A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENTIAL WORLD OF 'SECOND LIFE' FOR INDIVIDUALS AGED 60 YEARS AND OLDER

by

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PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

I, Eloise Law, hereby declare that this mini-dissertation is my own work. To my knowledge I have not committed any form of plagiarism.

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12 August 2011

ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively investigated older adults' experience of Second Life from a descriptive phenomenological perspective. Second Life is a virtual world found on the Internet and is considered to be a cyber reality that simulates aspects of everyday real life. The participant group comprised of five individuals, between the ages of 60 and 79 years of age, who have been participating in Second Life for longer than six months. All of the participants reside in the United States and all of the participants have a tertiary education. The research revealed three essential themes to older individuals' experience of Second Life that deals with: (1) Familiarisation with Second Life; (2) Connecting in Second Life; and (3) Second Life as a Place of Recreation. The research indicated that older adults seem to find value in their Second Life participation and tend to be actively involved and contributing members in this virtual world. These findings have implications for developmental theories in psychology that address later stages in life, and the researcher especially considers Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development. Additional implications for adults in the later stages of life and the discipline of psychology are also considered.

Key words: Gerontology, Elderly, Geropsychology, Developmental Psychology, Cyberpsychology, Virtual World, Second Life, Descriptive Phenomenology.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Chapter	Description of Abbreviation
A		
APA	Chapter 1	American Psychological Association
AIS	Chapter 10	Academic Information Services
B		
BDSM	Chapter 5	Bondage and Discipline Submission/ Masochism
BS	Chapter 3	Bachelor of Science
C		
COL	Chapter 10	Care OnLine
H		
HASP	Chapter 7	Hispanic Addictions Studies Program
I		
IM	Chapter 1	Instant Messaging
ISP	Chapter 1	Internet Service Provider
IT	Chapter 7	Information Technology
L		
L$	Chapter 1	Linden Dollar
M		
MA	Chapter 1	Master of Arts
N		
NASA	Chapter 11	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
P		
PhD	Chapter 3	Doctorate
PP	Chapter 3	Participant "P"
PL	Chapter 3	Participant "L"
PI	Chapter 3	Participant "I"
PB	Chapter 3	Participant "B"
PP	Chapter 3	Participant "P"
R		
RL	Chapter 1	Real Life
S		

SL	Chapter 1	Second Life
SLOODLE	Chapter 6	Simulation Linked Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment
SLED	Chapter 3	Second Life Educators List
SLR	Chapter 3	Second Life Researchers List
T		
3-D	Chapter 1	Three-dimensional
T	Chapter 4	Theme
U		
UP	Chapter 1	University of Pretoria
US$	Chapter 1	United States Dollar
USA	Chapter 1	United States of America
UK	Chapter 10	United Kingdom
W		
WWW	Chapter 1	World Wide Web

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

Introduction

In this chapter the background to the study is discussed. The first aspect that is addressed is the context of the study, followed by the research question and research goals. The chapter is concluded by depicting the motivation for this study, as well as by portraying the outline of the remainder of the research report.

1.1   CONTEXT

This study brings together the contexts of Gerontology and Second Life (SL), a virtual world. In the following section I will briefly introduce these contexts. The first context, Gerontology, is concisely described seeing that it will be comprehensively discussed in a later chapter of this work[1]. The context of SL will receive more attention in this chapter in order to familiarise the reader with SL.

1.1.1   Gerontology

Gerontology is the scientific study of ageing and considers the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of the ageing process and life in old age. As an interdisciplinary field, Gerontology considers a diverse range of issues related to later life, including but not limited to health care issues, life changes, retirement activities, and living arrangements. These days, gerontological matters are gaining more prominence in the scientific community, since the demographic profile of the world is ageing and there is an increased need to understand later life (Crandall, 1980). As this research project focuses on the experiences of people aged 60 years and older and their engagement

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[1]   As this study is conducted from a descriptive phenomenological approach, a literature review on Gerontology is portrayed after the research project. This is in accordance to the work of Lopez and Willis (2004), as well as Wojnar and Swanson (2007). This is also addressed in more detail in Chapter 2.

with SL, it is important to take cognisance of the field of Gerontology, as this study aims to provide some insight on the interplay between SL and people in later life. There are various disciplines involved in the field of Gerontology, such as medicine, sociology, education and psychology. The focus of this study lies within the field of psychology, as I am a postgraduate student doing research for a Master of Arts (MA) in Counselling Psychology.

The field of Psychology has many traditional branches, such as neurological psychology, developmental psychology, personality psychology, psychopathology and social psychology. For the purpose of this study, developmental psychology is more in the foreground, as well as two new fields in psychology, namely geropsychology and cyberpsychology.

1.1.1.1 Developmental Psychology

Within the field of developmental psychology, there are different theories pertaining to human development. For example, Sigmund Freud was mainly interested in childhood development and did not focus much on later life. He was convinced that personality in later years was merely a reflection of earlier personality, as established by the age of five (Crandall, 1980; Sadock & Sadock, 2007). However, Erik Erikson developed a very prominent theory in psychology that addresses later life and deals with personality development throughout the lifespan. His psychosocial developmental theory is widely used as a guideline for psychologists in practice to track healthy personality development from infancy to old age (Sadock & Sadock, 2007). As part of his theory, the developmental stage that is specifically applicable to this research is "Integrity versus Despair" (synthesis: Wisdom), which commences approximately at 60 years of age. In brief, healthy development at this stage is characterised by the individual's ability to become appropriately detached from the world, and also review their life with a sense of contentment. Attaining integrity denotes an ultimate acceptance of the life you have lived, accompanied by a sense of responsibility. Failing to attain integrity results in despair, and this often leaves the individual contemptuous of the external world. Without

acceptance, a person might experience unhealthy development and come to feel hopeless, depressed, and anxious that their time has run out (Erikson, 1980; Sadock & Sadock, 2007). For the purpose of this study it is important to take note of the field of developmental psychology in general, as well as the developmental theory of Erikson in particular, as this study focuses on people 60 years and older and their experience of SL.

