potential for aggression (Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2003). When I ask Marla why she plays Grand Theft Auto, she replies, “I don’t know, violence?” and laughs. I subtly suggest to Marla that she plays it because it is an outlet for aggression (again, my own positionality creeps in) and she counters,

I don’t know…entertaining…just something to do, like I don’t mind story games but they just…I guess when you’re playing a battle game it’s just like a minute battle and then it’s like a winner or loser and you can either keep going or eh, I’m done for the day…

Marla’s answer complicates the explanation that when women play violent games, it is because they can experience the violence not socially sanctioned in ‘real life.’ While Marla hints at this (“I like the mayhem…I just run around and shoot everything up”), it is about other factors as well, such as the ability to control the game play (“That’s how I play it”), competition (“winner or loser”), achievement (“I get all the stars”), choice (“You can either keep
going or eh, I’m done for the day”), and occasionally, sociality (“Or like, maybe if somebody’s there, you can do like two-player missions, shooting people…”). She is in firmly in control when describing her game play (I like, I just run, I play, I get, you can, I’m done). Marla likes to play when she wants to play (like between class breaks) and without commitment (“minute battle”). This sheds light on her comment in the survey that she finds games “time consuming.” Instead of not playing them altogether, she “makes her own game” instead, enabling her to walk away when she wants (“I’m done”). This is an interesting contrast and alternative to Ramona’s conception of gamers as spending significant amounts of time on the activity.

“Seems Like They Ruin Lives, I Heard That”

Beyond her gaming expertise, another reason I select Marla to interview is that she has some previous experience with virtual worlds from another communication class at the university. Through our interview, I come to find that it is not SL but Yoville, a 2D web-based application in Facebook. Based on Marla’s description of the environment (one I have not personally encountered), it is something of a hybrid of a virtual world and a game. Like a virtual world, the user creates and customizes an avatar and interacts with other people. Avatars are less sophisticated than those in SL; as Marla describes, “Little avatar people, like cartoon big heads.” The main purpose of Yoville is to earn points in order to “buy” things, like avatar accessories and apartment furnishings, earned by playing games. While games exist in SL, they are not necessary for one’s existence and productivity in the world. Likewise, while social interaction exists in Yoville, it is not necessary for one’s existence and productivity in the world, although Marla does mention that the more friends you bring into the world, the more points you earn.
While Yoville is different from SL in many ways, it is the only environment in which Marla has interacted online with those she does not know from ‘real life.’ Perhaps not surprisingly given her gaming experience, she preferred the games in Yoville rather than socializing with distanced others. The only time she conversed with someone she did not know was when “our teacher told us to… it was just somebody that was like ‘hey’ and I go ‘hey’ and then I disappeared and was like, OK I’m done with this.” I ask her why she did not go out of her way to talk to people and she explains,

I think it’s kind of a waste of time, like I don’t know…like in person, I guess you could find something in common to talk about, like if I’m on campus I can obviously talk about school (A: right, OK). On Yoville, it’s not like I can pick out a common, ‘oh you have the same blue shirt that I got free’ (A: OK, I see, I see).

Given that Marla emphasizes the factor of time in her gaming preferences, it is intriguing that she considers social online communication with strangers to be a waste of it. It seems that Marla chooses not to interact with others online because she does not perceive a social common ground. She starts out with a disempowered voice (I think, I don’t know) when gathering her thoughts about this kind of online communication. To make her point, she switches to a consideration of ‘real world’ sociality, of meeting ‘in person’ and the voice sounds more confident (I guess, you could find, I’m on campus, I can obviously). I ask her why she thinks others participate in Yoville for social reasons and she surmises, “Community I guess? I don’t know, I guess they really got into it, they could kind of build relationships with other people.” She is not totally certain of the dynamics of online community here (I guess, I don’t know, I
guess). While she acknowledges that some people do form social relationships, she draws a
 distinction between them and her (they really, they could).

I was curious to see how Marla would interpret her experiences in Yoville since it was an
academic context instead of her usual personal gaming context. She perceives it as a mandatory
requirement and nothing more. She explains, “I would be logged in ‘cause we had to, and then I
would log back out…After the class, I kind of let go of it.” At first, I thought maybe she just did
not prefer the environment, but later she shares that she participated in two very similar
environments in her personal life. I ask her what her feelings are about the upcoming SL
experiences and she simply says, “An assignment. It’s just an assignment.” This response stands
in contrast to Chelsea and Ramona, who seemed more genuinely curious about what was to
come.

Since Marla has never participated in SL before, I ask her what she knows about it. Her
knowledge derives from a discussion in a previous class:

I heard it was like an extreme version of like virtual worlds, like anything happens and
like uh, in Second Life and it’s like, they’re more 3D looking and stuff (A: Right). Seems
like they ruin lives, I heard that, (A: They do what?), like ruin lives, like how people get
so involved with their second life (A: oh) that they kind of neglect the real one (laughs, I
join in).

Marla relays the sensational reputation that virtual worlds like SL unfortunately often carry in the
media, being portrayed as dangerous places (extreme, anything happens) that have harmful
effects on users’ ‘real lives’ (ruin lives, neglect the real one). However, unlike some of the other
women I interviewed, she did not seem particularly bothered by it. Although I was taken aback
by her answer, for some reason, I laugh along with her. Instead of challenging this notion or at least acknowledging that it’s a media-centric view, I move on to another area entirely. I think I was unsure of how to address this misconception. In my reader’s reflection, I make a note to revisit this view during our second interview, after Marla’s SL experiences.

As our first interview winds down, I think about Marla’s complex position with regards to games and virtual worlds. With women non-gamers, it is easy to conclude that they have little knowledge about such environments and are starting with a clean slate. While Marla positions herself as a gamer, showing mastery, control and knowledge, her position in virtual worlds like SL is less clear. She has used avatars before but they were rudimentary (2D), and the focus of the other world was not on social interaction. While not interested in talking to people online who she does not feel a social common ground, the upcoming SL experience may be different since she is interacting with her classmates. However, her gaming practices of gaming “her way” may not be conducive to the academic context, which will have set activities. Although the technical competence that she has from her gaming may provide heightened access to the community. I am very interested in seeing how Marla positions herself in the SL learning community.

“Cause Everyone Else Could See Me, I Felt Like an Equal Member”

After engaging in some social discussion about how our school quarters have been as students, I begin our second interview by asking Marla to log into SL so I can take a snapshot of her avatar for my records. She did not have her own computer during the first session, so she created her avatar at home after a late night at work. I explain, “I’m curious to see if it, um, is still the smoke or what it’s gonna look like this time.” Marla’s avatar, who she names Marly, disappeared during the second session when she logged out and logged back in. Just like

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Ramona’s experience, while she could only see the smoke figure on her screen (Figure 7), others could see her actual avatar. I ask how that affected her experience and she complains, “It was aggravating, you know, like every time I had to see myself I had to look at somebody else’s screen.” Listening to how she refers to herself and her avatar, it appears she still projects her identity in the hybrid space (“see myself”), although it is somewhat fragmented since she cannot connect to it all of the time, which she finds “aggravating.” She is not used to this in the games she plays where she has more control.

Not surprisingly, this experience hinders Marla from customizing her avatar the way she intended. Expressing the desire to become unique in the space (“I’m still trying to get out of the regular [default] clothes”), she finds it technically difficult since she has to rely on someone else’s view to see her avatar. To negotiate this, Marla developed a strategy where she would navigate her avatar so it appeared on the projector screen in front of the class, which showed my avatar’s view. Since I rarely moved my avatar while I facilitated the class activities, the view remained the same. She explains, “When we went to the bookstore [where the free clothes were], like I kept on wanting to put something and then running back into the main view camera so I can see my (A: OK OK) avatar…” Listening to her I voice, I can hear a desire that

Figure 7. Marla’s disappearing avatar.
is not being fulfilled (I’m still trying, I kept on wanting) but a certain resilience remains (I can see).

Because of this barrier in avatar choice and control, Marla also mentions issues of social norms, namely how her avatar is behaving. She notes that her lack of avatar plus the frantic navigation between the bookstore and the main view camera led to a breach of social norms regarding interaction; “I kept bumping into people because I didn’t really see them.” This behavior could easily be misinterpreted by a peer, since they are seeing Marla’s actual avatar. She is also concerned with her avatar’s body language:

When we all had to sit down [in the virtual classroom], I wanted to make sure like I wasn’t, like other people in class were sitting with their legs wide open, so I had to look at the screen next to me (A: right) to make sure I wasn’t like you know (A laughs) halfway out of the chair or something.

Hearing a relation of herself to her avatar and a distinction from her classmates, I wanted to listen to this passage for a second time, paying attention to how she switches voice (Table 10).

Table 10

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<th>Avatar</th>
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Reading her I voice down the line, Marla sounds disempowered (I wanted, I wasn’t, I had to, I wasn’t). Because of the body language of peers which she deems personally unacceptable (sitting with open legs in the ‘real world’ is usually judged as socially improper, especially for women), she “had to” make sure her avatar was not in a similar fashion. The avatar is a reflection of self and others, as evidenced by her saying “other people were sitting” and “I wasn’t halfway out of the chair” instead of “other avatars” or “my avatar.” Even though she cannot see her avatar on her screen, she is keenly aware that others can, and keeps up the “aggravating” experience of looking on others’ screens (I had to look) to ensure she is appearing within the social norms she finds acceptable. While she is negotiating between two worlds, she invokes social norms from the ‘real world’ in this instance, perhaps because this is a simulation of a typical experience, of sitting in a classroom.

