Walden III: Digital Utopianism and Cultural Imperialism in Second Life

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"Each age and society re-creates its "Others." Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of "other" is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies […] human identity is not only not natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright […] patriotism, extreme xenophobic nationalism, and downright unpleasant chauvinism are common responses to this fear"

- Edward Said, New York March 1994

Digital utopianists have long heralded the rise of the virtual world, a mythical place that would eliminate the ills of meat space with identity and class inequality particularly in its crosshairs. In recent years, what was once an idea, albeit sometimes loosely executed, has become a reality, with people all over the globe signing on and living their lives in complex online societies. Undoubtedly, the most popular and discussed of these virtual worlds (outside of massively multiplayer online role-playing games [MMORPGs] such as *World of Warcraft*) is Second Life, launched in 2003 by Linden Research, Inc, more commonly referred to as Linden Lab. Since its launch, Second Life has become no more than a cultural phenomenon, dominating discourses across a bevy of academic and non-academic fields and inciting both exuberant praise and harsh criticism. Unsurprisingly, this occurrence poses a plethora of inquiries for cultural theorists to grapple with.

With the societal relevance of metaverses (virtual worlds) apparent, the question of how Second Life has performed in relation to its ideal philosophical lineage in digital utopianism is compelling. Is it what Steward Brand, John Perry Barlow, Lawrence

Lessig, and others who we may deem 'digital utopianists' have hoped for in their attempts to contextualize digital technology as the preeminent facilitation of democratic ideals? Or does Second Life paint a picture that is darker than what these theorists would have hoped for?

Specifically in relation to the study of global issues, Second Life's significance in understanding contemporary manifestations of cultural imperialism is of key interest. If the virtual world functions largely to liberate its inhabitants from the shackles of race, class, and gender, it naturally follows that it would be able to do the same in relation to the ills of cultural hegemony. Inhabitants need neither passport nor nationalist tendencies to function in a virtual space, yet whether Second Life alleviates or enables cultural imperialism is a question that is not so easily answered.

These two queries are intrinsically linked, forming the crux of what is intended to be a comprehensive (although inherently incomplete) analysis of how Second Life has altered how we understand cultural imperialism in a digital age. *Walden III*, both an essay and an experiment in multimedia scholarship, lays out four major points of interest in understanding these questions.

Framing these questions in relation to the philosophies of digital utopianism is of primary concern, giving historical and ideological context to the issues. For years theorists have speculated about the ability for digital technologies to enact positive social change. How well we grade Second Life in relation to this lineage is of interest and importance as its adherence or deviation from this path is essential in exploring its relation to cultural imperialism.

Secondly, we must grapple with and understand how culture and identity are represented and constructed within Second Life, which thrives on postmodern notions of fluidity and multiplicity. At the same time, we must look at how offline representations of nationalism and cultural identity are formed. By assessing theories regarding identity construction online (virtual worlds in particular) in relation to traditional views on nationalism, we are more apt to draw conclusions about the relation virtual worlds such as Second Life have with cultural imperialism.

We must then attempt to understand the economics of Second Life, deciphering how as a society it maintains a vibrant economy that both borrows from and rejects global capitalism. What is bought in Second Life, why it is bought, and in what manner are interesting starting points, but how major corporations and individuals flourish or flounder economically in Second Life is of most interest. Of related interest is how Linden Lab, a for-profit corporate entity, acts economically, specifically in lieu of the philosophical heritage of the virtual world.

Finally, we must investigate how cultural imperialism functions in a virtual world. Does Second Life disarm this type of imperialism? Does it enable it? Or does it do something completely different, simultaneously affirming it while eliminating our traditional conceptions? Beginning with an overview of cultural imperialism, we can begin to contextualize the historical lineage that predates what we understand as Western dominance in terms of cultural prevalence. Here, the most pertinent question that arises is whether or not virtual worlds, Second Life in particular, are poised to allay this globally malady. Similarly, and perhaps unpopular in theory, we must wonder if virtual worlds propose a different narrative than the of utopia, creating a world that mimics the cultural

issues we experience as a global society offline. Finally, with Edward Said's indispensable and pioneering work "Orientalism" as our guide, we must look towards a new type of orientalism evoked by Second Life in which journalists and academics make sweeping generalizations regarding Second Life's worth as a metaverse without serious interaction or understanding of the culture created by Second Life's citizens.

Issues Regarding Terminology and Framework

As it exists currently, most of the theory surrounding global issues is inept at understanding the impact digital technology has had on the way we function as a global society. The very lexicon used in the study of global issues, more popularly referred to as international relations, inherently privileges the actions of states over those of non-state actors. Similarly, the way global issues theory understands cultural identity, identity construction, and traditional cross-cultural interaction takes disproportionately little account of major shifts and advances in digital communications. Metaverses in particular provocatively challenge traditional ideas of state boundaries, nationalism, and global identity, re-contextualizing such concepts in a way that is as complex as it is exciting.

As such, it must be recognized that a new framework is necessary to understand the changes that are evoked by a technological development as poignant as the virtual world. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the sovereignty of nations has been the most basic concept of IR theory. In the past century, this view has expanded to incorporate a myriad of other actors that take part in global issues, ranging from international organizations to large corporations to global peace movements. At its most basic level, how we understand what type of 'actor' Second Life is of immediate

contention; it has its own citizens, own economy, and own cultural norms, three major characteristics we use to categorize traditional nation states. Conversely, it contains no apparent central government. With this said, boundaries, both technological and ethical, are put in place by Second Life's parent corporation, Linden Lab, that affect how the world is constructed in terms of physicality and morality. Similarly, Linden Lab is a for-profit entity, making it more akin to a multi-national corporation (MNC) than governmental organization. We can further contextualize Second Life as a purely cultural phenomenon, facilitating the exchange of cultural artifices and ideas, despite its resemblance to both state and non-state actors.

This is an essential quandary for understanding Second Life and its place within global issues theory. We must accept that Second Life, both conceptually and practically, is stepped in multiplicity, claiming a variety of definitions we understand readily while embracing none wholeheartedly. While his postmodern definition poses a marked challenge to a field that is entrenched in inelastic conceptions of global relations, claiming an acceptance of multiple definitions is inherent to understanding the aforementioned questions, none of which leave us with clean or concise answers.

Walden III: Beyond Text

As will hopefully be clear by the end of this thesis, my study would be incomplete if it existed only as text. While interacting with the vibrancy of the Internet through linkages, *Walden III* must step beyond traditional text and hyperlinks and into the world of Second Life if it is to be socially and academically relevant. Both in practice and in theory, it is absolutely essential that such a project exist in Second Life as it is through

such an instillation that we can both better interact with Second Life as a society and better understand it as a culture onto itself.

Digital Utopianism: Philosophical Lineage and the Promise of the Virtual World

Historical Roots

Digital utopianism, since its inception, has inherently looked towards the virtual world as the acme of its ideals and goals. In her book The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace, Margaret Wertheim explores this fascination with the virtual world, stating at the outset that the champions of cyberspace “proffer this new digital domain as a realm in which we may realize a better life here on earth”, claiming further that from the vantage of digital utopianists, cyberspace “becomes a place for the establishment of idealized communities that transcend the tyrannies of distance and that are free from biases of gender, race, and color.”[i] The Internet (and the communication networks it enables) is thus viewed by cyber-enthusiasts as a place that not only functions to eliminate the confines of race, class, gender, and socio-economic status but also as a place that is “unfractured by national boundaries, a space where people of all nations can in theory mix together with mutual ease.”[ii] Citizens of the Internet are not bound to the bodily confines that have over human existence been the source for identity construction – rather, they are able to construct their lives in a manner akin to those in Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, with the mind valued over physical characteristics of the body.

While this ability to define one’s identity is intriguing to say the least, it is important to note that such fluidity is best understood in reference to utopian visions of virtual communities. Holly Willis, Director of Academic Programs at the Institute for Multimedia Literacy, articulates a lineage of this philosophical stance in various periods of human history – “from Plato's cave in The Republic (c. 360BC) to Ray Bradbury's

gripping "The Veldt" (1951) to Vernor Vinge's *True Names* (1980) to Neal Stephenson's 1992 *Snow Crash* (where the term "metaverse" was reputedly coined), textual articulations of virtual worlds are numerous and varied, frequently expressing the desire to be free of a troublesome physical body that hinders unfettered, bodiless intelligence."[iii] With this said, the promise of a virtual world, a place we can access only through the use of advanced technology, is one that has been most eloquently articulated over the past half-century in relation to advances in information technology.