1.1.1.2 Geropsychology

In addition to the traditional branch of Developmental Psychology, the one new branch, Geropsychology, is relevant to this study as it pertains to the study of the psychological aspects of ageing and life in old age. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines clinical Geropsychology as the "proficiency in professional psychology aimed at helping older adults and their families maintain well-being, overcome problems, and achieve maximum potential during later life" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010, para 1). The branch of Geropsychology aspires to increase scientific understanding of the capabilities and changing psychological needs of an older society. It attempts to address questions pertaining to how ageing affects elements of the person's psychology including cognition, memory, mental health, emotion, social relationships, behaviour and older individuals' responses to psychotherapy (Qualls & Abeles, 2000). This new branch of Psychology is relevant to this specific research project, as it pays attention to people in later life, such as the participants in this study who are all 60 years and older.

1.1.1.3 Cyberpsychology

Another new branch of Psychology, Cyberpsychology, is also relevant to the current study, as this study does not only focus on people 60 years and older, but also on their experiences of their involvement with SL, a virtual world. It appears as though a need has developed, as a result of technological developments and advances in human communication systems, for psychologists to consider how computer mediated

communication affects the human psyche, even the psyche of those in later life (Fenichel, 2010). Psychology has responded to technology's challenge, through Cyberpsychology, and extended the discipline of Psychology to cyberspace, as can be seen, for example, in *The Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*. This journal addresses many different themes such as Internet-related intimacy problems and the construction of a virtual self in social networking sites. This new branch of Psychology is relevant to this specific research project, as it focuses on the virtual world of SL (Smahel, 2008).

As the participants of this study are people 60 years and older, it is important to take note of the field of Gerontology, with specific reference to Psychology (developmental psychology, geropsychology, and cyberpsychology) as part of the context of the study. Another important context of this research is SL.

1.1.2   Second Life

The goal of the following section is to place SL, as a virtual world, into the broader context of the Internet and cyberspace. Subsequently, I shall introduce SL and the context of the Internet in some detail.

1.1.2.1 Internet

The origin of the Internet dates back to 1962 when J.C.R Licklider laid the foundation for his concept of a *Galactic Network*. During this time he initiated and directed a research programme at the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency in the United States of America (USA), with the intention of building this system. Successively, a broad community of Internauts collaborated to augment this new technology, and in 1972 electronic mail was introduced (Leiner et al., 2003). Today, the Internet is a worldwide assemblage of many local, regional, national and international networks that unite millions of businesses, government agencies, educational institutions and private individuals (Shelly & Vermaat, 2009). Figure 1 schematically illustrates some of the

different components of the Internet infrastructure, each of which is subsequently discussed.

Figure 1. The Internet architecture and how it functions to connect Internet users accross continents
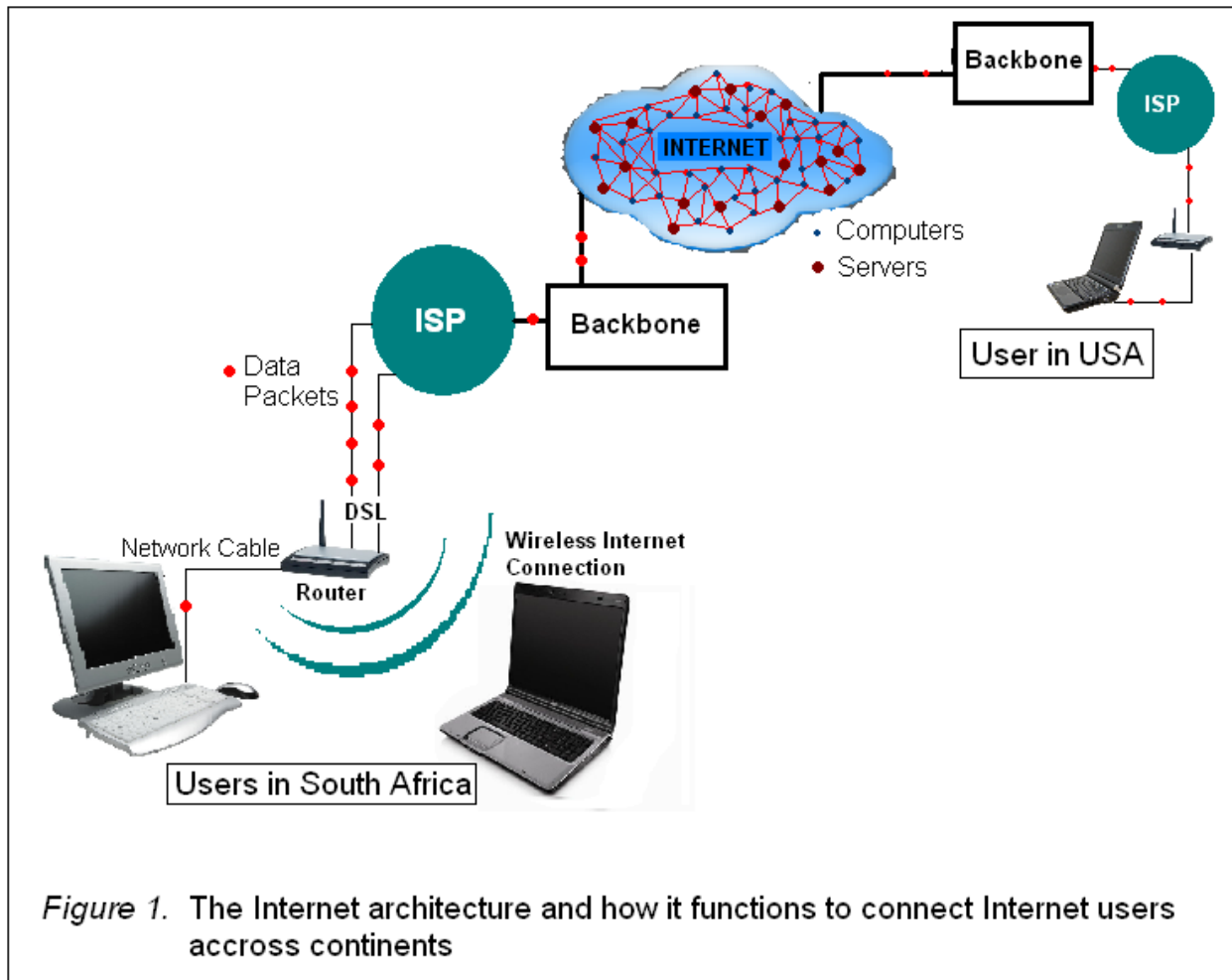
The Internet architecture comprises of countless connections between millions of servers and computers creating a network. Through an Internet Service Provider (ISP), a private person or a business is permitted access to the Internet. There are many different ways to connect to the Internet. Digital subscriber lines and wireless modems are two of the more popular methods, but cable television, radio signals and satellite connections may also be used as a means to connect to the Internet (Shelly & Vermaat, 2009).