The “aggravating” experience finally took its toll on the customization of her avatar. Marla shares, “It was too much work to change it, never mind, ‘cause I wanted to get up and come back, get up and come back [between computer screens] (A: right, you have very few options when you’re a puff of smoke).” After several attempts, Marla judges her personal efforts to construct her virtual body as “too much work,” so she stops trying (never mind), which is very disempowering. It is interesting that this is one of the few times she refers to her avatar as an “it” (change it), and makes me wonder if this is a sign of disconnection. I certainly reinforce a sense of disempowerment after her statement, suggesting that Marla has little agency (“you have very few options”) due to her hybrid identity (“you’re a puff of smoke”). This is a remark I regret in hindsight, since I am subtly imposing a hybrid identity for Marla in which she had very little choice or control.
One reason for avatar customization that I did not expect was Marla’s view of customization as a form of entertainment. I ask if she could remember what she looked like before she disappeared on her screen, and she describes, “I had blue hair, I had on a dress” (note the way that I use “she” to denote the avatar). I ask her if that appearance was intentional and she explains, “I was bored, so I was like…” Then when her avatar disappeared, she said, “I just didn’t feel like it [SL activity] was that entertaining anymore (laughs) (A: OK).” I ask if she would have changed her avatar from the blue hair and dress if it had been an easier process, and she explains, “Probably yeah, I would have just edited it a lot just ‘cause it’s something to do, I was there (laughs) (A: right). Something to pass the time…” Judging from this choice of words, it does not seem like Marla’s desire for customization is fueled by deep personal meaning, but rather “something to do” and “something to pass the time” since “I was there.” On one hand, I could interpret this is a signal that she regards this as a mandatory class assignment only or is simply unengaged with what is unfolding. On the other hand, this reminds me of her description of her gaming experiences, as she says she plays games “when I have nothing else to do” and that she plays Grand Theft Auto because it is “entertaining…just something to do.” Keeping this in mind, editing her avatar for reasons of entertainment may be just her way of engaging with the world, similar to the way she engages in her preferred gaming environments.

Since Ramona had indicated that the smoke cloud avatar made her feel like she was not “even really there” in the world, I ask Marla if she felt like an equal member of the class. She explains, “’Cause everyone else could see me, I felt like an equal member.” Again, Marla displays an awareness of how she appears in the world to others. Not only does she feel present in the world when others perceive her as present, but she feels equal. Despite the avatar issues,
she remains an empowered member of the learning community, still able to direct the social and cognitive processes of the community.

“I Thought it was Less Deceiving”

Noting that Marla initially chose a female avatar over a male avatar, and that she initially customized her avatar to wear a dress, I sensed that the explanation of ‘customization as entertainment’ was partial; there were issues of gendered identity at play as well. Since Marla did not have much opportunity to experiment with identity in SL due to the technical issue, I decided to ask her about her past customization experiences in Yoville. She explains, “I tried to make the avatar look as close to my actual appearance as possible. I chose the lighter of the two dark skinned options, the darkest hair and eye color and the roundest head.” I realized after our interview that I had forgotten to ask her to explain this choice, so I e-mailed her to follow up. Marla wrote back one line: “I thought it was less deceiving.”

This was not an answer I expected (I realize now that this seems to be a pattern for me regarding Marla’s answers). Her reasons for customization are not entirely personal, but also social in nature. She is thinking of how her avatar (and hybrid identity) will be perceived by others. This is a fascinating insight, especially when considering that she said she barely socialized with others and usually just played games in Yoville. Reflecting on her statement that an avatar that looks like her ‘real life’ self is less deceiving, it stands to reason that she connects “actual appearance” with issues of “real” personal identity. Marla goes on to describe the avatar as “a being that can represent yourself” and when interacting, “you actually see, technically not a person but something that represents the person.” Using this logic, when one does not make the
avatar look like her actual appearance, there is an element of deceit and disconnection regarding
projection of identity to others in the hybrid space.

Considering that Marla chose to customize her Yoville avatar like her “real” self for this
reason, it sheds light on why she began her “second life” as a woman wearing a dress. Although I
never got to see how Marla’s avatar evolved over the course of the class, I have a feeling it
would have stayed within Marla’s “real life” gendered identity. Giving her avatar blue hair may
have been as experimental as she was going to get. The fact that she did not consider blue hair to
be deceitful suggests that hair may not be as important as gender in relaying ‘real’ identity;
rather, it is an entertaining practice, much as it is in the ‘real world.’

“It Wasn’t That Hard at All”

Despite Marla’s avatar issues and her lack of computer during the first session, she and
her male partner Dominick won the scavenger hunt in the second session. I mention this in the
interview; “Um but despite [your avatar issues], you and Dominick (M: Yeah, but we know
how), you did really well (M: everyone else was in the...).” I remember this moment from our
interview. When she realizes I am about to mention their achievement, her facial expression
turns to one of a victorious underdog before declaring, “Yeah, but we know how…” and how
they stood apart from “everyone else.” She takes pride in overcoming the obstacle of her avatar
appearance (“yeah, but”) and maintains her sense of agency in the world (“we know how”).
Given that winning a distanced collaborative scavenger hunt would be challenging to even
seasoned SL users, I certainly wanted to hear more about how Marla negotiated this experience
with her relative inexperience and avatar issues.
Competence and collaboration emerge as two factors that explain her achievement. When I ask Marla how the physical distance from her partner (in separate labs) affected what happened, she first offers, “It wasn’t that hard at all,” and then suggests the quality of their collaboration contributed to the ease:

I guess maybe we were one of the good pairs I guess like and (A: yeah) even though he was a big ol’ Kool-Aid Man and at first I was kind of confused, I was clicking on places and then I forgot we had a list, I’m like ‘what are we supposed to do?’, like ‘oh wait, we have to look for things’ (A laughs).

I want to listen to this passage for a second time to denote the way she refers to her partner, to better understand where she places herself in relation to him (Table 11).

Marla surrounds her conception of their pairing with uncertainty (I guess; we were; I guess). Her wording of being a “good pair…even though he was a big ol’ Kool-Aid Man” elicits issues of identity, suggesting that they were a good pair despite his fantastical appearance, although this appearance had nothing to do with what they could achieve. She also may have said this because Marla and I laughed in the computer lab at the peculiarity of a Kool-Aid Man walking next to a smoke cloud during the hunt (Figure 8). She initially evaluates their pairing on an individual basis (he was; I was), admitting some personal difficulty (I was kind of confused; I was clicking; I forgot). Yet she has the ability to regain control and focus with the pair in mind (oh wait, we have to look for things). It is interesting how she poses this statement as a self-dialogue of sorts, almost coaching herself on her task. She keeps their collaboration in mind though; “we have to look.”
Table 11

One of the Good Pairs

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<td>I guess</td>
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<td>I’m like</td>
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I ask their secret to winning and she draws a distinction between her pair and others, explaining, “We used the teleport, I’m not sure if everybody realized how to use that, we used that from the start.” Although we briefly covered teleporting in the first session (teleporting is when a user double-clicks on a location in their inventory, disappearing from their current location and reappearing at the new location), the students were not experienced in it, as Marla notes that not everyone was competent in its use. It can be challenging to use, as the pair has to come to an understanding of who will offer a teleport to the other, and where. Marla explains:

Figure 8. Dominick and Marla (right) during the hunt.
The only thing I had a problem with was as soon as I was like, ‘let’s take a picture,’ next thing I know he teleported somewhere else so he could take another picture (A: OK) so ‘I guess we’ll go here’…after awhile I was like, ‘just teleport me when you get there.’

Listening to her voice, there does seem to be a subtle disconnection from her partner (he teleported, he could, I guess, I was, teleport me, you get there). It is interesting that although she mentions this hindrance in communication, when I ask her how their distance affected their communication, she says, “It wasn’t that hard at all.” This reminds me of Jenson and deCastell’s (2008) assertion that competence is more of a gendered performance than actual skills. They explain that opposed to women, “men are technologically competent by virtue of their performance of masculinity” (p. 54). I wonder if technical competence is linked more to the performances of gamers, of which most happen to be masculine.

Noting in my head that Marla is the only woman I have interviewed that did not perceive the hunt as technically difficult, I ask her if she thinks SL in general is too difficult for a class to use from a technical standpoint. She answers:

Like in a class sense? Not really, no (A: OK). Basic functions, like I didn’t, I’m not gonna lie, I didn’t pay attention because I didn’t have a computer (A: yes, that first day was nuts) the first class, so I was like (laughs) sitting there like but the second time was like pretty simple to navigate if they paid attention, it’s not really hard to figure out so (A: OK that’s good). If they actually wanted to think about it, everyone was asking everybody (A: yeah) but it’s not that hard to realize what we are doing.

Hearing a distinction between herself and her classmates regarding competence, I wanted to listen more closely to how her voice shifts in relation to others (Table 12).
When Marla answers whether SL is too difficult to use, she begins with her I voice, which is very disempowered when connecting issues of attention and access (not having a computer was a reason why she did not pay attention). When she switches from talking about the first session to the second session, her voice shifts to her classmates. She attributes their difficulty to a lack of attention rather than personal competence. She thinks they are asking questions of each other but were not “actually thinking” for themselves. She thinks it is “not that hard to realize what we are doing.” This reminds me of when Marla talks about her and her partner’s use of teleporting, that “I’m not sure if everybody realized how to use that…” This provides an interesting insight into how Marla gauges others’ competence and strategies in the world, as similar to her own. Based on my observations of others in the class, this is not the case. This is an interesting view of what gamers think about non-gamers, possibly; that they are not actually thinking or paying attention.

Table 12

*Like in a Class Sense?*

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<td>Everyone was asking everybody</td>
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<td>What we are doing</td>
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When I ask Marla if her extensive gaming experience may give her an advantage in SL, she initially does not think so, citing the difference between the nature of games and virtual worlds. She explains that her games are “simplified” when compared to SL which is “wide” and “in-depth.” But then she suggests that her past experience does help in terms of technical competence. She describes navigation in SL as “easy, I was used to using that [direction button] so that was easier…” when compared to games (“like hit ‘abbc’ to jump and fly and shoot at the same time…”). While previous gaming experience may give gamers a technical advantage in a SL learning community, it does not provide an identical experience because the virtual world is qualitatively different from games.

“The Just, Not My Flavor Type Thing”

Given Marla’s knowledge of games and her burgeoning knowledge of SL, I am curious to hear more about how she relates the two, especially with regards to objectives and purposes. I ask, “With games in general, there’s like an objective. Like you go into the game (M: yeah), you do certain things you need to do, how does that compare to your experiences (M: um) in Second Life?” She cites the influence of the academic context, explaining, “Well there still was like an objective, I was there for class (A: yeah), I could see if I was there for like my own, but it was like I’m here to like get enough information to write a paper.” This confirms her experiences of this virtual world participation as a requirement. If not for these academic objectives, she would not be “there” or “here” in SL. She starts to relate class-related SL activity to personal SL activity (“I could see if I was there for like my own, but…”), perhaps suggesting that if she was there for “her own,” there would be no objective. This is a point I wish I had pursued.
Immediately following this exchange, Marla says that since the paper is behind her now, “I probably won’t log back into Second Life (A: OK). Even I, with the blog [final SL assignment], I still probably won’t log back in (laughs).” I ask her why and she explains, “Just, not my flavor type thing (A: OK). It was too much work, like I can walk around in real life (A: walk around campus), yeah.” Taking part in a virtual environment that is too similar to ‘real life’ is not Marla’s “flavor.” This bears implications on the details of the class activities in SL. The majority of the time was spent on the university campus and the final session was in the virtual classroom. Since I had received positive feedback about virtual classrooms from men and women in my exploratory study, and concerns about safety from some women in my exploratory study, I thought it best to design SL activities a bit closer to home, so to speak. Marla notes this when I ask her to revisit her earlier conception of SL as “extreme, like anything happens.” She says, “We didn’t really do, didn’t do much outside of [university] campus, like we didn’t interact with other people but (A: yeah).” She finds the SL experience to be a disempowering one (we really didn’t do, we didn’t interact). She is used to playing games “her way.”