Due to technological limitations, the concept of a 'digital utopia' has often been restricted to what is better understood as virtual communities, manifesting networks through text as opposed to 3D worlds. This historically includes both *Usenet* (User Network) – the earliest incarnation of online interaction conceived in the late 1970s that focused on mini-communities based on subject matter – and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and MUDs Object Oriented (MOOs) – online games derivative of the popular group role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons. While both these incarnations have had immense impact our understand of virtual communities, the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (or The WELL) is the first virtual community to be most directly informed by the philosophies of digital utopianism. Founded in 1985 by digital pioneers Steward Brand and Lawrence Brilliant, The WELL "carried forward a set of ideals, management strategies, and interpersonal networks" that had first formulated around Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, which itself was a central gathering place for "counterculturalists, hackers, and journalists."[iv] Brand and his cohorts were quintessential digital utopinaists, coming to age during the era of Marshall McLuhan's seminal philosophical contribution of the *Global Village*. McLuhan argued that the "individual human body and the species

as a whole were linked by a single nervous system" fueled by the expansion of electronic signals across the globe[v]. Brand and the other members of 'The US Company' (USCO) – an art tribe Brand belonged to that was equally active in exploring ideas of "technology and mystical community" as the were the LSD scene in San Francisco during the 1960s – was similarly influenced by the writings and architecture of futurist Richard Buckminster Fuller[vi]. Both Fuller and McLuhan "embraced the pleasures and power associated with the products of technocracy" without becoming slaves to any technological system[vii]. Rather, Fuller and McLuhan both viewed technology as a means to be co-opted for a greater good, uniting individuals rather than homogenizing them. Brand would keep this notion close to home, with a firm belief in networked systems and tools represented in the community and educational aspects of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. It was not until the 1980s that this fervor for interlinked online communities would be translated online.

The WELL was designed as a place where like minded individuals could come to recreate the "countercultural ideal of a shared consciousness in a new "virtual community"", and although geographically based in San Francisco's Bay Area tech-scene of the mid-80s, the WELL represented a means for interaction between people who, while sharing similar interests, would otherwise have found communicating difficult if not impossible[viii]. On the WELL, the first login screen encountered told users:

> "You own your words. That means that you are responsible for the words that post on the WELL and that reproduction of those words without your permission in any medium outside of the WELL's conferencing system may be challenged by you, the author."[ix]

While this disclaimer was initially created as a means to protect The WELL from liability issues, it also represented a distinct choice to value those ideas posted to The WELL as more than "object[s] of exchange" but rather as "representation[s] of its creator's consciousness."[x] This was in stark contrast to other computer conferencing systems of the time – Prodigy, CompuServe and General Electric's Genie system – which viewed information "as a commodity to be exchanged and users as consumers of information goods", often times attempting to cash-in on whatever value user generated content might have[xi].

In terms of community building and governance, the WELL prided individual expression in correlation with boundaries for a self-governing social system. Brand achieved this by giving "users the power of self-rule through information technology", allowing members to erase postings they didn't like from their own screens (while retaining the same postings for the community as a whole) through the use of the "Bozo filter" program[xii]. Similarly, users we're able to go back and erase postings they may have felt remorse for posting in the first place.[xiii] Most importantly, there was little top down enforcement of rules – although the WELL retained the right to remove users if they saw fit, mangers "used that power only three times in the system's first six years, and each time they later allowed the member they had removed to return."[xiv] It was, to an extent, self-governing.

The WELL, as a result, became a beacon of forward thinking and progressivism online, creating a community that was both derivative of past communal experiments and wholly new. In regarding the WELL's legacy, it most immediately appears to function in technical relation to what we now understand to be social networks – websites like

Friendster, Myspace, Orkut, and Facebook where users create relationships with one another through text. With this said, the utopian thought that informed the WELL's creation and implementation distinguishes it from these social networks. People didn't gravitate towards the WELL solely as a social function, but as a means to discuss the problems facing a changing world. In particular, people sought refuge in the WELL as a means to overcome boundaries both physical and ideological that plagued them in their 'first lives', be it geographical location, political leaning, gender orientation, or otherwise.

Virtual worlds, online 3D spaces where users interacted with one another, were not far behind these text-based communities. LucasFilm's *Habitat*, launched in 1986, is of particular note. *Habitat* distinguished itself from previous online role-playing games (MUDs and MOOs) by abandoning text-based systems of interaction in favor of the avatar, a visual representation of self in an online space. Prior to *Habitat*, all social interactions in online spaces took the form of words – the advent of the avatar to these interactions (albeit at the time – and arguably still – quite crude) added an entirely new dimension to the landscape of virtual communities. In particular, the avatar gave greater attachment from individuals to their online selves. *Habitat* developers Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer posed a particularly provocative question to *Habitat* users: "is an Avatar an extension of a human being (thus entitled to be treated as you would treat a real person) or a Pac-Man-like critter destined to die a thousand deaths or something else entirely?"[xv] The question grew out of a discussion of death within the virtual world – the programmers behind *Habitat* had chosen to make death a part of the game, eventually retaining central city locations as 'safe zones' while the wilderness beyond city limits

allowed of "thievery and gunplay."[xvi] The community was divided, with roughly half viewing killing in *Habitat* as murder that should be punished, half viewing it as part of the game (and the fun).

Clearly from the standpoint of digital utopianists, death was incongruent with their vision of a world that would escape the ills of global society. While violence raged outside of the city centers and with battles became an integral part of *Habitat*'s gameplay, a Greek Orthodox Priest opened "The Order of the Holy Walnut", an in-*Habitat* Church whose disciples were forbidden to "carry weapons, steal, or participate in violence of any kind."[xvii] Though popular to an extent, these efforts to define and reclaim *Habitat* in the name of digital utopia were ultimately fruitless. It was undeniably a game first, virtual world second.

Since *Habitat*, the popularity of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) has grown exponentially, with worlds such as *Ultima Online* and *Everquest* dominating hard drive space throughout the late 1990s and the more recently conceived metaverses of *World of Warcraft*, *Runescape*, and *Gaia Online* attracting players from across the globe. While social structures exist in these virtual worlds, they still function primarily as games, offering users goals to be completed and challenges to be conquered. Very distinct social structures are created around the groupings that form therein, requiring similar, but distinct, literature and analytical approaches from those used in the analysis of Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs).

From the outset, Second Life positioned itself both explicitly and implicitly in the same philosophical lineage as the WELL – fueled by visions of cyber-utopia. Cory Ondrejka, CTO at Linden Lab, proclaimed with conviction his belief in the vision of

digital utopia, stating that while "people are not yet free to experience the collapse of geography, to build communities, groups, and businesses independent of location", virtual worlds have the ability to "lead this transition" to of a 'global village'[xviii]. Similarly, while all of Second Life's founders derived their knowledge of virtual worlds from computer games, they nonetheless envisioned a world that had at its core utopian thought. Phillip Rosedale, Linden Lab's primary creator, foresaw a "virtual Eden", invoking images he had seen of virtual landscapes at a 3-D graphics expo[xix]. Ondrejka, while primarily interested in the concept of Second Life initially as a means to "reinvigorate game development", nonetheless categorized his vision as that of a "living breathing world."[xx] Andrew Meadows, an original member of the software and technology team, saw the ability to formulate a "natural world that had bugs and flowers and trees that grew."[xxi] It wasn't until they accidentally discovered the power of user object creation – Second Life had, and still maintains, one of the most flexible and open building environments for a virtual world – that they realized the most profound aspect of the MUVE they created was that it was a world " for people, created by people."[xxii] Seen by Rosedale as akin to Burning Man – a temporary city constructed over 8 days in The Nevada desert, stepped with notions of communal development and openness – Second Life was meant to be a "huge playspace for making things […] a wonderland of creative projection".[xxiii]

[Digital] Utopia and Its Relation to Global Issues

With the context of digital utopia now briefly established, it is important to relate these ideas to their conceptual counterparts in global issues theory. Gratefully, notions of

utopia have historically strong ties to governance and the nation state, from both the standpoint of the state as a facilitator and a hindrance for utopian ascension. In *Imaginary Communities*, Phillip Wegner traces literary depictions of utopia (and dystopia) in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and finally George Orwell's *1984* – all seminal texts in their own right – to show the inescapability utopia has had in defining itself outside of the nation state. Wegner notes that in *Utopia* More positions the "imaginary community of the nation-state" as a "product of utopian figuration", establishing for subsequent literary depictions "the institutionality of the genre and the nation-state." [xxiv] Utopian narratives embrace the nation-state as the "object of [their] estranging technique", and as such, it is natural for descriptions of utopia to appear instinctually hostile towards the state system[xxv]. More's *Utopia* defined itself in reference to a "negative" image of Renaissance-era England, creating a fictional island that while escaping the ills of the time exists inherently in relation to the very place it is challenging[xxvi]. Zamyatin, Huxley, and most poignantly Orwell, follow similar suit, crafting symbiotic images of the nation-state as dystopia in an effort to define the promises of a better world.

Digital utopia therefore can be seen as a counter-narrative to the nation-state through technological innovation. The ability for computers and the Internet (in whatever form, theoretical or otherwise) to create links across borders has always been the most central application of digital utopianism within global issues theory. Here, we return to McLuhan's 'global village' as the basis of our understanding – a world where national boundaries are negated through the power of technology. These ideas pose a direct threat to the most established concepts in IR theory – specifically the notion of the nation state

as the central actor in world affairs – because they propose a system in which national boundaries, derived from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 where the concept of national sovereignty was first instituted, are not nearly as rigid or powerful as they claim to be. As explained by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, mass media and the Internet has played an integral role "in changing status of the nation-state" and perpetuating a "move toward a global economy."[xxvii] Sturken and Carwright observe that "transnational and diasporic cultures, in which peoples are dispersed across national boundaries, are linked in part by consumption patterns and media cultures" with the Internet allowing "global communications and international access not only to millions of World Wide Web sites, but to radio broad casts and print media articles."[xxviii] By providing a plethora of information, advances in digital communications garners the potential to supplant the nation-state for a source of identity and intellectual exploration.