Information available on the Internet is transferred via the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, which is considered to be the language computers use to

connect to each other. In order for information to be transmitted across this network, it is first fragmented into *data packets*. Data packets are managed by *routers*, which are responsible for selecting the best possible way for transmitting or *routing* selected information to the required destinations (Shelly & Vermaat, 2009). In order for information to be accessed and delivered, the architecture of the Internet also requires global addressing mechanisms that enable computers on one network to access information and communicate with computers on a different network. These addresses fulfil the same role as telephone numbers in a telephone directory (Kahn & Cerf, 1999).

Another important architectural feature of the Internet is called the Internet *backbone*, which is responsible for transmitting data between different geographic locations. Shelly and Vermaat (2009) use a metaphor that explains the backbone powerfully. They describe this inner structure as a massive automobile transportation system, which connects various cities with interconnecting highways, carrying the bulk of automotive traffic. Typically, these backbone structures are composed of fibre optic trunk lines with multiple cables combined together to increase data carrying capacity between personal computers, but also over countries, oceans and continents.

Because it promotes increased interconnectedness, the Internet has revolutionised global communication, by shrinking time and space. Paradoxically, however, the augmentation of the Internet has also opened up a new space in which people are responsible for creation. This new space that became available as a result of the physical structure of the Internet is called *cyberspace*.

 1.1.2.2 Cyberspace

William Gibson (1984) coined the term cyberspace in his science fiction novel "Neuromancer". Today the term has grown to encapsulate most references to the Internet and the digital material that exists within, although technically it is not synonymous with the Internet, but refers to that which the Internet holds. It is space created because of the Internet and raises more questions about people and social life

than it does about technology, data or information. "People meet in cyberspace, work in it, play in it, learn and discover things in it" ("Cybernauts Awake", 1999, p. 12). Ryan (1999, p. 1) describes cyberspace as a "...new frontier both enticing and forbidding, a frontier awaiting exploration, promising discovery, threatening humanistic values,... and questioning our sense of self and of embodiment". Within this novel space, the Internet also provides its users with different services. One very well known service of the Internet is the World Wide Web (WWW).

1.1.2.3 World Wide Web

The WWW, which emerged in the 1990s, is a specific service of the Internet and consists of an array of electronic documents. These global collections of documents are each made accessible through a web page and might contain built-in connections or hyperlinks to additional documents or web pages. Web pages may contain text, graphics, audio and video. Commerce is one of many contexts that has benefited from the Internet and the WWW. Information dissemination within the academic world has been amplified and knowledge, in turn, has become one of our world's most valuable and available commodities (Di Loreto, 2007; Shelly & Vermaat, 2009). In conjunction with the business and academic worlds, social life has been impacted to a great extent.

Social connectedness has been increased through other services available on the Internet such as "Myspace", "Twitter" and "Facebook". Blogging has become increasingly popular, providing people with a platform to express their views and voice their commentaries about life. Chatrooms host a multitude and diversity of people, introducing each to the other, and often these online cyber-relationships evolve and manifest into real life affiliations (Di Loreto, 2007; Shelly & Vermaat, 2009). Recently, Internet services have been enhanced through Web 2.0, which facilitates increased participation in cyberspace (Wikipedia, 2009a).

1.1.2.4 Web 2.0

Prior to Web 2.0 there was Web 1.0 characterised by static, unsynchronised information publishing. Web 1.0 might be considered as a "read-only-web" service, and users of this web service primarily receive information, without an opportunity to make a contribution. However, in 2004 the world was introduced to Web 2.0, which can be described as architecture that fosters participation through synchronised interaction on the Internet (Wikipedia, 2009a). Web 2.0 is considered the second generation of web development and web design. It facilitates more effective communication, information sharing and increased collaboration by use of the WWW, and many users and companies are integrating its benefits into their communication strategies (Gorini, Gaggioli, Vigna, & Riva, 2008). This "read-write-web" service harnesses the collective intelligence of Internet users, by allowing users to add to the content on sites. One of the more outstanding and successful applications of Web 2.0 was the creation of three dimensional (3-D) virtual worlds such as SL, which allows users to modify the website content and share personal information with other visitors (Shelly & Vermaat, 2009).