This helps to explain Marla’s feedback about the virtual classroom session. While she acknowledges the unique possibilities SL enables (“The way it was possible that they [distanced guest speakers] can like come there and basically it’s like a virtual classroom…”), her view shifts when focusing on the role of the students; “…we just kinda, it’s sometimes it’s boring ’cause in the classroom we just kind of sit there and listen (A: yeah yeah).” One could read this statement and easily attribute it to a ‘real life’ classroom. She can attend class in ‘real life’ and she can “walk around in real life”, easier than she can in SL. When I ask her about the
use of voice, she is curious about where the guest speakers actually were, but is not particularly supported by this mode of communication. On the contrary, she explains, “It was kinda hard to keep track of like what they were like saying and then reading what they were writing at the same time…other than that, it was about the same [as text].”

**Final Blog: “It was Really Nice”**

Although Marla twice claims in our second interview that she will “probably” not log back into SL after our final class session to do the blog, she does (Figure 9). Marla opens her blog with, “I do not think that my second life experience went as well as it could have.” Her reasons for this largely echo what she shares with me in the interviews. She directly relates this to her issues of identity disconnection and entertainment. She explains, “I really only got to see my avatar once,” as “my avatar decided to disappear and become a puff of smoke.” When this disconnection happened (as noted in her use of “my avatar” instead of “I”), she found it “really frustrating because it’s not as fun without having one.” She again cites aggravation that others could see her avatar; “The fact that everyone could see me but me made it even worse.” She displays resilience in changing this situation (“I’ve logged in three times since then including for

![Figure 9. Marla’s smoke avatar lounging in virtual Guadalajara.](image-url)
but remains disempowered to change herself (“I’m still a blur”). Because of this, “I probably will not be logging back in.”

Marla continues in her blog, “Despite this [avatar issues], I chose to go to the Guadalajara Mexico because I liked the way it looked when we had to do the scavenger hunt.” She shows resilience (despite this, I chose, I liked). She expresses a desire to talk to distanced others, sharing, “Unfortunately no one else was there, so I was unable to communicate with others.” Although she could not communicate with others, she “listened to the noises though and it was eerie how it resembled nature. You could hear the birds calling and the sounds of the ocean. It was really nice.” Bayne (2008) notes that virtual worlds often stimulate feelings of the uncanny in new users, “a peculiar commingling of the familiar [nature in the ‘real world’] and unfamiliar [nature in the ‘virtual world’]” (p. 198). Although Marla found it “eerie” that it was a simulated nature setting, she remained open to the experience (I listened, you could hear) and found it pleasurable (it was really nice). I think that Marla finally got to experience something that was not so familiar to her, something more “her flavor,” as opposed to walking around a virtual campus.

As a final note, I received an unexpected e-mail from Marla about ten days after our second interview. She wrote to inform me, “Just letting you know, I figured out how to fix my avatar…In case you run into someone else with the problem, have them look under the avatar section of the help section.” Despite it not being her “flavor type thing” and class being over, she persisted and figured out how to regain control of her avatar. To this day, I still wonder why Marla continued to try and fix her avatar when class was over, especially because she noted several times that she “probably” would not log back in. Was this just a way to pass the time
between classes when she had nothing else to do? Did she think SL would be entertaining to participate in if she fixed her avatar? Is it because she is versed in gaming and so she believes in her ability to navigate in the world? Unfortunately, I doubt I will find out the answers to these questions, as I lost contact with Marla several months after the class ended. Although she promised to send me a picture of her new and improved avatar, I never received one.

**Listening to Marla**

I have learned a lot by listening to Marla. First, her position as a gamer significantly influences her academic experiences in SL. In contrast to non-gamers who have little to compare their SL experience to, Marla has ample gaming experience. In some ways, it presents privileges. First, she exhibits strong technical competence as exemplified with her winning the hunt, despite her avatar difficulties and not having a computer the first day. Second, she exhibits a sense of resilience in the environment when presented by challenges. She still feels present and equal despite the avatar issues because she knows others can see her. Although her avatar was a smoke cloud and she did shows signs of giving up (“never mind”), she persists and fixes it. When she was confused in the hunt, she regained focus on her objective. As a gamer, she is used to achieving (“a winner and a loser”), and this was also an element in her motivation to participate in the scavenger hunt. Seeing that she preferred games over socializing in Yoville, this makes sense. When the class activities are more game-like, it may support gamers more.

In other ways, Marla’s gaming status presents some challenges I had not anticipated. First, when the virtual world is very similar to the ‘real world,’ it is not comforting or supportive to Marla, but rather boring and pointless (“It’s too much work, I can walk around in real life”; “boring to sit and listen”). When she plays games, she is doing things she cannot do in ‘real life’
for reasons of entertainment (for instance, “shooting everything up”). Staying on the virtual
campus may support non-gamers, but not her. Second, she already has built-in preferences
developed from past experiences; she prefers game play that is quick, convenient, challenging,
and often on an individual basis. In contrast, SL is “in-depth” and collaborative. She has trouble
explaining why people socialize online in virtual environments (“community, I guess?”). For this
reason, equal participation in a community may not come naturally to her. While she has
effective communication with her partner (they had mutual common ground), she indicates on
her survey that she is more interested to talk to others besides her peers in SL. While she “makes
her own game” in her personal life, she considers her SL participation as “just an assignment.”
Finally, her level of technical competence is heightened in comparison to non-gaming peers.
While her non-gaming peers are still trying to figure out things, Marla has already mastered it,
and this may account for her perceptions of looking for “something to pass the time.” It also may
promote a subtle disconnection between gamers and non-gamers in the class, as Marla perceived
the others as not paying attention as much as they should have. She is not altogether aware of
how her gaming experience influences her abilities in SL.

Several issues remain when thinking about Marla. The one in which I am most intrigued
concerns gendered identity. While she customized her avatar to be a woman, most of her male
gamer counterparts created fantastical avatars, like her Kool-Aid Man partner. Based on her
reasons for customization, she suggests that customizing an avatar much differently from ‘real
world’ appearance indicates some level of identity deception. She also voiced a desire to make
sure her avatar was acting right (sitting properly in a chair), while the men often took pleasure in
sitting in unusual places and dancing during unusual times. This could be the impetus toward
understanding why women customize their avatars to act within feminine social boundaries, regardless of gaming experience.
Virtual worlds represent a fundamental shift in the ways in which people project identity and interact, and this profoundly influences the nature of learning that can be constructed within virtual world learning communities. In Chapter 1, I explained how virtual worlds offer the most ‘real’ virtual experience to date, due to the embodiment of avatars which situates users in an online world-like social space. These spaces afford opportunities typically not realized in other online learning environments, such as the option to create and take on multiple identities and to collaborate with distanced others while sharing the same three-dimensional space. However, since virtual worlds have evolved from the traditionally male-dominated context of 3D video games, there is concern that this space may not be equally accessed or influenced by women. Issues such as anonymity, privacy, and safety emerge as potential factors more typically related to women regarding online interaction. It is important to hear how women students interpret their experiences between worlds to ensure that they have equal access, representation and support in the learning community.

The purpose of this research study is to explore how women students learn between worlds. In this chapter, I reflect on the voices of the three women in the previous chapter, and also bring in the voices of other women in the class. Listening to these voices, women students’ experiences in the gaps between the ‘real’ and virtual worlds are indeed “negotiated in interesting ways” (Taylor, 2006, p. 123). In this chapter, I revisit the research question posed in Chapter 1: How do women students understand the psychological and contextual factors that
influence their establishment of identity and interaction in a virtual world learning community?
For this question, I will identify and discuss the most significant ideas about identity and interaction that emerged from the findings and consider them in light of previous literature. In the final chapter, I will apply these ideas to generate some implications about how instructional design can be tailored to support equal access and participation in virtual world learning communities.

**Establishment of Identity**

In this section, I will discuss how women students established hybrid identity in the space between the ‘real’ and virtual worlds. Namely, the most significant finding is that all of the women students in the class constructed their avatars to embody cultural conceptions of femininity, regardless of gaming experience. This corroborates with past research concerning women and avatar construction (see Beavis & Charles, 2005; Kennedy, 2006; Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2006). The women I interviewed envisioned the meaning of avatars to be a representative of the ‘real world’ user, in which gendered identity plays a meaningful role. Psychological factors such as personal conceptions of the virtual world and gendered identity, and contextual factors such as the simultaneous contexts of the ‘real world’ and virtual world help to further understand these findings. It is important to note that individual technical skill, closely related to personal gaming experience, largely determined the power to ‘exist’ their avatar bodies in the desired manner.

**Personal conceptions of the virtual world and gendered identity.** Intently listening to the women’s words, a factor that influenced how they established identity through avatars in the virtual world was their conception of the nature of the virtual world. To my surprise, while the
women acknowledged the ways in which the virtual world is fundamentally different from the ‘real world’ (like when Ramona explains that “it can be as real as you want it to be”), they personally established identity in SL using ‘real world’ norms. This extended to the ways in which they constructed their own avatars and interpreted others’ avatars. Both of these perspectives are discussed in this section.