While the rhetoric of the 'global village' is enticing, it is important to mediate its central conceit in regards to practical applications in the current global political climate. Richard Falk, Professor of International Law and Practice, Emeritus at Princeton University and a leading mind in conceiving post-Westphalian systems, cautions against a gravitation towards what he perceives as the myth of the 'global village'. Falk relates McLuhan's theory to the related concept of global governance, claiming, "idealistically, world government was envisaged as the natural sequel to the era of sovereign states, a culmination of an evolutionary march of reason toward the institutionalization of political and societal unity."[xxix] To Falk, "the idea of world government engenders skepticism and disbelief", and that while information technology has made great advances in democratizing systems of cultural exchange and political participation, it is unlikely that

IT will “overwhelm the structures and attitudes of modernity in the foreseeable future, rather than mainly be accommodated by them.”[xxx] To Falk, the ‘global village’ is inherently Western, “regarded by most of the non-Western world as hegemonic in intention and effect’, a valid and salient point[xxxi].

Falk prefers instead to focus on regionism, the ability for states to group around geographical proximity, as the future of international politics. On a practical level, this outlook is quite sound – groupings of states, particularly in regards to the European Union, has allowed for greater political and economic influence for the actors therein. Similarly, this has promoted a spread of humane ideals as most regionalist institutions contain within them a strict adherence to concepts of universal human rights (much of which has to do with the presence of the Untied Nations as a ‘global regionalist’ actor). With this said, Falk does little favor to post-Westphalian conceptions of global politics in dismissing the growing type of regionism taking place outside of traditional state-boundaries on-line. As pointed out by William Mitchell, Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, digital communications “greatly increases the *density* of linkages”, an important distinction that places value on these methods of communication while remaining aware of their shortcomings[xxxii]. While not regional in a traditional sense, it is undeniable that the networks of communities that have developed online carry with them valid social, political, and economic impact. By harping on philosophical extremism (i.e. that McLuhan’s vision will never be attained fully and thus is dismissed categorically as overly idealist), Falk fails to recognize the power digital communications has in increasing the impact of these links.

On February 8, 1996, John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and a prominent member of the WELL, published *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Primarily a retort to the United States passing into law the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Barlow claimed stake to the Internet for he and his fellow cyber-pioneers:

> Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear. Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. You have neither solicited nor received ours. We did not invite you. You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions […] You do not know our culture, our ethics, or the unwritten codes that already provide our society more order than could be obtained by any of your impositions.

In Internet communities, Barlow's proclamation was met with praise and excitement. Unsurprisingly, those outside of these communities reacted in a different manner, with persons in governmental positions taking particular contention with his tone and ideology. While Barlow's aim was to be particularly provocative, he strikes at an essential chord in understanding how notions of utopia, specifically digital, contend ideologically with conceptions of statehood. In lieu of technological innovation, nation states face a crisis of identity, as their defining principle, a defined border, is eroded. As the power of the nation-state is absolutely central to the most dominant global political ideologies, neo-realism and neo-liberalism, it so follows that a move towards digital utopianism threatens the most essential political and economic power structures in place. The contention between digital utopianists such as Barlow and his political opposites then is understood as a struggle of epic proptions.

Culture and Identity in Second Life

Traditional Notions of Cultural Identity and Nationalism

Within global issues theory, the traditional starting point for understanding how we construct our identity as individuals begins with a discussion of nationalism. As previously noted, IR theorists – realists in particular but also liberalists, neo-conservatives, and a host of others – privilege state actors above all other entities. As nationalism is directly associated with a particularly nation state, it follows that this is the key cultural signifier for theorists who prescribe to concepts of state supremacy. Symbolically, we are inundated with this assumption through physical cultural signifiers, be they flags, passports, or other visualizations of the nation-state that separate one group from another.

This understanding of culture and identity is steeped in notions of modernity, particularly within the idea of a singular self. Citizens of any given nation state are first looked at as representatives of a larger whole – a piece part in a greater entity. This, combined with an assumption that culture is "an explanation as a last resort", leads to an oversimplification of grandiose proportions.[xxxiii] One need only look at the prevalence of Samuel P. Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis – a theory that defines two static systems of identity as unwavering and headed for inevitable conflict – within prominent IR journals, theoretical explanations, and in the mainstream news media to recognize this trend.

Realism in particular has a peculiar relationship with notions of cultural identity. As observed by Beate Jahn, realists look to culture as definitional for the nation-state, separating the "domestic from the international."[xxxiv] With this said, cultural difference

between societies is in and of itself unimportant. In realist theory, that one state privilege specific traditions and practices is of note only in that it draws a distinction between itself and another state – the nuances of its particular culture are relatively immaterial. This theoretical choice is relatively easy to digest – without clear lines dividing states as singular, realism fails to function in any meaning way. Culture must be homogenous, otherwise the actions of states on an international level are not so easily understood in reference to an anarchic system, or as Jahn and others phrase it, the state of nature.

While Huntington and his theoretical compatriots continue to dominate the discourse of global issues, there lies an alternate school of thought that focuses on the post-modern tenants of multiplicity and social construction. Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil chastise realist thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz for their decision to consider nationalism only as "an omission in […] the currently emerging structure of international politics."[xxxv] They similarly upbraid John Mearsheimer's notion of 'hypernationalism' as a reductionary means to understand neorealist principles such as the security dilemma or the balance of power. Realist thought relies on universalism to maintain its theoretical worth, and as such, disregards culture as it does not fit inside their worldview.

In an effort to understand a more dynamic notion of identity, we must look first towards notions of multiculturalism. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues for an understanding of multiculturalism as the demand for a "politics of equal recognition" and "equal status of cultures and genders"[xxxvi]. While these two tenants are important to the multiculturalists agenda, they again rely on singular notions of self. While accepting of a multitude of identities, a more complete understanding of multiculturalism allows for this manifestation of cultural diversity to be both internal and external.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in an effort to compare and contrast modern and postmodern notions of a cultural self, proposes two concepts for cultural identity. The first is defined in “terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.”[xxxvii] This definition allows for “our cultural identities to reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning.”[xxxviii] This construction of cultural identity is one that takes place on an everyday basis – by interacting in the world around us we inevitably absorb local cultural codes. This is in and of itself is insufficient. Hall thus proposes a second definition: that while understanding these shared points of cultural construction as real and important, we must also understand that “critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'.”[xxxix] To Hall, it is nearly impossible to speak of, “one experience [or] one identity” without a realization that this definition is incomplete[xl]. Hall continues:

> “Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found,

> and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."[xli]

Hall's stance is that a multiplicity of self allows for a greater cultural understanding in contemporary society. This multiplicity is not to be confused with fragmentation. Multiplicity represents a harmonious sense of self, one that while multi-faceted, is nonetheless congruent. Fragmentation implies a sense of self that is incoherent and jagged – a reality for some, but by no means the ultimate goal.

In expanding upon Hall's initial stances, it is important to turn to feminist theorists of global issues as they are unsurprisingly apt at understanding the postmodern crisis of identity and the overbearing nature of hegemonic conceptions of self. Continuously marginalized feminist thinkers have long understood the failures and shortcomings of traditional IR identity theory – written primarily by white males, such theories could be nothing but blind to the social constructions that inform our social sensibilities. Ann Tickner argues that this understanding of the social constructions behind identity has been central to nearly all contemporary feminists, with dichotomies that marginalize women in relation to the masculine – "strong/weak, rational/emotional, independent/dependent, public/private" – resulting from "the legacy of Western political and economic thought."[xlii] To feminists, "all knowledge is socially constructed and depends on the social, temporal, and spatial location of the knower", and so it follows that whatever identity is constructed from this knowledge is inherently informed by a fluctuating and variable set of sources[xliii]. Tickner elaborates on the notions of national identity in stating that nationalism provides a "unique sense of shared historical

memories" that allows for a semblance of "secure personal identity."[xliv] This point is argued in relation to the concept that there is a "psychological need for individuals to identify with a group" through the familial aspects of nationalism.[xlv] While this famial notion of identity provides solidity, it also is inherently in transition. Often times, the state is to be protected and defended, gendering it feminine. At other times, it acts as a protector providing for its populous, gendering it masculine. Ultimatley, Tickner argues, "national identities have been created through [a] mythical claim to homogeneity […] reinforced by the attribution of difference to those outside state boundaries."[xlvi]Through universalism and social construction, we are taught to ignore the postmodern self in lieu of a forced singularity from the hegemonic, and masculine, source of Realist thinking.