1.1.2.5 Second Life

SL is an immersive 3-D virtual world that exists within cyberspace. The official website of SL describes it as a world imagined and created by its residents. SL is a fast-growing digital world filled with people, amusement, experiences and a range of opportunities. In this capacity it is a creative arena where people can construct anything their imagination can conceive, and for less skilled users, SL affords an escape from the mundane existence many experience in real life (RL). In the following section I shall attempt to describe some facets of SL in order to communicate the various features of this world and how these elements contribute to people's enjoyment of this second reality. At this point, however, I would first like to draw a distinction between SL as a virtual world, and a different type of virtual reality.

Another form of virtual reality is described as "...a collection of technologies that allow people to interact efficiently with 3-D computerised databases in real time using their natural senses and skills" (Gaggioli, Mantonvani, Castelnuovo, Wiederhold, & Riva, 2003, p. 117). Equipment such as goggles and audio are used in an attempt to immerse the person's senses, and while immersed the person has real bodily reactions to the stimuli presented. Virtual reality in this form has been used in various settings such as military training, entertainment and even in psychology to equip people with a new skill, thrill or as a form of rehabilitation. The usefulness of this type of virtual reality in rehabilitation of stroke patients and people with phobias has also been confirmed by research (Gaggioli et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2007).

SL is described as an online digital 3-D virtual world, which allows people to interact in a different reality through a personified virtual character. The person on the other end of the computer screen manipulates the character to do what they desire, much like a puppet on a string. Upon entering SL, a person receives a variety of note cards[2] welcoming them to this new world, whilst promoting what SL has to offer. In the following section I will describe some facets of SL in an attempt to orientate the reader to this virtual world.

1.   History of Second Life

SL, launched in June 2003, is a virtual world that simulates many aspects of everyday RL and is arguably the most popular cyber reality available today. The creator of this cyber reality, Philip Rosedale, studied physics at the University of California, San Diego, USA. Currently he is the president of Linden Lab, the company who developed SL, and in 2008 he accepted a prestigious award at the "59th Annual Technology and Engineering Emmy Awards" for developing online sites with user-generated content (Wikipedia, 2009b). People from all over the world engage, relate and create in this world for hours a day through their virtual selves called avatars.

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[2]   This is a means of information dissemination in SL, much like informative brochures.

2.   Avatar and Second Life

The word *avatar* is a Hindu term that originally meant the incarnation of a deity into the physical realm (Brown, 2007; "Merriam-Webster", 2010a). In this context, however, it refers to a person's online incarnation. Avatars may be constructed to resemble a person's RL physical appearance, or they may differ completely from that of the person. Upon registering to SL you receive a standard avatar, which you can personalise as you wish.

In an article titled, "Create the Perfect Virtual You" (2007) the authors consider what the relationship might be between people and their avatars. Researchers from Stanford University suggest that RL introverts create avatars that are extensions of themselves, whereas extroverts explore with different identities (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). These *massive multiplayer online role-playing games*, such as SL, "Eve Online" and "World of Warcraft" offer individuals the opportunity and anonymity to be whomever, whatever and however they desire to be when interacting and communicating with other players in these worlds.

Avatars in SL communicate with each other through local chat, which is a form of public communication, as well as private global instant messaging (IM)*.* Voice chat is also becoming an increasingly popular form of communication inworld[3]. Because SL facilitates such effective communication, many different collaborative networks have been created for a multitude of purposes and various social groups exist here, established on the basis of commonalities among avatars and their RL counterparts.

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[3]   *Inworld* is cyber terminology used to describe being online and in a virtual world such as SL.

3.   Industry and Second Life

A diversity of industries exists within SL and its economy is growing at a rapid pace. It is largely adopted for social, business, advertising and educational purposes (De Lucia, Francese, Passero, & Genoveffa, 2009). The Linden Dollar (L$), which is the internal currency, trades against the United States Dollar (US$) and is used inworld in much the same manner currency is used in RL. Various virtual goods are available for purchase, such as clothing, land, houses, cars, food and commodities that contribute to making avatars increasingly attractive such as skins, hair, and body shapes. Reportedly, in 2009 a few of the SL residents generated profits exceeding 1 million US$ for the goods they produced inworld (Wikipedia, 2009b) and the annual gross domestic product was estimated to be 64 million US$ in 2006 (Newitz, 2006). SL has its own stock exchange called LindeX.

The extremely lucrative sex industry, which operates in SL, is one of the main attractions for the residents of this cyber world and there are many adult nightclubs and brothels that operate here (Smith, 2008b). Sex as an industry is not the only form of sexual contact in SL, however. Avatars describe inworld friendships that are more "real" than RL friendships and sex is experienced as a form of closeness and is considered a powerful expression of love and intimacy (Boellstorff, 2008).

Other popular attractions are religious pursuits and various Christian Missions exist within this realm. The Egyptian Islam online news website allows people devout to the Muslim faith to perform the ritual of Hajj virtually on their island in SL, before embarking on the pilgrimage in person (Wikipedia, 2009b). A number of non-profit and healthcare organisations also operate inworld.