*Avatar customization of self.* Conceptions of ‘real world’ gendered identity were applied to the virtual world, as the women all constructed feminine avatars. Although acknowledging that avatars are not always exact representations of the ‘real world’ user (Ramona explains, “You can be someone you decide to create”), each woman I interviewed voiced that the avatar should serve as a virtual representation of the user, much as the corporeal body serves as the ‘real’ representation of self in the actual world. Therefore, it is a “normal and logical response” to customize the avatar to resemble the user’s physical appearance, in which gendered identity happens to plays a major role. Other women noted that they customized their avatars to present an enhanced version of their ‘real life’ appearances, focusing on gendered ways in which they would like to look in ‘real life’: slimmer, longer hair, and impeccably dressed. Sasha describes the avatar as “that virtual person that you wish you could be, you know?” Although referring to physical bodies, Butler’s (1987) assertion that “The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one’s body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles” (p. 131) could also be applied to the simulated bodies of avatars. The women students ‘existed’ their avatar bodies in SL much as they would in the ‘real world,’ by taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms. However, gender norms can be
more easily attained in SL. Chelsea recognizes this when she says that while she will never have perfect hair, her avatar can “in no time.”

Whether women constructed avatars to be much like their actual appearances (in which gender plays a role) or an enhanced feminine appearance, they constructed their avatars as feminine because being a woman is a significant part of ‘real’ identity, and avatars should convey a sense of the ‘real’ person. Women like Marla and Jalen explain that they made their avatars look as close to their ‘real life’ bodies as possible because of the intention of projecting an honest identity to other users. As Chelsea explains, “I want them to see a reflection of me.” Adopting a ‘real life’ appearance enables others to perceive one’s ‘real life’ body, which is a significant element of ‘real life’ identity. For example, Sasha describes, “If you wear glasses [in real life] you’re probably gonna put glasses on [your avatar] you know, so you kinda get like an image of what that person looks like…you put a face with the name.” This perspective sheds additional light on Chelsea’s deeply fragmented relationship with her avatar when it resembled a male. Not only did it not accurately represent her ‘real life’ gendered identity, but it projected an identity to others that she did not intend.

It is tempting to conclude that since the women typically have less previous experience in similar gaming environments, they customize as women simply because they are not used to embodying alternative possibilities of identity. However, the practice of constructing avatars as women is a consistent finding in the literature regardless of gaming experience. In the present study, Marla the gamer also operates within the cultural boundaries of femininity. What sets Marla apart from the other women is that she exhibits heightened technical competence due to her vast gaming experience, and has more control of her avatar. While she does struggle with the
SL glitch of her disappearing avatar, she still manages to customize her avatar as feminine and not have any personal embarrassments such as missing clothes. Other women, not as familiar with similar types of gaming environments and the personal embodiment of avatars, experienced issues of technical competence which interfered with the establishment of a gendered identity. This lack of control over the avatar frequently resulted in a disempowered voice from the women (such as when Chelsea said, “It didn’t ask me, it just gave me the male”), supporting the idea that one must feel control over the avatar in order to feel agency in the environment (Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Personal gaming experience emerges as a mediating factor that influences that sense of control and agency, since those with more gaming experience have more technical competence. Without the sense of control, women are at risk for embodying and projecting a hybrid identity that is not intended, facing real social consequences.

*Avatar customization of others.* Like the students in Edirisingha et al.’s (2009) study, women described others in the terms of hybrid identities. For instance, when Ramona recalls the time when PJ’s avatar was running around SL, she words it as “when PJ put on the armor and was like running around.” However, when other avatars in the environment do not look like their ‘real life’ users’ appearances, the women judged that they were not taking the virtual world in the same manner as the ‘real world.’ For instance, Ramona draws a contrast between people who made their avatars appear “how they actually look” and those who made them “as crazy as possible,” citing their personal conceptions of the virtual world as a major factor in that choice. People like PJ who donned warrior gear did not take the virtual world to be “really as real” so he established a “not-so-real” hybrid identity (Edirisingha et al., 2009, p. 475).
All of the women I interviewed noted that most of the men did not take SL seriously, based on the customization of their fantastical avatars.

While some of the women such as Ramona and Sasha interpreted the men’s “not-so-real” hybrid identities as simply funny or entertaining, others noted more sinister implications. For example, Chelsea notes that men students were “hiding behind their avatar” when they made their avatars look and act in ways they would not in ‘real life.’ This results in a perceived disconnection between “avatar” and “self”. Jalen also voiced concerns that through avatars, “you can dress however you want, talk to people, I mean you can create these identities that no one would ever know,” which makes her more wary of those in which she interacts online.

**Virtual world context.** A contextual factor that influenced how women students established their hybrid identities was the specific nature of the context of SL. Factors include the culture and affordances of the virtual world and the technical design of the learning space. Technical competence mediates the establishment of identity as well.

*Culture and affordances.* Based on my personal experiences with SL and observing the experiences of the women in this study, I concur with Dumitrica and Gaden’s (2009) conception of SL as a heterosexual, gendered world. The most obvious example of this is that when a user first creates an avatar, she must choose between male or female. This binary selection immediately structures the user’s understanding of the social identities and practices that are acceptable in SL, and subtly discourages the experimentation of identity outside of traditional ‘real world’ gendered boundaries. For women students with little previous experience embodying avatars, it is sensible to infer ‘real world’ social norms and adopt a gendered identity in which they are familiar in the ‘real world.’ This supports Dumitrica and Gaden’s finding that
choice of avatar appearance is “heavily mediated by the options presented by the platform at the enrollment stage” (p. 15). In addition, for those who may want to dramatically change their avatar’s appearance, it does require an adequate amount of technical skill that the majority of the women students do not possess.

Much like the ‘real world,’ interaction with others in SL influences how one conceives and customizes personal identity. In SL, avatars tend to embody and project cultural conceptions of femininity. In their personal explorations of SL, Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) note that, “Straight away, we noticed how the avatars we identified as female had big breasts, slim waists, and long legs” (p. 11). Against their ‘real world’ beliefs, they admit feeling a social pressure to customize their avatars in a similar fashion because of the familiar ‘real world’ pressure to ‘fit in.’ Chelsea hints at this influence in our interview; “Maybe after like spending more time in Second Life and like seeing how other people are dressed and like they have fun stuff, I would probably like wanna do more of that.”

In addition to bodies, the clothing offered in SL is often gendered and sexualized. For instance, a sweater that looks “work friendly” at first glance still often clings tightly to the avatar body. Because of this, the women’s avatars sometimes wore outfits that they would not necessarily wear in ‘real life.’ Given the view that avatars serve as personal representatives of self in the virtual world, one of the hindrances to establishing desired hybrid identity was limited access to avatar features that were reflective of ‘real life.’ For instance, I ask Chelsea if she thinks her avatar looks enough like her, and she says, “I think a little bit. I mean I don’t think I would wear like, skin tight, like what is that, like a white (A: it’s like a body suit or something).” She notes, “You probably wouldn’t find me with that on.” Jalen also notes that she would have
liked to dress her avatar in “something that I would wear…in real life,” and that the strapless shirt she had on was not her typical dress. Because of this lack of choice, they are somewhat conflicted about the meanings of their avatars, not feeling that the avatar completely represents self (Taylor, 2008). This supports the findings of Falloon (2010), who concluded that when students could project personal and social identity through avatar appearance, they perceived more agency in the environment.

Finally, technical competence emerges as an individual factor that has a significant impact on identity and avatar customization. SL is technically challenging and complex, and customization is not entirely intuitive. Some of the women mention a lack of choice over their avatars because of this complexity. Noting that some other women wore heels while she wore “goofy shoes”, Chelsea says, “I probably would have chosen some of the dresses they [SL] had, I really liked those…just something not so like, I don’t know, plain.” Following Jalen’s explanation that she would have liked for her avatar to wear more ‘real life’ clothes, she explains, “I’d probably put different clothes on, but when I put those on, I was just like, I have something on and it’s showing up, so I’m just gonna leave it.” When women experimented, they sometimes experienced personal embarrassments, such as when Sasha’s avatar accidentally lost her pants and Sasha did not know how to attach pants again (Figure 10). Since avatars are conceived as a reflection of ‘real world’ self, these unintentional appearances are internalized as part of hybrid identity. When Sasha looks at her pant-less avatar, she says, “Look at me, isn’t that horrible!” In order to feel empowered in a learning community, one must feel that identity is being projected. Due to the highly powerful nature of bodies, a matter of technical difficulty can result in a significant barrier to being equal in the learning community.
Design of learning space. The specific design of the virtual learning space also influenced women’s conception of their avatars. In this class, the primary meeting space in SL was the university’s island, which closely resembled the appearance of the ‘real’ campus. This encouraged some of the women to invoke the same norms as those existing on the ‘real’ campus. Sasha explains, “It’s more realistic when you’re on campus.” She describes her avatar as a representation of her identity as a college student, suggesting, “Maybe it has to do with like the whole, ‘I’m on the campus’ thing.” Familiar spaces also structured the ways they negotiated their hybrid identities in the environment. For example, the virtual classroom closely resembled a typical ‘real world’ classroom, a setting which the women students were very familiar with. Projecting the identities of students in the virtual world, they positioned their avatars in the chairs, making sure they were sitting as students typically would in the ‘real world.’ This supports the findings of Petrakou (2010) and Yee and Bailenson (2007) who found that users tend to position their avatars the way they would position their bodies in the ‘real world.’

‘Real world’ context. When a user is immersed in SL, she is always grounded in the ‘real world’ as well. In this study, not only were students sharing the same class purpose, but
they were physically sharing the computer lab. This experience of being between worlds in the same physical space proved very influential in the ways women established their hybrid identities and interpreted others’ identities. The computer lab and the academic context overall proved influential in the ways women constructed their avatars.

When students are sharing the same space through physical bodies like in a computer lab, they are already establishing identity. When logged into SL, they are sharing the same spaces, both physically and virtually. In a way, customization of the avatar comes under more scrutiny in this setting. For instance, when Chelsea’s avatar was accidentally a boy, she explained that she cared more about it because she was sitting next to her peers, and she did not want them to make judgments about her ‘real’ identity by looking at her avatar. With the idea that avatars serve as representatives of ‘real life’ identity, having an avatar that does not physically match the ‘real world’ student in the classroom may “raise some questions.” It appears there may be more social pressures to ‘fit in’ when users share the same physical space. As Chelsea explains, “The boys want to be funny, the girls want to be cute.” Many of the women thought that the men in the class gave their avatars outlandish looks with the intention of showing off for each other, and that they would not do the same in a distanced setting. This supports the findings of Feldon and Kafai (2008) who found that when students shared the same physical space, avatars were largely customized for purposes of social interaction rather than deep personal meaning.