Manifestations of Self Online and in the Virtual World

In relation to digital communications theory, we must begin a discussion of identity construction not at its current zenith, the avatar of virtual worlds, but from the more general vantage of how identity construction in online spaces differs from that of identity construction in offline spaces. Angela Thomas, Professor of English Education at the University of Sydney, argues that within the physical world, our identity is constructed through numerous factors, most potently "gender, ethnicity and age; our individual personalities as evidenced through our fashion sense […] and our psychological make-up such as our mannerisms of walk and talk."[xlvii] In the virtual world, "the performance of identity is divorced from a direct interaction with [the] cues from the physical, and instead relies upon the texts we create in the virtual worlds we

inhabit."[xlviii] In Virtual Worlds, Sherry Turkle presents a compelling argument that identity construction in a virtual space begins with multiplicity, a manifestation derivative of the post-modern fragmented self. Turkle claims that the Internet allows people to "build a self by cycling through many selves", indulging in Freud's (Turkle argues overlooked) notion of a "radically decentered view of the self."[xlix] This is a drastic shift from what earlier had been a "forged" identity that rarely deviated outside of "lifelong involvement with families and communities."[l] Multiple identities (not to be confused with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD)) were restricted to a variety of social outcasts: "the con artist, the bigamist, the cross-gender impersonator, the "split personality", the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."[li] The identity construction of multiple personas was looked at as socially unacceptable. As society became more fragmented due to the affects of globalization and a philosophical awareness of postmodernism, so too did conceptions of self. To many who struggled with this shift, online communities represented a way to explore competing internal conceptions of identity in a way that was psychologically sound.

Turkle provides a necessary framework for understanding Second Life's historical lineage as a means for identity construction by presenting a comprehensive history of Multi-User Dungeons/Domains (MUDs), the earliest of online social metaverses, and how identity was and is constructed therein. Stemming from the face-to-face role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, MUDs manifested as both "adventure-type" (derivative of D&D), where a player's main goal is to gain experience points for their character, and "social" MUDs, where the objective is to "interact with other players and, on some MUDs, to help build the virtual world by creating one's own objects and architecture."[lii]

In both incarnations, Turkle found that interacting with other characters was the main allure of MUDs, despite the immediate appeal of "hack and slash" adventures.[liii]

By providing their users with anonymity (a chosen username is all that denotes one's character), MUDs allow "individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves" that they might otherwise stifle.[liv] Character creation in MUDs inherently implies "difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation", a subversion of traditional singular notions of identity.[lv] Players in MUDs therefore use the virtual spaces to explore competing notions of self in an environment that enables multiple identities, choosing to be aggressive, passive, sexually adventurous, reserved, racial different, or gender shifted; sometimes as multiple characters, sometimes as one central pastiche.

In reference to a WELL discussion group thread, Turkle found that many participants sought refuge in the ability to explore their competing selves online, with one participant in particular applauding the "pastiche of personality" where "the test of competence is not so much the integrity of the whole but the apparent correct representation appearing at the right time, in the right context, not to the detriment of the rest of the internal 'collective.'"[lvi] Again, Turkle found that online spaces accepted competing and complementary manifestations of persona much better than offline spaces in which individuals are far more limited to traditional notions of singularity. Concluding her remarks, Turkle waxes:

> "In cyberspace, hundreds of thousands, perhaps already millions, of users create online personae who live in a diverse group of virtual communities where the routine formation of multiple identities undermines any notion of a real and unitary self. Yet the notion of the real fights back. People

> who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical selves. Virtual communities offer a dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the Internet. They are spaces for learning about the lived meaning of a culture of simulation. Will it be a separate world where people get lost in the surfaces or will we learn to see how the real and the virtual can be made permeable, each having the potential for enriching and expanding the other? The citizens of MUDs are our pioneers."

This is not to imply that all peoples will be predisposed to multiplicity. Indeed, while representation of self in an online space leave some feeling "sense of relief", others feel "an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation."[lvii] While this is unsurprising, it is important to note as one of the central divisions between those formulating identity in an online space and those who choose not to. Particularly in relation to Second Life, those who feel fragmentation unnatural often prescribe this view outwardly, viewing those who explore multiplicity of the self as socially bizarre. This of course goes both ways (and in both cases is a generalization) but nonetheless is a central source of tension between citizens of Second Life and those on the outside.

F. Randall Farmer, a system administrator (or Oracle) in *Habitat*, observed in particular a unique approach to identity construction within *Habitat*'s environment – "Cyberspaces, because they are anonymous, present people with a unique opportunity to present themselves in any matter they desire. Shy people can experiment with being bold or they can present themselves as a member of the opposite sex."[lviii] Further investigating this claim, Farmer queried residents in regards to two important questions: firstly, did

they "think of [their] Avatar as a separate being, or [as] it a representation of [themselves]"; secondly, did they "act like [their] usual self when [they were] in Habitat, or in ways different from real life."[lix] The percentage breakdown was curious in its symmetry, with a near 50/50 split for both questions. Under furthered examination, Farmer found that "several that had selected 'self' for the first question had not selected 'self' for the second question", and that in reality, only 26%, a statistical minority, were representing themselves in the same way online as they did offline.[lx] To Farmer, this was confirmation that "cyberspace citizens feel empowered by the technology to experiment with social interactions […] they feel safe enough to try on a different skin"[lxi].

Identity construction within Second Life functions in the same manner as in the virtual communities that predate it. Users are given the ability to experiment with images of self, and, depending on the user, extend this experimentation into realms of gender, race, and beyond. Second Life in particular allows for interesting methods of identity construction in that avatars are highly customizable. Users can create whatever bodily attachment they so desire, juxtaposing an arm of tentacles under business attire or a schoolgirl's uniform with a medusa head. Enchanting light surrounds an avatar who while choosing a male body with black suit, has an oversized eyeball where their head would typically be. Even more so, rather than simply human avatars, Second Life allows users to experiment with the body shapes of animals, extending this identity experimentation even further. Many still choose to represent themselves 'faithfully', though these avatars are usually reserved for participants who utilize Second Life for a means beyond cultural expression (online conferences, academia, and or business in

particular). For those who actively use the community, most all avatars have been customized to an extent.

Notions of Self in Second Life: A Global Perspective

It is interesting at this point to turn again towards Lapid and his claim makes that "intellectual isolation and parochialism" have played a large role in the struggle scholars of global issues have had in grappling with understanding the post-modern self[lxii]. While many theorists have reached out towards a variety of other disciplines to understand these issues, the reluctance to seriously absorb an understanding of changes in digital communications is perplexing to say the least. Already multidisciplinary in nature, it is to its own detriment that mainstream global issues theory relegates the interactions taking place on-line to the footnotes and end chapters of their texts, if at all. There is a subtle implication that movements on-line are issues of the future – possible yes, but still debatably in terms of how likely they will be to actually occur. It is painfully obvious that this is not the case, that indeed people around the world are moving online in a variety of fasions. This is not to imply that there are not those within the field that recognize the affect digital communications is having on global interactions, but rather that as a whole, the discipline, despite obvious reasons otherwise, still chooses to privilege different explanations for some of its most vexing issues. Perhaps we must accept 'accidental' global issues theorists – those who study digital communications and who inevitably see their intrinsic value to issues of global community – as the pioneers of this type of discourse. It would be valiant for IR theorists to embrace this with their own expertise, as they inevitably can formulate these type of thoughts in a far different manner.

As noted previously, theorists of global issues that lie outside dominant philosophical schools are well aware of the changes in self that present themselves in a postmodern global society. If we are to apply the concepts of multiplicity enabled by online communities to issues of cultural identity, we can see that a having the ability to experiment with varying cultural identities offers an escape from the prescribed singularity of nationalism. Tuckle argues that this culture of multiplicity allows "a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity", not only within one's self, but outwardly as well, further claiming a "heightened consciousness of incompleteness may predispose us to join with others" more readily.[lxiii] Therefore in Second Life, we can expect to find a society less reactionary to cross cultural exchange. Where offline people may resist adopting foreign cultural norms, online spaces allow an indulgence in 'otherness'.

This is not to say we don't find cultural groupings in Second Life. Nationalism, traditionally tied to geography, simply acts as only one facet of the complex equation of social groupings. As Ondrejka points out, "numerous spaces have already been created in homage to specific countries" within Second Life, with the Maldives, Mexico, and Sweeden setting up official government mixed-reality sites in addition to already Resident created, nation-specific, areas. These areas exist alongside areas that focus on numerous other cultural signifiers – steampunks, fans of the AJAX Football Club, replications of fictional spaces, and so on. Rather than group solely around birthright when thrown into a group of strangers, most people gravitate towards those with similar cultural interests. Groups, the most prevalent social structure in Second Life, can be joined by a click of the mouse, and while some groups delineate themselves based on

national identity, most do not. Rather, they focus on specific cultural interests, be it to a certain type of music, literary school, subculture, or otherwise. With this in mind, it is important to note that geographic locales within Second Life carry similar cultural attachments as they may in real life. Different islands and areas function as meeting places for different subcultures, all offering a unique purpose. Immigration takes place between communities online not based on nationality, but on interests. Cultural interests provide the passports of Second Life, making citizens out of shared passions as opposed to inescapable birthrights. As such, rather than nationalism as a prominent signifier of identity, we see *culturalism*, the attachment to a cultural norm or practice, as the defining calling card for Second Life's Residents. More accurately, as Residents rarely belong to one group alone but rather many, we see multiculturalism.