4.   Research and Second Life

In order to determine whether or not SL would be a viable context for scientific research enquiry, I embarked on a research review of this virtual world. In the following section I

briefly discuss the findings of the review to illustrate that SL is indeed a viable arena to conduct scientific research.

As noted earlier, SL is widely utilised for educational purposes. Princeton University is one of many real world universities that has created a virtual campus within SL. Students can register for a range of courses, attend virtual classes, access virtual libraries and socialise with fellow students in recreational areas within these virtual sites. Researchers exploring the educational facet of SL have demonstrated how effective this environment is for experiential learning. They further remark on the impact virtual worlds such as SL are expected to have on education in the near future, and that because of the present limited understanding of these 3-D virtual teaching grounds, more research on the topic is needed (De Lucia et al., 2009; Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrat, & Trivedi, 2009).

Other disciplines have also shown an interest in SL. Researchers working from a behavioural psychology approach, devised an experiment to determine avatar interaction by introducing two separate variables: (1) avatar attractiveness and (2) avatar tallness. They subsequently identified the *Proteus Effect*, which refers to a change in behaviour and self-representation when a person acts through an avatar, resulting in a type of disinhibition. People with attractive avatars were found to be more willing than non-attractive avatars to approach strangers of the opposite sex. In addition, people with attractive avatars were increasingly open to disclose more information about themself sooner. Also, taller avatars acted with more confidence in negotiation tasks assigned to them. They were more willing to negotiate unfair splits that resulted in their personal gain, as opposed to the shorter avatars that were more likely to accept the lesser part of the transaction. SL and other online contexts could thus facilitate online disinhibition, since people have the anonymity and freedom to act and interact as they wish (Yee & Bailenson, 2007).

SL has also received attention from the sociological and anthropological disciplines. Bardzell and Odom (2008) carried out a sociological ethnographic study using

participant observation and in-depth interviews. The researchers were interested in the mutually constituted relations among avatars, space and artefacts within the Gorean community of SL. These researchers found Gorean fantasy[4] to be a compelling form of play and a source of intimacy and emotion for thousands of SL residents.

Cabiria (2008) identified intimacy and support within another subgroup in SL. This researcher used grounded theory when considering life in SL for gay and lesbian people. He explored the benefits of a supportive community of other gay and lesbian citizens who belong to the SL virtual world. He hypothesised that some participants may lead more authentic lives because of their virtual world experience and that there would be carry-over-effects from SL to the real world. The findings supported his hypothesis and acknowledge the permeability between real and virtual lives and how people benefit from online interaction and support.

Boellstorff (2008) conducted two years of fieldwork where he lived among the residents of SL and observed the culture of this world as related to multiple issues of gender, race, sex, money and various other facets of human/avatar behaviour. In 2008 he released the first anthropology book relating to SL in which he depicts how virtual worlds can shape our identity and perception of self. He considers how society functions within SL and discusses social events such as religious services, wedding celebrations and other occurrences in this world that form part of the human experience.

5.   Implications of Second Life

Two very important variables become apparent based on the above-mentioned research. Firstly, when moving within a virtual reality, people experience a sense of freedom, coupled with anonymity, which has effects on their online behaviour. This online disinhibition could allow a person to experiment with many different interaction styles that might have consequences for their RL self and relationships. In addition,

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[4]   Gorean fantasy, or the Gorean lifestyle, usually revolves around master/slave role-play games that may or may not be of a sexual nature.

people who experience difficulty in RL might find online exploration with different interaction styles and identities therapeutic and helpful.

Secondly, research indicates that learning is transferable from SL to RL (Cabiria, 2008; Jarmon et al., 2009). Informational, behavioural, cognitive, interactional and emotional acquisitions from an online source thus have the potential to manifest and influence a person outside of the online environment and in their RL. This implies definite and diverse consequences and opportunities for people and for the discipline of psychology.

Cyber therapy and *eHealth* are new concepts that have emerged because more individuals take part in online socialisation. A firm, called "Gartner", estimates that by the end 2011, 80% of all Internet users will be residents of one virtual world or another. Questions related to the psychological impact on people living two different lives become relevant when considering these statistics. Another critical question is whether the counselling and therapy professions are paying enough attention to this area (Daniel, 2008).

Researchers have considered the use of 3-D virtual worlds for online mental health applications, and they found that online worlds are becoming increasingly popular for social research and health services. There are a number of opportunities that virtual interaction offers individuals with mental or physical disabilities. For many of these individuals, SL is becoming a way of coping with their limitations and also provides them with a means of social interaction that is free from ridicule and judgment (Daniel, 2008). Sum, Mathews, Hughes, and Campbell (2008) explored how older adults in Australia use the Internet. Older adults were recruited online to complete an online survey. The results indicated that they primarily engage in Internet use for interpersonal communication, followed by information seeking, commerce and entertainment. The researchers concluded that the Internet is an important technology that helps older adults to lead independent and social lives.

Based on the findings of Sum et al. (2008), one can presume that the Internet and cyberspace could be a valuable resource for the older population group. The cited

research identified specific online experiences that older participants found meaningful. Although it would seem that the Internet and cyberspace has a lot of potential for addressing a number of matters associated with the elderly, research considering the movement of older people in cyberspace is limited overall.

1.1.3 Gerontology and Second Life

This study is about the interplay between people 60 years and older and their experience of SL. Therefore, the context of this study is on the one hand informed by Gerontology (1.1.1), while on the other hand it is shaped by the virtual world of SL (1.1.2).

1.2   RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the description in 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, the research question for this research project is: "How do individuals, aged 60 years and older, experience their participation in SL?"