It is also important to consider that this is an academic context, not a purely social or gaming context. There was an assumption of the women that if the virtual world experience is to serve a class purpose, then the avatar should be representative for the student and look like ‘real life.’ When women were confronted with peers’ fantastical avatars, they assumed they were not
taking the academic experience seriously. For instance, Sasha thinks that Matt’s avatar which donned a leopard print coat and a mullet hairstyle was not academic appropriate. She explains, “I guess he was just creating someone silly to be on there but if you were gonna do it more serious like if you were having to do it for a class, I’m sure you would make yourself look more….realistic.” This helps to explain the finding that the women did not take advantage of the virtual world’s affordances of experimenting with multiple identities or rewriting the script of what it means to be a woman in this environment (Kennedy, 2006). In this particular situation, they were grounded in the world as themselves, as college students, and customized accordingly.

**Interaction**

In this section, I will discuss how women students interacted and connected with others in the space between the ‘real’ and virtual worlds. The negotiation within this complex hybrid space proved somewhat treacherous. The most significant finding is that women interpreted virtual world interactions in the same lens as they would if it occurred to them in the ‘real world.’ This sometimes resulted in a feeling of conflict, as most were unfamiliar with the social context of the virtual world, which shares similarities and differences from the ‘real world.’ Women most easily interacted with others when the social context of the virtual world resembled a comfortable ‘real world’ context. Women avoided interactions with others in the virtual world in the instances when they would avoid similar ones in ‘real life,’ or if they were not sure how to negotiate in the virtual world context. As with identity establishment, psychological factors such as personal conception of the virtual world and gendered identity, and the contextual factors of the virtual world and ‘real world’ all emerged as factors that influenced women students’ interaction in the virtual world learning community.
Personal conception of the world and gendered identity. Certainly, the way one constructs her body influences the interactions she experiences in the world (Butler, 1987). Because women students established their gendered identities in SL as women, they interpreted their interactive experiences in SL through this lens. Although women acknowledged that the virtual world and avatars were not exact duplicates of the ‘real world’ or people, interactions in the virtual world were usually interpreted the way they would be if they occurred in the ‘real world.’ Just as identities should be the same, interactions should be the same as well.

Atkinson (2009) suggests that people form emotional connections to their avatars, feeling good when something good happens to their avatars in SL. Women students tended to feel good when the interactions they experienced were expected and desirable, reminiscent of the ‘real world.’ This usually involved interacting with people they knew from ‘real life.’ For instance, when Chelsea imagines meeting friends from ‘real life’ in SL, she exclaims, “What would I do if I saw like, you know, so-and-so standing on the beach where I used to see them every day, only in Second Life, that would make me really excited to see them.” When interactions closely resembled the social context of desirable ‘real world’ interactions, most women reported feeling more immersed and empowered in the environment. For instance, Chelsea and Ramona both view the virtual class session as a highlight, in part because they were familiar with the students’ avatars in the space.

However, there were times when women felt good interacting with those they did not know, as long as the situation was expected and desirable. For example, Dionne relays her recent visit to a dance club in SL in her blog: “When I entered the room, the DJ was playing one of my favorite songs…A lot of the avatars were doing dance moves that I have not discovered how to
do yet but everyone was still really nice to me…I was having a really great time.” This exemplifies the influence of personal identity in these spaces; while other women may avoid dance clubs in SL, Dionne sought one out due to her personal enjoyment of the experience. Her interactions with the dancing avatars closely resembled a desirable ‘real world’ interaction.

In contrast, when interactions were judged as atypical or undesirable by ‘real world’ standards, some of the women reported distressing psychological conditions such as anxiety, avoidance, and intimidation. Namely, the majority of interactions with strangers were met with some element of discomfort. Identifying as a woman in both the ‘real world’ and virtual world colors these experiences. This is exemplified in Ashley’s blog, in which she describes her interpretations of her independent experience in SL:

I came to a bridge with a creepy looking avatar standing at the other end of bridge. I was pretty intimidated by his appearance (yes, I realize he is made up) but anyone who looked the way he did in real life, I would be sketchy of as well. I did not approach him and talk to him, but I did manage to get him included in a snapshot I took of me, the bridge, and creepy avatar man (Figure 11).

Ashley’s selection of words throughout this story reveals her gendered experience of this interaction in the space between worlds, which Dumitrica and Gaden (2009) describe as “a discomfort and a fear that was both familiar and less so…” (p. 10). In the ‘real world,’ if a woman is alone in an unfamiliar land and comes within sight of a strange, intimidating man, she would very likely avoid him. This is a familiar fear for Ashley, who has lived a lifetime of gendered identity. According to Lin (2008), “Women’s fear and perceptions of risk are deeply
rooted in their bodies” (p. 67). Although Ashley acknowledges that this is not an actual person in the ‘real

Figure 11. Ashley and the “creepy avatar man.”

world’ who could actually harm her body (“yes, I realize he’s made up”), her ‘real life’ concerns remain, which elicits a less familiar fear. What is most striking about this story is the way she refers to her hybrid experiences. For instance, she writes that “I was pretty intimidated” and “I did not approach him,” supporting the idea that virtual world experiences are in fact, in some ways real. This is exemplified in the snapshot that Ashley takes of this experience, as she positions her simulated body in opposition to his and places a safe distance between them. Personally, I am captivated at the power of this image to demonstrate such a complex gendered experience in SL.

From this study, the influence of gaming experience on interpretation of these kinds of experiences is still unclear. Marla expressed a desire to interact with others and was disappointed when she did not meet anyone during her independent visit. She indicated that she would not care one way or another if strangers were to arrive in the virtual classroom and participate in the session, which would be an atypical social practice in the ‘real world.’ However, Dionne,
claiming little gaming experience, also expressed no hesitation when interacting with strangers and even danced with some of them. This is an area that deserves further exploration.

**Context of virtual world.** A contextual factor that influenced how women students understood their interactions was the specific context of SL. Factors include the culture and affordances of the world and the design of the specific learning space and activity.

*Culture and affordances.* As stated earlier, SL is a culturally gendered world. For instance, it is common to see pink and blue balls positioned above objects around the islands, which demarcate feminine and masculine practices. This structure subtly lets users know what is considered gender appropriate behavior for avatars in this environment. Since the women established their virtual identities as feminine, they conducted their avatars as women in the virtual space. For instance, Jalen visits St. Patrick’s Day Land and explains, “I would have been able to drink beer from the tap (I mean literally drink from the spout). I didn’t see any other young ladies doing it, however, so I too refrained.” While SL has the capability of being a space where conceptions of femininity can be challenged, the students in this study largely acted within the established social boundaries.

Boellstorff (2008) explains, “Actual world sociality cannot explain virtual world sociality…it develops on its own terms” (p. 63). Conflicting feelings emerged when women attempted to apply ‘real world’ social practices to unfamiliar virtual world situations. In some cases, women expressed an interest in forging social connections with strangers, but did not know how to establish relations. For instance, during Jalen’s visit to St. Patrick’s Day Land, she was “sad” that no one talked to her. She explains in her blog, “I felt uneasy about approaching another avatar and making conversation because I didn’t really know what to talk about. In real
life, it seems a lot easier to make small talk.” In SL, it is socially acceptable to approach other avatars, and most often, talk about their shared surroundings or the avatar’s appearance, much as one would do in the ‘real world.’ However, some prefer not to talk about their ‘real life’ selves, so it is customary to refrain from personal questions in the beginning of the interaction. Jalen, unfamiliar with this culture of this world, does not know these unwritten rules and so she decides to avoid a potentially uncomfortable interaction. In another example, Chelsea becomes anxious when she explores houses in SL, fearing that she will get caught and “really be in trouble.” In SL, it is socially acceptable to explore others’ homes, but since Chelsea is applying ‘real world’ norms to this situation, she feels distress.

Considering communication features in SL, a user can communicate with others through text or voice, in a private or public arena. Voice was perceived in a positive light by Ramona and Chelsea for two reasons. First, it was technically easier and more efficient to communicate, as conversations used the same turn-taking patterns as the ‘real world.’ Second, voice was interpreted as a direct link to the person’s ‘real life’ identity. For instance, Chelsea found it was easier to identify people in SL when she could hear their voices. Carr et al. (2008) found that voice is a tool for self-disclosure and promotes trust. Ramona’s words seem to support this idea, as she found that hearing voices brought a “human aspect to a virtual world” and was more “personal” and “meaningful.” Given that these women feel that avatars should be reflections of the user, voice helps to confirm this. However, gamer Marla did not feel that voice enhanced this class interaction, although she found it somewhat novel. For gamers, it may be less necessary to tie the person to her ‘real life’ identity.
Design of learning space. The design of the virtual world space proved influential in the women’s interactions as well. When the space was familiar and realistic, there were no troubling interactions reported. The virtual classroom session proved to be the most supportive for Ramona and Chelsea for a few reasons. First, being able to share the same virtual space at the same time elicits a sense of immersion and co-presence (really being with others in the space) and group cohesion (“all there together”) that is not realized when students’ avatars are scattered “in various places throughout the map.” It also helps students connect and relate avatars to the ‘real’ peers in the lab. Finally, the social context of the virtual classroom was remarkably similar to the context of the ‘real world’ context of the physical classroom, and so there were no feelings of conflict about how to interact there.

When the land was not as realistic, women questioned the nature of interactions they might face. For instance, Jalen describes, “My initial reaction to the place [St. Patrick’s Day Land] was a little uneasy. It looked very fairytale-ish and I thought I would meet a lot of weird people.” Since the design of this land does not translate to the ‘real world,’ then the avatars may not either. Sasha visited a “sci-fi” place called Mosquito and explains, “Being there made me feel like I was on another planet. The only life that I saw was a little green alien character. I think Mosquito was really strange.”

An important factor that emerges concerns the influence of gaming experience on perception of virtual world interactions. While familiar, realistic settings generally supported the women, Marla interpreted the spaces as too realistic and familiar, and therefore somewhat pointless. For instance, she calls the virtual classroom session “ kinda boring” because all they did was sit and listen. She tells me in her interview, “We didn’t really do anything, like we didn’t
interact with other people outside of campus.” This proved to be “too much work, I can walk around in real life.” Through her daily gaming, Marla is used to immersing in fantastical environments. When Marla was confronted with an unfamiliar setting in SL that resembled a natural scene (“it was eerie how it resembled nature”), she was not troubled by it and instead accepted the space for what it offered (“you could hear the sounds of the ocean, it was really nice”). From Marla, I learn that designing an exact replica of the ‘real world’ and mimicking ‘real world’ interactions may be supportive to some women, but not all.