In attempting to understand this phenomenon, Ondrejka proposes the concept of "virtual citizenship" which he compares to both traditional citizen ship (geographic citizenship, or g-citizens) and honorary-citizens (h-citizens) who find themselves in an effort to "cross-pollinate, reduce the cost of learning, and spur innovation"[lxiv]:

> Rather than building around a specific geography or event, v-citizens are tied to a nation-state by mind share and time. They meet and collaborate within virtual worlds, enabling them to ignore geographic limitations and focus instead on challenges and connections with other v-citizens. Rather than spending four days per year thinking about a particular nation, a v-citizen could spend one hour per week or five hours per month. More importantly, that time could be spent in virtual locations populated by other v- and g-citizens of the nation." [lxv]

The future the Ondrejka sees is one that recognizes the fluid nature of citizenship in a digital age, and overcomes the traditional reliance on nationalism as a moniker not by attempting to delete it from our global consciousness, but rather recognize that is functions differently in an online space. This concept, while the product of economic theory, is equally important to cultural studies. In an online space, it isn't that citizenry is negated. Rather, as people are allowed to experiment with their own identity construction, the concept of who a foreigner is and where identity lies in a previously unvisited space changes. Residents of Second Life, while able to retain their national identities if they so desire, are also able to, and often prefer, to identify themselves through their variety of cultural interests, creating an image of self that is multiple yet congruent and able to escape the rigidity of dominant notions of nationalism.

The Economics of Second Life

Intellectual Property and Ingenuity in Second Life

As a web-based corporation, Linden Lab was well aware of the fickle nature of the economy surrounding online startups. Revenue stream for those creating virtual communities, be they avatar based or otherwise, could flow with immense vigor, coming fast and furious only to dry up just as quickly. As such, soon after its commercial launch in July of 2003, Linden Lab was faced with a serious dilemma – the traditional revenue model for virtual communities, subscription-based charges, was gaining little to no traction for the metaverse. Residents were "given a weekly stipend of Linden Dollars, an allotment of land, and a set number of objects they could create on their homestead" – if they created more objects than they were allowed, they were taxed accordingly.[lxvi] While understandable in theory – Linden Lab could allow so much building in an effort to combat server lag – the system proved disastrous in practice.

Residents, quite literally, revolted. One group in particular, who were attempting to recreate relevant U.S. landmarks in the themed space "Americana" – the Washington, Monument, Fenway Park, a Route 66 gas station – found themselves creatively and financially stunted by Linden's policy. As Au points out, "it was an ambitious project that required thousands and thousands of prims [the building blocks of Second Life] to exist, and each member had to suffer the tax penalty."[lxvii] Eventually, the tax became too much for Residents – they saw it in direct conflict with the vision of a world fueled by "freeform imagination,"[lxviii] Rather, this world was one "where stringent limits were set on […] creativity", posing a direct conflict with Linden's hope for an "improvisational,

collaborative, community-minded world."[lxix] The revolt took on various forms, from signs and billboards to buildings set aflame, and while it eventually subsided (with Linden Lab's acknowledgment of its relevance) the essential problem remained – "ambitious creativity was still constrained by the State (i.e. Linden Lab)."[lxx]

While the revolt had come and gone, Linden Lab was faced with the reality that their subscription service, which was informed by staff background in the game industry, was not creating the type of virtual world they had envisioned. As such, Linden Lab turned to three of the most prominent minds thinking about where Net culture intersects with law and political discourse: Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford Law Professor and founder of Creative Commons, a non-profit working on flexible copyright licensing; tech journalist Julian Dibbell; and Edward Castranova, an economics professor who has written extensively on virtual economies. This intellectual dream team, in conjunction with the staff at Linden Lab, began with a question that is constantly discussed in IR circles – "What makes a country successful and helps a third-world developing country grow?"[lxxi] Pulling from the work of Peruvian neoliberal economist Hernando De Soto (whose *The Mystery of Capital* had "garnered praise from both Bill Clinton and Ronald Regan"), the group came to the simple, yet profound, realization that "the informal economies of the poorest countries could be harnessed and transformed into long-lasting prosperity once the right structures were in place."[lxxii] In other words, users had to be able to "reap the benefits of their labor", meaning the required both "ownership and financial reward" for their ingenuity.[lxxiii]

So Linden Lab's decided upon a new model. They would sell virtual land and charge Residents user fees for maintenance, allow Linden Dollars to be "bought and sold

on the open market for real dollars” (something most other virtual worlds had prohibited), and most “unprecedented of all” they would allow Residents to “retain the intellectual property of the designs and depictions of the 3-D objects and scripts they created”[lxxiv]. This was a point stressed unsurprisingly by Lessig, who pushed Linden Lab to live up to its slogan of “Your world. Your imagination.” The group was satisfied, and although their lawyers initially posed particular resistance to the issue of IP rights, Linden’s management pushed through with the change. In doing so, Linden Lab not only took a stance that was in line with its lineage in digital utopianism, but unleashed “an internal economy of virtual businesses in clothing design, engineering and architecture, entertainment, and beyond.”[lxxv]

This stance was furthered in 2007 by Linden Lab’s choice to license Second Life’s source code under the GNU General Public License (GPL), allowing those outside of Linden Lab to modify the source code as well as copy and distribute derivative works. This can be done for commercial gain, but the resulting program must also be released under the same license. Net-theorist and sci-fi writer Cory Doctorow best explained the importance of such a move in establishing Second Life as a legitimate realm for economic growth:

> Second Life is distinct because it allows in-game creators of objects to "own" them, sell copies of them, give them away, and license them under Creative Commons. Most other worlds require that you assign all your copyright to the game's corporate owners -- and prevent you from doing some kinds of creative stuff to avoid copyright hassles […] But there's a fly in the ointment -- it's not very meaningful to amass in-game wealth if

> your ability to use it is contingent on your ongoing good relations with a single company […] by opening up the source code for Second Life, Linden is inviting a competitive marketplace for Second Life hosters […] This turns Linden wealth into real-world wealth."[lxxvi]

Doctorow continues to theorize about the implications of 'opening' Second Life's source code, claiming Linden Lab is positioning Residents as actual citizens as opposed to customers – "Citizens get to petition for redress of their grievances from a state that represents them; customers can only take their business elsewhere. Customers only ever get to love it or leave it. Citizens get to change it."[lxxvii] With the ability to take their 'second lives' elsewhere, Residents can leverage Linden Lab against any actions they see unfit for the community.

Global Capitalism in Second Life and The Pride of Big Business

With these changes in place, Linden Lab positioned Second Life to be an undeniable platform for entrepreneurship and new methods of business. In January 2004, the first private island available in Second Life was auctioned and sold for L$1,200 to an avatar named Fizik Bakersville, who subsequently announced that he represented a "London- and Chicago-based Innovation and Branding Company" interested in exploring the commercial opportunities previously untapped in Second Life. Within a day, the island was overrun with Residents taking part in the "first virtual anti-globalization protest."[lxxviii] Since the very beginning tension has existed between large corporations using Second Life as a business platform and "grassroots content creators" looking to create and sell community oriented goods.[lxxix] On a general level, outside corporations

were both “unwanted and exploitative” with an assumed potential for cluttering of bandwidth and marginalization of ‘Mom and Pop’ content creators.[lxxx]

Corporations came nonetheless. With differing motivations, companies began to establish themselves within Second Life in early 2006, hiring in-world architects to build up their islands for optimum economic potential. These meta-verse development companies made a fortune, amassing millions of dollars from companies like Coca-Cola, Reuteters, and Dell by the end of 2006. A variety of major publications touted Second Life as the newest frontier in online business – Bussiness Week, Forbes, WIRED, the New York Times, and an undeniably long list of others portrayed Second Life as both untapped and highly populous. Fearful they miss out on a virtual goldmine, corporations hastily set themselves up in-world, eagerly awaiting the massive amounts of money that would surely flow their way. While the investment was large, the returns were inversely low, having as Au claims, “next to no[]” impact on the economic or social landscape of Second Life. Nearly all of the most popular (i.e. most trafficked) locales on Second Life are Resident-run, leaving the corporate sites, although beautifully designed, virtual ghost towns.

This is not to say that money is not exchanged in Second Life – indeed, “hundreds of millions of dollars change hands every day”, it is just that this is most often done between Residents.[lxxxi] Tristan Louis, a programmer at HSBC calculated that on average Residents were spending the equivalent of $50 to $60 a week, making Second Life at the very least an active economy, if not a promising one.[lxxxii] Companies weren’t categorically revolted against (although some were), but rather were paid relatively little

attention as Residents chose to spend their capital on products by those who understood their wants and needs far better, their fellow Residents.