1.3   GOALS

1.3.1 General Goal

The primary goal of this research project is to understand how individuals, aged 60 years and older, experience their participation in SL.

1.3.2 Specific Goals

The secondary goals of this research project are:

1.   To describe the theoretical approach of this research project, being descriptive phenomenology (Chapter 2).

2.   To describe the research methodology followed in this research project (Chapter 3).

3.   To describe the individual research findings from this research project (Chapter 4 – Chapter 8), as well as a summary of the individual findings (Chapter 9).

4.   To conduct a literature review pertaining to Gerontology (Chapter 10), with the aim of creating interplay between the research findings and the literature review.

5.   To conduct the research project in accordance with the ethical clearance set by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (UP).

6.   To write the research report.

1.4   MOTIVATION

1.4.1   Academic Motivation

As part of my two year MA (Counselling Psychology) course I am required to: (1) complete theoretical and practical training; as well as (2) conduct a research project. The research project and the research report comprise 50% of my qualifying mark. Therefore the principal reason for undertaking this research study is to adhere to this requirement set forth by the UP and so qualify with a MA-degree in Counselling Psychology.

1.4.2   Technological Motivation

The rapid rate of technological advancement is potentially shaping the future of what it means to be human. At the very least, it is bolstering the construction of a new world; a new reality that has remarkable potential, the benefits and detriments of which has yet to be discovered. Human experience no longer occurs solely within a universe, but it has been broadened through co-creation to subsist within a multiverse. The Internet, together with the vast new space it unlocks for human existence, is creating new possibilities for young and old. Therefore the second motivation for embarking on this

research project was to explore how people make use of the new technological innovation of SL, and what SL offers as a new reality and place of interaction.

1.4.3 Research Motivation

My third and final motivation for conducting this research is to understand how specifically older people experience SL. As mentioned in section 1.1.2.5 [6], very little research explores the relationship between the Internet, cyberspace and the elderly. I found no research on the participation of older adults in online virtual worlds, such as SL, and therefore I specifically set out to address this gap in scientific literature.

1.5   STRUCTURE

At the outset of Chapter 1, I briefly introduced two contexts pertinent to this study, Gerontology and SL. Subsequently, technological developments with specific reference to SL were discussed. I also specified the goals of this research and stipulated my motivations for engaging in this research project.

Chapter 2 will feature a discussion of this study's research position, which is descriptive phenomenology, as it functions within the cosmos of social research. Descriptive phenomenology will be contrasted to interpretive phenomenology to illuminate the inherent differences, and the contributions made possible by the two distinct research approaches, before being discussed with specific reference to this study.

In Chapter 3, the different methodological aspects of the research inquiry will be delineated. The research contexts will be described and thereafter the research participants will be introduced. As part of Chapter 3, the research material will be discussed, as well as the steps taken to enhance the quality of the research project. Chapter 3 will conclude with a discussion on the ethics associated with psychological research.

The research findings will be reported from Chapter 4 to Chapter 8, in which each participant will be depicted in their own individual chapter. In each of the five participant chapters, the themes that became apparent during the analysis phase will be identified. Collective essences or themes shared by all participants will be presented in Chapter 9.

In Chapter 10, a literature review of Gerontology is depicted. In this chapter, Gerontology will be defined and discussed according to its multi-disciplinary nature, as well as the older and more recent theories that inform this discipline. An overview of recent research in the field of Gerontology will also be outlined.

Chapter 11 will conclude with a discussion on the implications of the research results and the limitations of the study will also be declared.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed two contexts that inform this research project, namely Gerontology and SL. Furthermore, I stated the research question as well as the research goals. This was followed by the motivation for conducting the research project, as well as a portrayal of the research report structure. In the following chapter I shall address the research position.

CHAPTER 2
RESEARCH POSITION

Introduction

The following chapter systematically considers the research position of this study. The discussion will initially focus on three fundamental research paradigms that inform psychological research, namely the positivist paradigm, the constructivist paradigm and the constructionist paradigm. Subsequently, the discussion will progress towards phenomenology, specifically contrasting the two main schools of thought within this research position, namely the descriptive and the interpretive approaches, before summarising the qualities of specifically the descriptive school.

2.1   RESEARCH PARADIGMS

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary broadly defines *paradigm* as a "philosophical or theoretical framework" ("Merriam-Webster", 2010b). Tomas Kuhn first introduced the concept of paradigm and paradigm shift, to suggest that it is possible to replace one way of thinking about knowledge and research with another incommensurable view, in order to generate different findings (Donmoyer, 2006). Paradigms differ mostly in terms of their positions on ontology, epistemology and methodology.

2.1.1 Positivist Paradigm

Essentially, the researcher working within the positivist paradigm believes in an objective, stable, external reality that is accessible through the senses, and thus lends itself to direct observation and study. According to this paradigm's natural epistemology, scientific theory maps the outside world and should accurately reflect external reality by providing factual statements, categories, or natural laws that operate in it. Evidence is collected through quantitative methods by initially formulating a hypothesis, and then testing this hypothesis by way of verification and falsification. Subsequently, the data is

analysed deductively to arrive at the one true account of reality, with an ultimate purpose of gaining control over the natural world. Although the positivist research paradigm has dominated scientific inquiry throughout modernity, it is often criticised for its obsessive concern with realism, scepticism, error and simplification (Stam, 2001). Furthermore, research from this approach is often criticised for concealing as much as it reveals, since it does not look beyond the empirical data to the background knowledge, as it is usually circumscribed by culture (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006).