**Context of the ‘real world.’** As with ‘identity,’ the context of the ‘real world’ classroom lab influenced how women students interpreted their interactions with others, especially peers. While some of the women were entertained by outlandish men peer avatars and others were not as amused, there were no concerns of safety with regards to directly interacting with men peers. Some women noted that since they could hear the men in the classroom, they could better understand the intentions of the avatars on the screen and connect peers to their avatars. For example, PJ the warrior, who could certainly be regarded as physically intimidating on the computer screen, did not scare the women, and both Marla and Ramona interacted with him in SL. This shows the advantage of sharing the same ‘real world’ context, as it serves as a place for ‘true’ identity to be revealed.

Regarding the academic context, certain activities seemed to encourage peer interactions more than others. Supporting the findings from past literature, most of the women preferred socially interactive activities over individual exploration (see Delwiche, 2006; Kao, Galas, & Kafai, 2005; Mayrath, Sanchez, Traphagan, Heikes, & Trivedi, 2007; Sanchez, 2007). While the classroom setting promoted feelings of group cohesion, the structured collaborative scavenger
hunt elicited more direct social interaction between peers. For instance, Chelsea and John discuss how they are the most attractive pair of avatars in the bunch, and Dionne and her partner trade jokes about her unintentionally bald avatar ("Better get yourself a hat!"). Chelsea notes an additional advantage, that the task prompted her male partner to stop showing off for his peers and be "really helpful, really nice." The one possible exception is Ramona, who emphasized how she did not know her partner in the scavenger hunt and that was a factor in her difficulty with the task. Although not intimidated by him, she suggests that if they had known each other in ‘real life’ better, he may have been more willing to help her. Again, it seems that building ‘real’ social connections in the classroom may enhance the connections that are forged online.

**Discussion Summary**

As I close this chapter, I marvel at the similarities and differences exhibited by these women students regarding identity and interaction. As I reflect now, I keep coming back to the tension between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ that exists when one is logged onto SL. Regarding hybrid identity, all of the women in this study customize feminine avatars, and the ones that I interviewed relate that appearance with feeling ‘real’ in a rather ‘unreal’ space. Virtual world interactions are largely interpreted in the same manner as they would if they occurred in the ‘real world.’

However, there is a clear awareness that the virtual world is not the same; it is in fact, unreal. It approaches the “actual *without arriving there*” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 19). It is this negotiation of real and unreal spaces that varies among the women. Thinking of the women in the three chapters helps to understand this more deeply. Chelsea experiences the tension between real and unreal with an element of mistrust, initially positioning the worlds in opposition; “Why
wasn’t real life good enough?” As she spends more time in SL, her perception of the unreal develops, becoming more complementary than oppositional. While she first thought of it as a game, Ramona actively negotiates her fluid perception of the real and unreal. The virtual world is “as real as you want it to be,” determined by the person in question. Both Chelsea and Marla privilege the ‘real.’ Marla, with ample gaming experience, does not place the real and unreal in opposition, nor spends much time building her understanding of the space between worlds. Instead, she deems the unreal (virtual world) as too much like the ‘real world.’ While the ‘unreal’ is new to Ramona and untrustworthy to Chelsea, Marla is quite familiar with it. It is this negotiation between the real and unreal that ultimately influences how these women students understand their identities and interactions in the virtual world learning community.
Chapter 9
Conclusions and Implications

Given the point that virtual worlds like SL represent a fundamental shift in the way people establish identity and interact, and that they have only existed in the education sector for less than a decade, there is still much that is unknown about the ways in which students learn between worlds. This study was the culmination of my desire as an educator and a person to address the questions about identity and learning that came to mind when I first was introduced to SL: Are avatars characters or ‘real life’ representatives? What can one do here? Do educators take this seriously? My exploratory study concerning the formation of learning communities in SL uncovered a factor that I did not anticipate would be terribly significant: gender. Gender emerges as an especially salient factor since virtual worlds offer simulated gendered bodies and places, and have evolved from the male-dominated context of gaming.

The findings from my exploratory study implied that the ways in which women and men students projected identity and interacted with each other in the virtual world learning community was mediated by personal conception of identity, view of the nature of the virtual world, and technical skill. In general, women were more likely to question the virtual world and experience technical difficulties, which affected their participation in the learning community. Wanting to deeply understand the experiences of women, through the embrace of qualitative
feminist methodology in the present study, I have begun to identify and connect the psychological and contextual factors that influence how women students establish identity and interact in the virtual world learning community. Although there is much more to be understood about these relationships, my work serves as an important first step toward establishing and sustaining virtual world learning communities in which every member feels represented and empowered.

In this final chapter, I will briefly summarize the most significant findings generated from the women in the study and explain how these revelations both add to the knowledge base about virtual world learning communities and propose implications. In addition, I will explore how the theoretical conception of hybridity and the adoption of qualitative feminist methodologies and methods allowed for new meanings and relationships to be constructed. I will consider the limitations of this study. Finally, suggestions for future research directions will be proposed.

**Significance of Findings**

This study is significant because it is specifically addresses some major gaps in the previous literature about virtual worlds in academic contexts. As noted in Chapter 3, the most glaring gap in the literature is that no study has specifically documented the gendered experiences of male or female students in a virtual world. Given the highly gendered nature of SL emphasized in the discussion chapter, interpreting students’ thoughts and reactions concerning identity and interaction in a virtual learning community without considering the influence of gender reveals only a partial picture.

As stated in the previous discussion chapter, there were several findings that were significant. Concerning identity establishment, women constructed feminine avatars regardless
of gaming experience. Familiar learning spaces, people and interactions supported some women, but not all, to feel immersed and present with others in the virtual world. Gaming experience emerges as a factor that affords the user technical competence in the world but also presents divergence since they are used to playing games for entertainment, not education. I will address each of these points and explain how they add to what is already known in the literature. I will also propose instructional design principles to address them.

Feminine avatars. In previous gaming literature, it was found that women tend to select women avatars to project an identity that is strong, but still traditionally feminine (Beavis & Charles, 2005; Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2006). While noteworthy, these studies were focused on women who personally choose to participate in video games. My study adds to the knowledge base by focusing on women who are required to participate as students in the social virtual world of SL. The women in my study chose to construct their avatars to be feminine with several factors in mind. The most significant is that they identify as women in the ‘real world,’ and they conceive of SL avatars as ‘real world’ representatives in the virtual space. Simulating this gendered identity projects a genuine identity to others in SL. This perspective was held by women, regardless of other influential factors such as gaming experience. The influence of the learning context further encourages this projection, since they are not characters, but students in the space. Jenson and deCastell (2010) recommend “attending to the ways players engage with technologies that enable and constrain certain forms of experience” (p. 61). The highly gendered nature of SL also informs and structures the possibilities that can be realized.

Few studies have attempted to carefully consider the factors that arise out of the dual contexts of the ‘real’ and virtual worlds, usually exclusively focusing on the virtual world. Not
considering the full context, in which the ‘real world’ is a major part, reveals an incomplete understanding of what is occurring. By documenting and connecting the contexts of the ‘real world’ (the space of the computer lab and the academic purpose) and the virtual world (the space of the learning events and the online activities), it is now better understood why women students construct feminine avatars in SL. While it would be easy to conclude that women construct feminine avatars because they have a desire to be attractive, or because they are less likely to embody fantastical avatars in their personal lives, or because they are less technically skilled, what I have found complicates these explanations. In some ways, there does seem support for these points separately. For example, Chelsea’s assertion, “Of course, we [women] want to be cute” suggests that avatars serve as vehicles to perform socially prescribed norms of femininity. However, each woman regardless of gaming experience conceived the meaning of avatars to ultimately be a representative or reflection of herself in the virtual world, and this representative is gendered. This finding illuminates the incredible power of the socially constructed category of gender towards identity construction in both the ‘real’ and virtual worlds.

Since establishment of identity is so vital in feeling ‘real’ in the space, students need help to create that look, especially students who have less gaming experience (traditionally, women). Students would benefit from at least one person in the room devoted to technical help, along with school-related technical help in the virtual world as well. Since some of the women mentioned that their avatars were not enough like them because the clothing options were ‘student-appropriate,’ it is important to offer typical student clothing on the home base in the virtual world. Providing school-related clothing would be ideal, as it would promote a sense of personal and social identity in the community. It also would be helpful to offer a mix of class
configurations. While it would be very beneficial to meet in person to get to know the ‘real’
people and establish relationships, holding several online sessions may elicit the immersion and
co-presence to support students without the ‘real world’ social pressure to project virtual
identities in gendered funny or cute ways. Online sessions may also prompt the students to build
technical competence, which is related to more feelings of empowerment in the community and
control over avatar.

One of the most striking findings emerging from this study was the disparity between
people who made their avatars realistic (all women, a few men) and those who made their
avatars to be fantastical (men). It was almost as though they were in two distinct communities.
The women perceived those who were not realistic to not take the virtual world, or their avatars,
seriously. Thinking of this in terms of learning community, this is a troubling notion. Feelings of
trust must be felt because members can construct knowledge together and this disparity places a
rift in the community. In communities, it is hard to negotiate what you mean and share
perspectives when half of the avatars are not taken seriously.

A few implications for instructional design emerge from this. First, it is important for
students to be able to voice why they are constructing their avatars and make their intentions
known to others in the class. This provides an arena for others to understand each other better
and also gives the teacher an insight into the community dynamics. Second, it should be clear
from the start that this is an academic context and that it is different from a gaming context.
Allowing students to think of the ways in which the two contexts differ may clarify what is
acceptable up front. Attention must also be given to the clothes easily available in the virtual
world learning space. One has to be somewhat cautious of providing fantastical avatar attire, as it
tends to create a disparity between the ‘realistic’ avatars and the fantastical ones. Ultimately, the learning objective will structure what options the users have for establishing identity.

**Familiarity.** Through careful consideration of the influence of certain learning spaces within SL, I identified the situations that appeared to evoke the most immersion, co-presence, and positive feedback in women students. Namely, I found that when a woman student was situated in virtual surroundings that closely simulated the ‘real world,’ such as the design of the virtual space, what was occurring in the virtual space, and the avatars in which she was sharing the virtual space, little hesitancies were reported. For example, the virtual classroom resembled the ‘real life’ classroom, stimulated the same classroom activities, and was occupied by students. Unfamiliar lands or unfamiliar avatars tended to elicit psychological elements of uncertainty and disconnection.