Au claims that this failure of big business to capitalize on the budding Second Life economy has to do with three distinct points: the use of teleporting in-world, area popularity, and most importantly lack of creativity and imagination on the part of corporations. Since the beginning of Second Life, Residents have been able to teleport where they desire without having to see anything else, unless they wanted to. This means that once a Resident knows where they would like to go, there is no need for them to trudge through any sort of common space that would be traditionally ripe for advertising. In addition, most corporate islands were secluded on to themselves. While this allowed for greater control over marketing and message, it meant marketers had to figure out a way to have Residents "voluntarily dive into their ad and stay long enough for meaningful bran immersion."[lxxxiii] In terms of geographic popularity, it is a fairly simple equation – Second Life is a social system and as such, the more Residents in any given area, the more enticing it is for other Residents to teleport to that location. Most importantly, companies lacked the ingenuity that was thriving amongst Residents. Whereas those within Second Life were experimenting with the new and exciting, companies came in and attempted to market a digitized replication of their meatspace wares, which more often than not, were "boring, banal, and unimaginative."[lxxxiv]

As many foresaw, 'the backlash' was inevitable. With such high expectations so grossly underachieved, corporations were frustrated and looking for an answer to what went wrong. The first major voice to lead the dissent backwards was Clay Shirky, professor of New Media at New York University's Graduate Interactive

Telecommunications Program (ITP) who explicitly studies the social and economic impact of Internet technologies. On December 12, 2006, Shirky released a damming account of what he perceived to be questionable numbers on the behalf of Linden Lab in relation to their Resident count. Shirky rightfully points out that at the time, Linden Lab's method to account for their Resident number was imperfect at best – Linden Lab's "definition of "recently logged in" includes everyone in the last 60 days, even though the industry standard for reporting unique users is 30 days", making the actual number of users online hard to determine[lxxxv]. This, combined with knowledge that many users had multiple accounts and avatars, led Shriky to believe that Second Life's population numbers were grossly deceiving.

Shirky raises a valid point in chastising Linden Lab's process for counting Residents as it is inherently vague in methodology. With this said, the discourse that followed Shirky's initial claim harped upon his work with the same blindness that had led periodicals to outright claims of Second Life as a commercial wonderland. WIRED published a particularly negative critque titled "How Madison Avenue Is Wasting Millions on a Deserted Second Life", with the headline reading "Lonely Planet". The myth had been solidified – there was 'no one in Second Life'. More accurately, there was no one (or close to no one) in Second Life interested in the beacons of global capitalism.

Even this understanding, that Residents were on Second Life and just not in corporate areas, misses a greater point. In a post on the metaverse-centric blog Terra Nova, Thomas Malaby takes a stance against this reliance on numbers, standing up for what he sees as a resistance in the social sciences to find 'anecdotal research' valid. By relying on numbers, Malaby claims, we position ourselves to ignore other valid forms of

research, particularly that which relies on single interactions with community members. Malaby furthers his argument in claiming, "numbers say nothing without the ability to interpret them provided by other kinds of interpretive research", arguing against generalizations based solely on statistics[lxxxvi]. From these anecdotes, one can glean an understanding of the culture they are attempting to understand far better than by simply analyzing figures. Shirky himself stated that "any claim about Second Life derived from a count of Residents is not to be taken seriously, and anyone making claims about Second Life based on those figures is to be regarded with skepticism"[lxxxvii]. While certainly referring to claims of Second Life as a fruitful business environment, the inverse validation rings true as well. Journalists and business consultants relied too heavily on what was now seen as a lack of Residents. Rather than focus on what Residents were doing – interacting and exchanging capital with one another on a consistent and increasing level – big business sought refuge for their failed attempts in the same failed judgment that led them to Second Life in the first place.

In an interesting turn, Au points to a particularly illuminating example of where big business got it right in Second Life in his discussion of L'Oreal's marketing within the metaverse. Unlike its competitors, who ignored the nuances of community that developed in Second Life, L'Orreal chose to market their brnad through a preestablished success, UK studio Rezzable's inworld playground 'Greenies'. Greenies focused on games and exploration, creating a platform that was enjoyable for Residents to interact with. A little over half a year after its launch, Greenies had seen over 100,000 unique visitors, an impressive number to say the least. L'Orreal worked with Rezzable to "subtly and playfully" embed its products with the Greenie universe, resulting in thousands of

L'Orreal products purchased in the space[lxxxviii]. Rather than follow the traditional model of "creating and launching a SL site fully branded with the real world advertiser's logos and trademarks", L'Orreal cleverly engaged with the Second Life community and reaped the subsequent rewards[lxxxix]. What the future holds for big business in Second Life is certainly uncertain, but it is this type of understanding of the culture inside metaverses that is invaluable to anyone attempting to engage with Residents therein, business or otherwise.

Cultural Imperialism: Classical Representations and Manifestations in the Virtual World

The Digital Divide and the Cultural Imperialist Nature of Information Technology

There are few more loaded terms within global issues theory than cultural imperialism. Tomes upon tomes of knowledge have been amassed on the subject, making it nearly devoid of any real meaning, an almost-causality of over-analysis. A variety of words substitute nicely for cultural imperialism – ‘Westernization’, ‘Americanization’, ‘Globalization’, and so on – but none bring us any closer to a singular definition that is applicable across academic discourses. In attempting to asses how these overlapping theories coagulate in reference to digital communications and global issues, we must accept an inherently incomplete definition of cultural imperialism as the hegemonic practice of one culture exporting its values in an inequitable exchange over another. This can be manifested in a dominance of cultural norms and practices that are explicit and tangible – music, art, film, cuisine – or in norms and practices that are implicit – ideology, economic theory, political systems, societal practices. From this starting point we can begin to discuss how this method of inequality manifests itself through modes of digital communications, within and surrounding Second Life in particular.

Before diving into a deep discussion of how cultural imperialism appears in a virtual space, we must first recognize an inherent dilemma in regards to digital communications. While the Internet holds immense promise in combating the ills of cultural imperialism and facilitating equitable dialogue between societies, its practical worth rests nonetheless on an essential quandary – even if metaverses like Second Life enable cross-cultural exchange in a completely equitable way, they are inaccessible by a

large portion of global society due to technological and economic inequality. This ‘digital divide’, while often debated, is very much a reality, with certain portions of the world’s population grossly underrepresented on the web. This divide extends beyond the ability to connect to the Internet and access the bevy of information therein, but also to the particular skill set required to navigate its vast series of networks.

With this said, it must be recognized that the concept of the ‘digital divide’ itself runs the risk of being imperialist. As media scholar Henry Jenkins points out, “the rhetoric of the digital divide holds open [a] division between civilized tool-users and uncivilized nonusers […] as well-meaning as it is as a policy initiative, it can be marginalizing and patronizing in its own terms."”[xc] Jenkins raises a valid and cautionary point in that we must be careful not to assume ignorance on behalf of the majority world to what we in the minority world view as an incredible resource in technological innovation. Nonetheless, in assessing the notions of digital utopia previously discussed, the disparity between Internet usages marginalizes many from the ‘global village’. Thankfully, this discrepancy grows smaller everyday, as more people are gaining access to the Internet either through natural economic and technologic patterns or through the work of nonprofits such as the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project.

Let us accept then, for at least the immediate future, that the concept of the digital divide, while potentially overstated, positions those in the majority world to be at a technological disadvantage in determining the landscape of global culture. It is important then to look at theories of convergence culture in reference to information technology. In *Social Dimensions of Information Technology*, Alan Hedley proposes firstly that software and coding is inherently cultural and that to the extent “one culture or one linguistic

group produces the bulk of software", the possibility for cultural imperialism on a "massive scale" is very real.[xci] With this said, Hedley claims "a true global village in which all people have the opportunity to interact and to voice their individual concerns is possible, if not yet realized."[xcii] The reality of the situation most likely lies in between these two visions – coding, while formerly prevalent only in Western societies, has become common practice for many cultural groups across the globe.

It is at this point that a discussion of global culture begins to play an important role in understanding Second Life's relation to cultural imperialism. In terms of a movement towards a 'global culture', Leo Ching astutely argues "while there is no such thing as a global culture, there is indeed a globalization of culture" that comes about as a direct result of "the immense expansion and extension of global communications and world markets."[xciii] Rather than one cultural force that gains traction across states, Ching is arguing that the interactions between cultures is creating a symbiotic mélange of norms and ideas. This globalized culture will represent itself differently to those with different cultural heritages and inclinations – one person may gravitate towards absorbing Malian blues and roots music while another may find their interest piqued through Japanese Anime. Both are engaging with the cultural artifices of different societies yet they have distinctly different aesthetic tastes.