2.1.2 Constructivist Paradigm

Another popular research paradigm, commonly associated with postmodernism, is constructivism. Supporters of constructivism conceive of reality as subjective and relative to individual experience. This approach adopts an endogenic position or individual epistemology and proposes that knowledge pertains to understanding human sense-making systems, including perceptual organisation, cognitive processes, consciousness and schemata. In other words, the constructivist approach emphasises understanding people's diverse internal realities, which are based on an external world, but that are made possible by the rational capacity of the human mind (Gergen, 1985). Thus, the primary purpose of research within this paradigm is revealing how people render the world sensible. Constructivist researchers primarily use the qualitative research design, together with collaborative research techniques, inductive analysis, thematic analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, they don't consider themselves as standing separate from the research process, but rather relate empathetically to the research participants. Theory serves to map internal processes and findings are considered to be knowledge claims, rather than factual statements. The main criticism against this paradigm is that it focuses excessively on the internal world of the person, normally neglecting external reality and that which happens between people in social reality. It is also criticised for its relativism and for ignoring the subjectivity of the person (O'loughlin, 2007).

Gergen (1985) likens understanding positivism and constructivism to a pendulum swinging between empiricism and rationalism. The following paradigm to be discussed transcends this object-subject dualism and understands knowledge as it is found in human affairs.

2.1.3 Constructionist Paradigm

Constructionism understands the nature of reality as occurring between people and is therefore considered sociorationialistic (Gergen, 1985). Constructionists assert that the world is socially constructed and negotiated between people through language and discourse and that knowledge is found in social interchange. Within this approach, theory serves to expose social processes, institutions and grand narratives that manage to marginalise and imprison people. Researchers work from a "not-knowing", curious and suspicious position and make moral judgments to expose systems of authority and power that operate in the social world. They ascribe to the qualitative research design and engage in deconstructionism, textual analysis, discourse analysis, as well as other collaborative and hermeneutic techniques (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). The purpose of research within this paradigm is to show and deconstruct different versions of reality, challenge undisputed authority and grand narratives, as well as to understand the normative values against which people measure themselves (Doan, 1997; Gergen, 1985). Constructionism is often criticised for its conventionalism and chastised for: (1) not being realistic; or (2) assuming realism (Stam, 2001). Other critique questions this approach's ability to assert anything, since they maintain that language and reality are mutable, possibly resulting in their stance appearing too flexible and perhaps even foundationless (Doan, 1997). Finally, this approach is criticized for not taking more accountability for its reputation within the academic world, especially since it places so much importance on the accountability of people (Stam, 2001).

Since I am interested in describing how people aged 60 years and older experience their participation in SL, I decided to situate this inquiry in the research context of phenomenology. Considering the aforementioned discussion, phenomenology seems to

be ontologically grounded within the constructivist paradigm, because of its focus on the consciousness of the person and the meaning he or she ascribes to experience.

2.2 PHENOMENOLOGY AS RESEARCH POSITION

In the next section I will discuss the historical development of phenomenology, as well as distinguish between the descriptive and interpretive schools in how they represent phenomenological research. The discussion will close with a summary of the descriptive approach specifically.

2.2.1 Historical Development of Phenomenology

Phenomenology, in a sense, has been practiced for millennia by all cultures and religions that practice the art of meditation. The act of reflecting on the different states of consciousness achieved through meditation is a form of phenomenology. Descartes, Hume and Kant all practiced phenomenology when they contemplated states of perception, thought and imagination (Smith, 2008a, para 27; Zaner, 1970). Franz Brentano (1838-1917) and Carl Stumpf (1848-1936) formed part of the "Preparatory Phase" of the phenomenological movement, and both contributed much to its development; Brentano with the concept of intentionality, and Stumpf demonstrating the scientific rigour of phenomenology (Cohen, 1987; Moran, 2000).

The second phase was called the "German Phase" and was dominated by the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), both of German heritages.

Husserl's theoretical development can be thought of as occurring in three phases. Eugene Fink, Husserl's research assistant, named the three stages of Husserl's theoretical development. He called the first phase "Psychologism", the second "Descriptive Phenomenology" and the third phase "Transcendental Phenomenology". These three phases approximately correspond to Husserl's time at Halle, Göttingen,

and Freiburg (Cohen, 1987; Moran, 2000). At Halle, Husserl, a mathematician, became interested in the relations between mathematics and formal logic. He published his Habilitation thesis in 1887, which proposed a psychological clarification of arithmetic. In his thesis he attempted "psychological analyses, implying a psychological description, of how we form the concept of a number" (Moran, 2000, p. 71). During this phase, Husserl was absorbed in studying the structures of consciousness itself, a project Stumph criticised for its contradiction; phenomenology without phenomena. His years at Göttingen (1901-1913) and Freiburg (1916-1938) were respectively characterised by the second and third phases in his theoretical development. The second phase involved an equal emphasis on objective and subjective aspects of experience and it is during this phase that Husserl introduced the notion of *reduction*. Psychological reduction is aimed at bracketing off the *natural attitude,* which promotes unscientific thinking. Through employing the procedures of reduction, the researcher can enter "...the sphere of the epochè" (Moran, 2000, p. 148). The final phase encompassed pure phenomenology, in which phenomenology was conceived as the universal foundation of philosophy and science. It was between 1906 and 1916 that Husserl formulated a new *transcendentalism*; a condition in which a researcher succeeds in abandoning his or her own lived experience to describe a phenomenon in its pure and universal sense (Cohen, 1987; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

The next proponent in the German Phase was Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who worked as Husserl's assistant from 1919-1923. His phenomenology, known as *existential phenomenology*, was concerned with existential interpretation of our modes of being, including our being-towards-time and being-towards-death. He opposed Husserl's epochè saying that it is not possible for a researcher to bracket off his or her own seeing in an attempt to study a phenomenon in a detached way. Heidegger underlines that humanity is situated within a historical and cultural context. His phenomenology is less concerned with describing phenomena and more concerned with interpreting the meaning of things, whilst being grounded in the things themselves. Heidegger influenced many other great thinkers and proponents of phenomenology

including Hanse George Gadamer, whose efforts have made hermeneutics central to philosophy (Cohen, 1987; Langdridge, 2007; Moran, 2000).