One emerging instructional approach that can support students is to deeply think about the nature of the virtual world space. It is important for students to realize that the virtual experience is a real one, which will give support to women who may feel silly that they are feeling weird in a virtual encounter. Like in the ‘real world,’ they need to know how to get away when they need. Most importantly, they need to understand that the social norms of the virtual world do not exactly match up with the ‘real world.’ For example, Jalen was unsure what to talk about in a virtual world and how to approach others. Better understanding the social practices of SL will give the students more confidence to act within the world. It will also help them interpret the interactions more accurately. This can be accomplished through class discussion, readings, watching of video clips, all before actually entering the world itself. This will help all students,
as gamers who only use spaces for entertainment may not understand the purpose of interaction here.

It is important to note that as a user spends more time in the virtual world, they build competence in technical ability and social expectations. It is helpful to structure activities very carefully to support that natural progression. At first, tasks can be smaller and stay within the familiar spaces of campus with familiar people, and then steadily increased to the general virtual world. This is not unlike the experience of a child in the ‘real world’ who is sheltered by her parents and slowly given more freedom to independently explore the world. Some children will mature faster and need less support, while others will need more. As women incrementally gain both technical and worldly social competence, they will likely feel more confident in exploring unfamiliar places and engaging in new situations. Therefore, more complex visits can be envisioned and forged with each class session. Judging from the results of this study, engaging in SL for only a handful of sessions may not elicit the immersive, transformational experience that a teacher may have intended.

**Gaming experience.** In this study, gaming experience emerges as an influential factor in virtual world learning community participation. In general, Marla the gamer possessed a level of technical competence that heightened her access to the virtual world and excelling in the class activities, even winning the scavenger hunt with her partner. When faced with technical difficulties (having a smoke cloud avatar), she persisted in the environment as an equal and eventually fixed it. While studies have mentioned that SL is technically challenging, there is no detailed identification of who may have heightened access to the world. By identifying gaming experience as a factor, it may be helpful to assess this experience in the beginning of the class in
order to determine who may require more assistance in accessing the virtual world learning community. I found the gaming survey I gave out to be quite effective in providing a “big picture” of each woman’s prior experience and current attitudes about games and virtual worlds. Those with more experience can be paired with less experienced students. This keeps the gamers busy while helping the non-gamers. It also promotes more collaboration and community in the class. While Marla attributed the technical difficulty of others as a lack of paying attention, collaborating with another could show her that the person simply needs additional help.

A most interesting finding is that the preference for familiarity was not universally voiced by the women in the study. Marla, who is used to gaming on a regular basis, finds virtual settings that are nearly identical to the ‘real world’ settings somewhat pointless. There is already a ‘real life’ venue to have class, so why simulate it online? She was more interested in exploring the unfamiliar: avatars she did not know from class, lands beyond the university island. This finding about familiarity adds to the knowledge base about women and virtual worlds by identifying a possible individual factor (gaming experience) to explain the diversity. Taking prior differences and contextual factors into account is vital towards breaking from the typical gender stereotypes about women in virtual environments (Jenson & deCastell, 2010). By focusing on how women understand the factors that influence their participation in the community, the variation felt among women is more realized.

These findings support the notion proposed in Chapter 2, that women students will not have identical experiences because of the complex interaction of individual and social contexts. It also brings forth an important implication: It is important to provide different choices for students to accomplish a certain objective. It is supportive to provide a myriad of familiar and
unfamiliar virtual places and situations. For instance, if the objective is to identify environmental communication messages in SL, the students can have the option of staying on the safe university island and collaborating with a known classmate, or travel to some teacher-approved places, or search independently and find new people to talk to. Gamers like Marla may choose the more adventurous while Chelsea may choose to stay on campus. This keeps the students engaged and supported at the same time, regardless of preference. Another idea is to select a class for the students to collaborate with from a distance. This provides a new experience for the gamers but supports the others in knowing the people are trusted and known. Multiple modes of communication can further support this community, as voice is a link to ‘real’ identity. This can elicit some common ground with distanced others, if they have a collaborative purpose.

**Theoretical Contribution: Hybridity**

Given the relatively new nature of 3D video games and virtual worlds, approaches to research investigate them have been multiple. While some researchers focus on the ability of worlds like SL to let users project self without boundaries and others attempt to parse the virtual world experience into distinctly ‘real’ and virtual components, I have embraced another approach. I, along with other researchers such as Taylor (2006), accept that attempting to separate the ‘real’ and virtual worlds in order to better understand users’ experiences is not possible or even desirable, as it does not help us further understand those spaces. When people are logged into SL, they exist between worlds. Therefore, I choose to interpret issues of identity and interaction in what I call a ‘hybrid’ sense. For example, approaching identity in terms of hybridity helps to better understand the complex ways the women referred to their avatars. When
Ashley says, “I was pretty intimidated” by the “creepy avatar,” she is living in the gaps, embodying both her physical and virtual bodies. In doing this, it yields a hybrid identity.

This acknowledgement of the hybrid identity not only helps better understand how women negotiate in these spaces, but also honors the experiences that happen there. For instance, Ashley notes that she realizes the creepy man was “made up,” perhaps subtly pondering whether she has a legitimate reason to feel intimidated. By acknowledging that virtual experiences may not be actual but are real deepens the seriousness of this research and gives support to the complex negotiations of identity felt there. From this perspective, new meaning about human identity can be constructed. This conception can also be extended to consider and possibly reevaluate other forms of interaction in other online learning environments.

Methodology

My study forges new ground in that it is the first that adopts a feminist qualitative methodology in a virtual world academic context. In this section, I will explain how this approach, and the method of the Listening Guide, allowed for the construction of new knowledge.

Feminist qualitative approach. Several elements of the feminist qualitative approach have allowed me to add to the knowledge base: the emphasis on relationships in learning; the preservation of context; the accountability and positionality of the researcher; and the focus on women as bearers of knowledge.

From a feminist research perspective, knowledge and development are constructed in relationships, rather than solely within the individual. Because of this, the person and her context cannot be separated. For instance, listening for the ways that Chelsea, Ramona and Marla situate
themselves in the larger gaming context gives valuable meaning and insight to the ways they interpret the immediate virtual world experience. One of the main critiques in the review of literature is that few studies have preserved the complex context of the virtual world experience. As stated before, when one is logged into SL, she is always grounded in the ‘real world’ and incorporates a lifetime of ‘real world’ gendered identity. She may be in the same room with someone or alone; she may be interacting with distanced friends or strangers; she may be participating for personal or academic reasons. I am not taking their answers at face value but positioning them in the larger context which is gendered. Using the Listening Guide, multiple perspectives and meanings are ‘heard’ separately and together, to form a more complete view of what the interviewee is saying (Raider-Roth, 2005). How do they define themselves in virtual world, in class, in that hybrid space? Therefore, it is important that I listen for the subtle ways they define themselves and others in their language in order to preserve the complexity of women students’ experiences in this unique context. Using the other data sources such as blogs, snapshots, SL communication, and my observations enhance this picture. Documenting the ways the identities and interactions shift as the context shifts may help to understand how women construct their experiences in the gaps between the two worlds. It helped me to listen to the subtle contexts in which women were speaking and positioning themselves in, and discover themes of empowerment and connection in relation to others.

I believe one of the greatest strengths of this study is the recognition of my positionality. Only one other study does this (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009); mine is the only one that does this in an academic context. Given the inherent complexity of the virtual world experience concerning identity and interaction, it is imperative for the researcher to make clear their own personal views
and feelings about it. I am personally grounded in particular contexts that will inevitably affect how I select and interpret the data. I identify as a woman in the ‘real world,’ just like the women in my study. The relationship of the researcher and participant is embraced as a subjective one, with it being acknowledged that knowledge will be constructed together. Approaching the study with this perspective, I forged relationships with them which resulted in many different perspectives of learning to be generated. Phillips (2010) explains, “The ways in which the different collaborating actors position themselves and each other…in processes of negotiation shape the kinds of knowledge produced” (p. 7). Keeping in mind that “gender is always being produced by our participants and us, with regards to the greater social and cultural conversations” (Taylor, 2008, p. 56), it is vital to be aware of this production. This allows for me to see the ways in which we relate to each other and build knowledge and understanding together. It also illuminates the power of the researcher in shaping the direction of the findings. Being aware of this power and tracking how gender is produced helps to preserve the complexity of the moment and interpret the knowledge that is generated.

Thinking about the frameworks that I am using (and the women are using) to tell and interpret stories dramatically influences what I will find and enhances accountability (Bhavnani, 2004). A good example is in my interview with Marla, when I assumed she was not a gamer. When this happened, I realized that my conception of gaming as a masculine practice was coloring my perceptions of what she was saying. It is also important to listen to the participants in order to understand not only what they are saying, but what frameworks and relationships they are using to tell the story. It is important to keep this context in mind in order to “unpack invisibility” (Taylor, 2006, p. 100). Being cognizant of this helps me to go beyond what is
already known and avoid the reproduction of inequalities of gender (Jenson & deCastell, 2008). Taking these factors into account helps make women’s varied and multiple experiences more visible and less framed in opposition to men.

Using a feminist qualitative methodology positions the women as bearers of knowledge. I am proud to put women in the center of my study, who are usually defined as ‘other’ and silenced in similar kinds of gaming contexts. Approaching the women as legitimate sources to learn from and answer my research questions acknowledges their power. It assumes that knowledge is given meaning by the people producing it, so it “involves the commitment to represent those we study on their own terms and through their own perspectives” (Clarke, 2006, p. 348). Through this commitment, it is understood that knowledge is always partial and situated. Instead of speaking for the women, here I have given a platform for the women themselves to speak. Through the Listening Guide, I have truly listened to the ways they speak about themselves and others, and how their understanding is forged. This helps us see women as always changing, given the context they are situated in. Applying this philosophy to research, knowledge is not simply discovered, but constructed by participants (Alcoff, 1988). My relationships with the women I interviewed continued after the class was over, with my intention to make sure that the interpretations I was making were accurate by their standards. This helps to strengthen the validity of the findings.

Limitations of Study

Although the study has produced meaningful findings that help instructional design principles, there are some limitations of the study. First, the length of the study is a major factor that shapes the findings. In the class, there were three sessions in SL. Given that technical
competence increases over time, it is likely that their understandings of SL and relationships would have been a lot different beyond three sessions. In addition, I only interviewed 5 women out of 14. There was one other woman that had considerable gaming experience but declined to be interviewed, so the knowledge she would have contributed would have been changed what was found in this study. In addition, a context that I did not fully address was the content of the course itself, which was communications. The connection the student felt to the content is also going to have an influence on how they interact with other people and interpret the experience. Finally, a vitally important member of the learning community is the teacher. While I worked with her to devise activities and in the classroom, I did not talk with her (or the students) to find out her perspective of her role in the community. Not acknowledging this relationship reveals a somewhat incomplete picture of the community.