Sturken and Carwright expand on Ching's statement through an understanding of cultural imperialism in relation to global consumer culture. "Logos of products with global markets – the Coca-Cola trademark logo, for example, and the image of the red Coke can itself – symbolize the global dominance of the multinational corporations that produce these goods."[xciv] In other words, logos and brands carry with them "speicific

cultural and national identities" that are to an extent inescapable, with many of these brands originating in the West.[xcv] This seems in nature to be distinctly imperialistic, symbols are not static, especially over time, and while "in some contexts […] the symbol of Coke carried the meaning of cultural imperialism, symbolizing the spread of US capitalism around the world", these identities have the ability to change.[xcvi] Sturken and Cartwright take the example of McDonald's in contemporary China, where cultural imports "have become status symbols rather than symbols of cultural imperialism", with communities decoding and recodfying these symbols within their own sensibilities.[xcvii] In an ironic sense, the concept of cultural imperialism can be in itself imperialistic, refusing to afford other cultures the ability to recontextualize images of consumer culture within their own cultural context.

Manifestations of Cultural Imperialism Within Second Life: Cultural Clashes, the Ideology of Linden Lab, and Consumer Culture

With this in mind, it is interesting to look at the cultural breakdown currently in place on Second Life. Ondrejka recognizes the necessity for "virtual worlds to be broadly accessible" if they are to achieve any sense of global worth, claiming "if only a tiny minority of Web users were able to master and enjoy the new technology, virtual worlds would remain a technologically feasible but largely irrelevant form of communication."[xcviii] Ondrejka states, "the evidence so far indicates users of Second Life, while still early adopters, come from a more gender-balanced, older, and multinational audience than would normally be expected of first users of new technology […] rather than young American males, Second Life's community is nearly evenly divided between

men and women, has a median age in the 30's, and most residents live outside of the United States"[xcix]. This systematic revelation is inspiring to say the least, although we must be careful to not place too much faith in this analysis. Firstly, Ondrejka has a vested interest in the perception of Second Life as a true digital utopia as both an employee of Linden Lab and also as a Second Life user. More importantly, a key component is left out of these statistics in that economic status is not assessed. While most residents may live outside of the United States with an equal gender split, the majority could very well come from the same socio-economic class. In relation to the postmodern self-attempting to explore identity amongst like-minded peers online, it is not unlikely that cultural similarities are derived from Residents who, although in different geographical locations, gravitate towards Second Life because of similar societal status within their own nations.

While I have both implicitly and explicitly argued up to this point that virtual worlds provide an ability to escape cultural imperialism by allowing users to experiment with a variety of cultural identities, it is important to recognize the difference between potentiality and actuality. While groups are free to form, exist, and are often keen to allow others in, there nonetheless exists clear cultural differences between Residents in Second Life. Au tells the story of a particularly harsh cultural battle that raged in Second Life during the spring and summer of 2003 in relation to the political climate surrounding the U.S. led invasion of Iraq. Expectedly, this ideological battle was waged between those who supported the war – politically conservative Residents who came primarily from the online game *World War II Online* (WWIIOL) – and anti-war activists – politically liberal Residents who came to Second Life as a means to escape the ills of contemporary society such as war and unnecessary death.

This cultural battle took place at “The Outlands”, an area of Second Life where you can be ‘killed’, an act described by Au as more obnoxious than anything else, as it sends you back to your last “home” point you set. Created by Linden Lab as a place where Residents “could let their id rage”, WWIIOLers saw the Outlands as an extension of their own online territory, converting it into a simulated war zone.[c] Peaceful residents gravitated to the Outlands because there was an immense amount of land available, ripe for building. While there were various conflicts between the two groups, with WWIIOLers shooting Residents who would not fight back and Residents taking claim to land that was admittedly meant for this sort of gaming, cultural differences truly manifested themselves along the ‘Jessie Wall’, a virtual 3D barrier between the area where killing was allowed and where it was forbidden. The ‘Jessie Wall’ soon became an experiment in virtual graffiti, with anti-war activists posting anti-American and anti-Bush images only to be covered up by ‘Support Our Troops’ slogans and images of the military. Residents were unknowingly participating in an “odd battle of ideological iconography” with its zenith being the posting of a Confederate Flag, a symbol viewed by many residents (and Linden Lab) as a “symbol of racism and slavery”[ci]. That image pushed Linden Lab to lock the ‘Jessie Wall’ – no one but the company would be able to post images on it from there after.

Au relates this story to Robert Rozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, in which Rozick argues that a true utopia is not be ruled by one singular set of principles, but rather is “open to allow a variety of utopian visions – many of them inevitably conflicting” to coexist.[cii] The battle of the ‘Jessie Wall’ is framed nicely by Rozick’s theory – Second Life exists as a place where numerous cultures, while independent of

one another and each with their own vision of society, coexist in the same relative space. This concept goes far to mediate the ills of cultural imperialism, allowing for coexisting ideologies. An equitable exchange was exhibited between those who were pro-war and those who were pacifists. Each was afforded equal voice through the 'Jessie Wall' and neither was privileged in its closing. With this said, it is important to analyze Linden Lab's decision to close the wall in relation to Linden Lab as a source for imperialism. While in this situation acting the benevolent dictator, Linden Lab would not be able to maintain such objectivity later.

Thus we turn a sharp eye to the policies enacted by Linden Lab in regards to Residents' ability to express themselves in a manner they see fit. The promise of virtual communities lies as much in a users ability to express notions of self they would otherwise be forced to internalize as it does in a reliance on self-governance. As such, Linden Lab's decision to enact age and identity verification within Second Life, in what can only be seen as a response to criticism from mainstream media in relation to child pornography, understandably raises eyebrows. The following post on Linden Lab's blog is particularly troublesome:

> "The diversity of things to see and do within Second Life is almost unimaginable, but our community has made it clear to us that certain types of content and activity are simply not acceptable in any form. Real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depiction of sexual or lewd acts involving or appearing to involve children or minors; real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depictions of sexual violence including rape, real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depictions of extreme or

> graphic violence, and other broadly offensive content are never allowed or tolerated within Second Life.
>
> Please help us to keep Second Life a safe and welcoming space by continuing to notify Linden Lab about locations in-world that are violating our Community Standards regarding broadly offensive and potentially illegal content. Our team monitors such notification 24-hours a day, seven-days a week. Individuals and groups promoting or providing such content and activities will be swiftly met with a variety of sanctions, including termination of accounts, closure of groups, removal of content, and loss of land. It's up to all of us to make sure Second Life remains a safe and welcoming haven of creativity and social vision."[ciii]

While child pornography and pedophilia is particularly contentious in modern society, representing a dangerous exploitation of the under-represented, censorship of any sort imposes a particular worldview upon Second Life and its inhabitants. As Bonnie Ruberg points out, one of Second Life's major strengths is its ability to allow experimentation with differing forms of identity:

> "This freedom creates a welcoming environment where fantasy can grow, where it can turn into community and eventually cultural practice. Where else but Second Life could we have such an extensive population of furries, or Goreans? While the real world may wag a finger of judgment at these sexual preferences, Second Life has always seemed to say, "To each his/her own.""[civ]

Ruberg, who studies sexual expression in Second Life, differentiates between child pornography (i.e. pornography featuring those under the age of 18), virtual child pornography, where avatars are rendered as children, and age play, where "consenting adults pretend to be children"[cv]. While child pornography is obviously eplotation, virtual child pornography is not illegal in the United States. Neither is age play. While society as whole looks down upon these urges, in censoring people's ability to formulate identity without restriction, Linden Lab prescribes its own moral code upon. To say that this is culturally imperialistic, with Residents given no potion but a termination of account – essentially the 'death' of their Second Life – is an understatement.

While Linden Lab as an actor presents its own quandary in reference to cultural imperialism within Second Life, so too does the 'ingenuity' of Residents. Eager to build, buy, and sell, Second Life has created (as previously noted) a vibrant economy based on grassroots efforts. While Residents seem to reject the pillars of global capitalism in big business – either because of indifference or meditated dismissal – they nonetheless absorb the tenants of capitalist society, a system which in itself carries a particularly ideological agenda. While it doesn't cost anything to join Second Life, and one can theoretically never spend a L$, a long-term resident will inevitably purchase at the very least additions to their avatars, if not and other objects. As such, consumerism enters the sphere of the digital utopia, and while it doesn't negate the positives provided by Second Life's infrastructure, it nonetheless taints its philosophical lineage.

Manifestations of Cultural Imperialism Surrounding Second Life: A Return to Orientalism

In 1977, Edward Said unleashed his seminal work, *Orientalism*, into an academic world that was unprepared for theories of such magnitude, depth, and provocation. In *Orientalism*, Said claimed an unexamined and unrecognized prejudice on behalf of Western scholars and elites towards cultures of the Middle East and the Asian continent as a whole, over-generalized at the time as 'The Orient'. To Said, Orientalism represented a "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" that painted a distinct difference between 'us' (Said's Occident) and 'them' (the Orient)[cvi]. Said accused Western scholars, and Western culture as a whole, of reductionalism:

> "So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression."[cvii]

The reaction to Said's central thesis was, as expected, varied. Ranging from unwavering praise to the harshest of criticisms, Said sparked a new discourse in the study of global issues based around an awareness of post-colonial elitism and the prevalence of cultural imperialism. The entire discipline of global issues was based on regimes, and even though resisted by many initially, post-colonial studies is now a major tenant of any academic study of global politics. Tickner expands upon this central notion, claiming

"national identities, constructed in terms of differentiation from devalued others both inside and outside state boundaries, reinforce social and cultural hierarchies and provide the legitimization for expansionary projects, military preparedness, and ever war"[cviii]

Such a framework is stimulating in reference to the backlash discussed earlier against Second Life in the mainstream press. In the same article where Shirky chastises the numbers surrounding Second Life's population – as noted previously a fair, if not misguided, critique – Shirky similarly lambasts the reporters who to that point, seemingly gave Second Life an 'easy time':

> "What accounts for the current press interest in Second Life? […] First, the tech beat is an intake valve for the young. Most reporters don't remember that anyone has ever wrongly predicted a bright future for immersive worlds or flythrough 3D spaces in the past, so they have no skepticism triggered by the historical failure of things like LambdaMOO or VRML. Instead, they hear of a marvelous thing — A virtual world! Where you have an avatar that travels around! And talks to other avatars! — which they then see with their very own eyes. How cool is that? You'd have to be a pretty crotchety old skeptic not to want to believe. I bet few of those reporters ever go back, but I'm sure they're sure that other people do (something we know to be false, to a first approximation, from the aforementioned churn.) Second Life is a story that's too good to check."

Shirky fairly obviously calls into question the journalistic rigor, and thus integrity, of those who were covering Second Life. In questioning one of the most revered bastions of contemporary journalism – one needs to only look towards the glorified figure of

Edward R. Murrow in contemporary society to notice this trend – Shirky put an entire community on the defensive. Rather than approach further explanations of Second Life in a way that was more balanced, journalists as a whole allowed the pendulum to swing the other way, criticizing Second Life with the same intense vigor they praised it with.

This is not to imply that criticism is not due for Second Life or other virtual worlds, but rather to begin an analysis of what increasingly is manifested as bigotry and net-xenophobia. A particularly close-minded narrative was presented in the October 2007 issue of GOOD Magazine, titled *Get A Life*. The author, Morgan Clendaniel, lands in second life with the 'noble' intention to explore a space where he "will no longer be hindered by the chafing constraints of our physical world", yet the article goes onto censure Second Life for its ability to function, in Clendaniel's mind, only as a place for sex and failed experiments in new business[cix]. Clendaniel claims Second Life "appears to be less a new way for businesses to reach their consumers, and more of a way for people with a little skill at using Second Life's programming code to make a few quick bucks in the cock market", a reference to his struggle to find a virtual penis. To Clendaniel, "virtual sex is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a virtual world."[cx] Clendaniel then lambastes Second Life's failures to captivate bug business, stating that corporations are "eating the losses of paying designers to create lavish headquarters for them, and leaving altogether." Finally, Clendaniel observes that while a million users have logged on in the week prior to his visit, 8 million have chosen not to. These are the tropes of Second Life Orientalism – sex, anti-capitalism, and the myth of empty spaces.

While Clendaniel's observation that Second Life allows Residents to "live out a fantasy that is totally unfeasible in the real world" is in line with our discussion of

multiplicity of self, it is steeped in loaded language[cxi]. By referring to the metaverse as a 'fanasy', Clendaniel portrays it is as childish and a mode for escapism rather than an extension of a person's social life[cxii]. Clendaniel isn't the only person participating in this sort of rhetoric – the Telecommunications Subcommittee in the U.S. House of Representatives recently held a hearing on virtual worlds in which most of the dialogue made light of the elected officials' avatars, condescending in language that was only equaled by a subsequent related article in the Washington Post. In this write up, Dana Milbank writes, among other imperialist rhetoric, that hearing took place in "unwitting observance of April Fools' Day."[cxiii]

While this rhetoric seems harmless in nature, it invokes serious questioning when the words *avatar* and *Second Life* are replaced with *marginalized persons* and *developing nations*. If Clendaniel was to write so sardonically about any area in the majority world, he would be rightfully chastised by progressives, moderates, and conservatives alike as a racist or imperialist. As pointed out in the comments section on GOOD's website, Clendaniel doesn't belong to any Second Life groups – the major social structure in Second Life – and spent limited time the metaverse. Yet he felt he understood the nuances and complexities of the space well enough to write an article laced with rash judgments and generalizations. It is easy to forget that there are real people, often socially marginalized in their physical lives, behind avatars, and to them, Second Life isn't a bizarre coagulation of 'Otherness' or a spectacle, but a very integral part of their universe.

Thankfully, the current academic landscape for analyzing and understanding virtual worlds is not nearly as bleak as the environment Said encountered in his research

for *Oritentalism*. On a very basic level, this is due to a few prominent individuals – Henry Jenkins and Joi Ito come immediately to mind - who are able to reach mass audiences through the internet and defend the lifestyles and culture that exist in Second Life and in virtual communities. The 'other', in this 'neo-orientalism', has a prominent voice, a major distinction between the ill encountered by Said.

> At the end of his novel Culture and Imperialism, Said takes the following stance: "No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental."[cxiv]

Said was concerned with, amongst a bevy of other inquires, what "intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like Orientalism."[cxv] Guiding Said's work was an assumption that Orientalism was fueled in large part by a "fairly constant sense of confrontation felt be Westerners in dealing with the East"[cxvi]. Said further claims that "human societies [...] have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with "other" cultures."[cxvii]

Citizens of Second Life are a new 'other' – a group that can't be understood from the outside, and thus are categorized outwardly with sweeping generalizations that often imply negative creations of self. Their culture is inherently odd to those who don't experience it first hand, as it apes many traditions found in first life while subverting

these practices subtly as a means to adapt to the nature of metaverses. Similarly, Second Life allows greater refuge for cultural sub-groupings who are already marginalized by mainstream society, making any backlash against it as an online society easier. This isn't much different from how the general public perceived the early Internet – a gateway for pornography, gambling, and other indulgences that we were too fearful to explore in meatspace. Perhaps this has to do with the linguistic associations of "Second Life" – many react to such a phrase in a way that implies it is a replacement or substitute for their day-to-day interactions as opposed to something that is complimentary. Taking this argument a step further, we may in the future be unable to distinguish our 'second' lives from our 'fist' lives. Just as social networking has become a natural extension of traditional social interactions, so too may Second Life, or more realistically a currently unforeseen metaverse (or metaverses) become natural extensions of how we interact with one another as opposed to contentious societies that face harsh judgments from an insecure populous.

Final Thoughts

Where does this analysis leave us then, if not at an understanding of Second Life as a complex entity that pushes our notions of cultural identity, societal equality, and traditional notions of international politics. Most certainly, Second Life falls short of its capability to be a digital utopia. This should come as no surprise – utopia inherently refers to ‘no place’, an image we have of what could be but never will. While rejecting the imperialist nature of global corporations, Residents in Second Life nonetheless embrace a sense of consumerism that can only be understood as of Western descent. While this is troublesome at times, it need not negate the positive lessons Second Life proposes in relation to the construction and experimentation of the post-modern self. Second Life and other burgeoning metaverses are far from perfect, but they do represent a different and unique narrative in relation to how we approach cultural imperialism from the standpoint of contemporary society. As more people move online, and inevitably more experiment with virtual worlds, perhaps the cosmopolitan nature of Second Life will grow even further. An opposite outcome, with Second Life becoming defined solely by consumerism, is equally as possible.

It is of absolute importance at this point for me to admit my own failings as a researcher in regards to Second Life and the community I found therein. To say I was hesitant to engage with Second Life would be an understatement – it was a place that initially frustrated me as I found it foreign to my sensibilities and difficult to understand. I exhibited many, if not all, the traits I have previously laid out as characteristic of ‘digital orientalism’. Without engaging in the community, I failed to make any meaningful strides in my research, reverting back to assumptions, hunches, and preconceived ideas I had

about metaverses in general and Second Life in particular. As I began this project at the height of what I know see as an insecure backlash from both the journalism and business communities, I found myself aping many of the claims these two groups were making. Most of all, I simply could not understand why someone would abandon their 'first life' for a second one. While I am by no means proud of such a history, I am happy to recognize it in the past tense. After pushing myself to engage with the community, and engaging more deeply with previous research on digital communities and identity construction, my respect and understanding grew as did the complexities I saw.

It was much easier for me to understand Second Life in generalizations. As it threatened the societal and cultural sensibilities I have relied on for my existence as a teenager and adult, relying on sweeping claims about who was doing what where in Second Life made its complexities far easier to digest it with more ease. It fit neatly into my worldview, although this fit was always uncomfortable.

Like Said, I have no capacity to show "what the true Orient" – in my case the culture in Second Life – is.[cxviii]My inclinations tell me that Second Life is not a utopia, digital or otherwise. With this said, it has immense ability to function for societal good, both from the standpoint of cross-cultural communication and for the exploration of self. Perhaps it is the name Second Life that causes so much trouble as it threatens notions of what our First Life must be. Rather than focus on these two notions as dichotomies, we would do better to recognize both in the same manner as we view identity in contemporary society, as fluid definitions, neither rigid nor defining, that allow us to better understand bout ourselves and those around us.

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