**Future Directions**

Seeing as this research study is a beginning step into understanding how women access and participate in virtual world learning communities, there are many directions for this research to proceed. In this section, I will propose the most fruitful ones, inspired by the instructional design principles recommended above: studying the influence of different ‘real world’ configurations; engaging in a longer study; and focusing on men and how they relate to women.

Thinking about the instructional design principles I proposed, it would be helpful to see how women negotiate different kind of SL configurations. For instance, how would identity and interaction be established if they met with peers in a computer lab the first week, and online the rest? Does it encourage them to experiment with identity more? Do they feel less safe when they can’t hear the others’ intentions in the lab? Does their competence increase in this structure?
It would help to have a longer study to see how preferences and attitudes, and place in community, change over time. In only three class sessions, Ramona and Chelsea, who had never used an avatar or been in a virtual world, went from a crude understanding of virtual worlds to a pretty sophisticated one, both noting the possibilities. It would be great to see where their conceptions would have gone and how their interaction with others would have changed. It would also be interesting to see if Marla’s view had changed if the tasks had gotten a bit more complex and adventurous.

Now that I feel a better handle on why women project feminine identities and interaction in varied ways in virtual worlds, I am growing more curious about men’s practices. It would be fascinating to listen to how they position themselves as students, gamers, and men in the virtual world learning community context. Why do men feel more freedom in customizing avatars differently? How do they conceive of identity? Why do they behave in ways they could not in the ‘real world’ while women largely stick with the script? It may provide some clues to support the whole learning community to a deeper degree.

**Final Reflection**

As I conclude this study, I revisit the first day in the lab when I saw Marcia’s avatar walking around the digital campus in SL. Back then, I certainly did not realize how deep and complex this virtual experience was. I now reflect on those questions I first posed, thinking of the women in this study. Is this a video game based on real life? No, it is certainly not a game, although Ramona thought it was at first. Is an avatar a character or is it a digital version of the person? I suppose that depends on who is embodying the avatar at the time. According to the women I interviewed, it should be a digital version of the person. Is it even right to refer to an
avatar as ‘she’? The women in my study not only used ‘she’ but ‘I,’ denoting a real connection between self and avatar. Beyond that, what do you do here? What can you do here? These questions cannot easily be answered by the women in my study, as they were only getting started. Do educators actually take this seriously? As I reflect on this question, perhaps I should have asked, “Do students actually take this seriously?” If a teacher is using it, odds are they are taking it seriously. According to the women I interviewed, some students were not taking it seriously, while others were. I leave you with Ramona’s words, “It’s as real as you want it to be.”
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Appendix A

Survey of 3D Multi-User Gaming and Virtual World Experience

The purpose of this survey is to assess the nature of your previous 3D multi-user gaming and virtual world experience. The survey will take around 10 minutes.

1. Have you ever played any of the following? Check all that apply, and then indicate when you first started playing.
   - Computer games (those that do not require an Internet connection)
     - Elementary school
     - Middle school
     - High school
     - College
   - Video games (those that require a game console like a Wii)
     - Elementary school
     - Middle school
     - High school
     - College
   - Online games (those that require an Internet connection like Worlds of Warcraft)
     - Elementary school
     - Middle school
     - High school
     - College
   - I have never played any of these.

2. Do you currently have a game console like an Xbox, a Playstation or a Wii? If ‘yes’, how long have you had it?
   - Yes ___________
   - No

3. What kinds of games or virtual worlds do you currently participate, or have participated in the past? Check all that apply.
   - Puzzles
   - Action
   - First-person shooters
   - Strategy
   - Simulation
☐ Sports
☐ Role Playing
☐ Racing
☐ Rhythm
☐ Survival Horror
☐ Multi-player online games (like World of Warcraft)
☐ Social virtual worlds (like Second Life or Active Worlds)
☐ None (if you choose this, skip to Question #9)

4. About how often do you play games and/or participate in virtual worlds?
   ☐ Several times a day
   ☐ About once a day
   ☐ 3-5 days a week
   ☐ 1-2 days a week
   ☐ Every few weeks
   ☐ Less often than every few weeks

5. On a typical day, approximately how many hours do you spend playing games and/or participating in virtual worlds?
   ☐ Less than one hour
   ☐ One hour
   ☐ Two hours
   ☐ Three hours or more

6. For the game and/or virtual world you play most often, which way do you play most often?
   ☐ Playing the game/virtual world with people you know in real life, who are in the same room with you
   ☐ Playing the game/virtual world with people you know in real life, who are connected through the Internet
   ☐ Playing the game/virtual world with people you first met online, who are connected through the Internet
   ☐ Playing the game/virtual world alone

7. The games and/or virtual worlds I have participated in have helped me make new friends.
   ☐ Strongly agree
   ☐ Agree
   ☐ Neither agree nor disagree

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8. The games and/or virtual worlds I have participated in have helped me improve existing relationships.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neither agree nor disagree
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

9. What words do you associate with when you think of the word ‘gaming’? Check all that apply. If you wish, check ‘other’ to fill in your own words.
   - Fun
   - Exciting
   - Challenging
   - Frustrating
   - Scary
   - Boring
   - Pointless
   - Stressful
   - Other ________________________________________

For this class, you will be participating in the social virtual world of Second Life. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

10. I would like to communicate with fellow classmates while in Second Life.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree nor disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree

11. I would like to communicate with other people besides my classmates in Second Life.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree nor disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
12. If you have participated in a social virtual world like Second Life or Active Worlds in the past, was it for personal reasons, professional/academic reasons, or both?
   - Personal
   - Professional/Academic
   - Both
   - I have never participated in a social virtual world.

13. If you have never participated in a social virtual world like Second Life or Active Worlds, please indicate why. Check all that apply. If you wish, check ‘other’ to fill in your own words.
   - I have participated in a social virtual world.
   - I don’t know what a virtual world is
   - I don’t have the time
   - I simply am not interested in it
   - It is too complex to learn and use
   - I am concerned about being exposed to offensive material
   - I am concerned about talking to strangers online
   - My computer does not have the requirements to run it
   - Other ________________________________

14. Do you, or have you ever, used an avatar or other online graphic representation of yourself?
   - Yes
   - No

15. Check the following terms if you feel confident that you could explain the term in detail. Check all that apply.
   - Avatar
   - Rez
   - Teleport
   - Prim
   - Sim
   - In-world
   - SLURL
   - 2L
   - Griefing
   - IRL
   - BRB
   - Pwned
16. What is your age?
   - 20-22
   - 23-25
   - 26-28
   - 29-31
   - 32 or above

17. What is your gender?
   - Man
   - Woman
   - Transgender
Appendix B

Blog Prompt

Our two visits in Second Life have been pretty bustling; we haven’t had much time to simply observe and experience the virtual world. For this blog, log in to Second Life during the week and visit a place outside of UC’s island. I recommend you travel to one of the places listed in the scavenger hunt from last week. To do this, click on your Inventory and search for the landmarks in the folder “Hunt_Landmarks” or “Nancy_Landmarks”. To find other places, log in to SL and click the blue ‘Search’ button on the bottom of the screen. Then click on the ‘Showcase’ tab.

There will be a list of places to review and teleport. Feel free to browse around islands that are just for avatar fashions, but select another place to fully explore. Feel free to travel around until you find a place where you feel comfortable and want to explore. Remember, you can always immediately teleport home at any time. Just click “World” and then “Teleport Home”.

Once you’ve selected your place, spend at least 15 minutes there. If you can, turn the sound up to hear noises from the environment. Also, expand Second Life so it fills up the whole computer screen. Try to reduce any outside influence during your visit (turn on TV or Ipod, for instance). Take some notes on paper while you are there, keeping the items below in mind.

Expectations:
Write at least 150 words about your thoughts about Second Life. Include a picture from Second Life of your avatar. Tell us where you visited and why you selected that place. Then, answer the following questions in a cohesive narrative (not just a list, answering each question):

a) While you were there, what did you see?

b) What are your reactions to what you saw? Did anything interest you? Did anything surprise you? Did anything make you uneasy? Include a snapshot if you want.

c) Did you see other avatars? If so, did you interact with anyone? If so, what was it like? If you didn’t interact with an avatar, why not? Include a snapshot if you want.

d) What questions do you walk away with about this environment?
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Data Collection Materials: Second Life Pre-Interview Guide

Tell me about this class; learning objectives, etc.

Do you consider yourself a gamer?

If so, what kind of games do you play? How often?

How is the gaming environment different from real life?

In your personal life, do or did you ever communicate online with people you haven’t met in real life? Explain.

Before this class, had you heard of Second Life?

If another student asked you what Second Life was, what would you say?

Imagine I have never met “Avatar Name” before. What would you tell me about her/him?

What do you and your avatar have in common?

How are you different from your avatar?

When (and with whom) do you prefer to use voice to communicate?

When (and with whom) do you prefer to use text to communicate?

How do you think the body language in Second Life compares with real life?

What does it mean to feel safe in Second Life?
What is your comfort level in Second Life (navigation, technical issues, identity) right now?

Post-Interview Guide

Has your avatar changed since the last time we talked? How so?

What has been your main mode of communication in Second Life – text or voice?

Did you communicate with a friend within Second Life that you know from real life? If so, how is your communication different in Second Life?

Did you communicate with someone in Second Life that you have never met face-to-face? If so, describe your interactions.

Now that you’ve spent more time in Second Life, what does it mean to feel safe in Second Life?

Describe a time when you felt safe in Second Life.

Describe a time when you did not feel safe in Second Life. How did you react?

Do the communication features (text/voice) influence feelings of safety?

What have you learned while collaborating with others in Second Life?

What are the benefits concerning learning with others in Second Life?

What are the limitations concerning learning with others in Second Life?

What were the challenges of using Second Life for this class?

I learned that your final paper is concerning Second Life. At this time, will you allow me to review your final paper once the class is over? As with your blogs and interviews, I will strip your name before the data analysis, and your name will not appear in any publications. This is totally voluntary; you may choose not to give consent for the final papers but participate in the rest of the study.

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