The third phase of phenomenology, termed the "French Phase", saw phenomenology move from Germany to be practiced as the dominant philosophy in France, post World War II. The Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Jean-Paul Sartre, was an accomplished and acknowledged novelist and playwright who contributed to phenomenology in his 1943 publication of "Being and Nothingness", which discusses the human desire for and fear of freedom as it features in human relationships (Moran, 2000; Smith, 2008a, para 44). "Phenomenology of Perception" (1945) is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation of phenomenology. This phenomenology concentrates on "… the experience of the body, the spatiality of the body, the motility of the body, the body in sexual being and in speech, other selves, temporality and the character of freedom..." (Smith, 2008a, para 48). Human embodiment is focal to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and he is quoted by Smith (2008a, para 49) in stating: "...my existence as subjectivity [=consciousness] is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world". Other great thinkers who feature in and around this time period of phenomenological development include Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Simone de Beauvoir (Cohen, 1987; Moran, 2000).

Another discernable phase of the phenomenological movement, not included in the formal timeline, is the "American Phase", which comprises the work of Amedeo Giorgi. Giorgi's academic career began at Manhattan College, followed by Duquesne University and later the University of Quebec, Montreal. Giorgi has been a professor at Saybrook Graduate School, San Francisco since 1986. Giorgi specifically studied the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and developed a phenomenological method of qualitative research inquiry based on his readings (Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi 1992; Koch, 1996; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). He has authored over 100 phenomenological articles, a number of books and is the founder and the original editor of the "Journal of Phenomenological Psychology". Giorgi has lectured on phenomenological psychology in various countries

including Europe, Asia, Latin America, Australia and South Africa (Giorgi, 2009). In considering the historical development of phenomenology, it is possible to identify two distinct schools of thought that transpired, namely, the descriptive tradition and the interpretive tradition. The key distinctions between these two approaches will be put forward in the following section.

2.2.2 Descriptive Phenomenology versus Interpretive Phenomenology

2.2.2.1 Ontology

Descriptive phenomenology advocates for the existence of an external world with real objects moving in space and time. However, understanding of these occurrences can only be achieved by studying how they appear to the perceiving person's consciousness. Consciousness is the interface between a person and the external world, and thus external reality exists for us as objects of consciousness. The nature of reality is also considered objective and mostly independent of history and context (Maggs-Rapport, 2001).

Interpretive phenomenology puts emphasis on *situatedness* and *being-in-the-world* in an attempt to place prominence on context. Researchers from this school of thought hold that people make sense of the world through their existence within it and that understanding people cannot occur in isolation, but rather, people should be described within their contexts of culture, time and history. People's realities are determined by the meaning they derive from living the phenomena in these different contexts (Maggs-Rapport, 2001).

2.2.2.2 Epistemology

According to descriptive phenomenology, we can know phenomena of the world only through our consciousness, through a process known as *intuiting* or the presenting function. "To intuit an object is to respond to it *exactly* as it is presented to

consciousness with nothing added or deleted", thus no interpretations (Maggs-Rapport, 2001, p. 376). Through *intentionality* we direct our consciousness towards phenomena we want to know and then set out to describe the structure of the selected phenomenon as it presents to the person's consciousness (Langdridge, 2007).

Understanding and describing the meaning the phenomenon has for the person, rather than pure description of the structure of the phenomenon in the person's consciousness, is of importance to the interprevist school. This school places more value on knowing how the person interprets the phenomenon and the meaning they attach to the phenomenon. The researcher is able to access this meaning through language and speech, which also reveals the *embeddedness* of the person in the world and the contexts in which they move (Giorgi, 1992; Maggs-Rapport, 2001).

2.2.2.3 Methodology

By use of a specific methodology, the phenomenological researcher sets out to collect information about and describe a phenomenon. The descriptive and interpretive approaches differ in a number of ways in how they undertake a research project.

1.   Question

The descriptive approach advises against a specific research question that might direct the quality of the participant's response. They call for general research questions that permit a spontaneous and broad description of lived experience in relation to the topic. Underlying the question should be an assumption that there is a universal structure or essence associated with the experience. Finally, the question should be independent of context and there should be no guiding framework (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1992; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

In contrast, the interpretive approach requires a highly specific research question, asking for specific descriptions that guide the participant to place the experience in

contexts, such as work, socialisation, relationships, as well as time and body, in order to yield an embedded account. Underlying the question is the motivation to understand the ideographic meaning, instead of finding commonalities within the experience. Lastly, there typically is a guiding framework, such as theory or the researcher's motivation that guides the inquiry (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1992; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

2.   Purpose

Studying the pure content of human subjectivity is the primary goal for the descriptive researcher. Furthermore, the descriptive researcher is interested in revealing the universal structure of the phenomenon that is true for all who live the experience (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1992).

The interpretive researcher is interested in revealing how people make sense of the world through their existence within it, by interpreting what a phenomenon means to the person. They emphasise the diversity and variations of the experience for all involved, rather than the universalities found therein (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1992).

3.   Literature

In order to access the epochè and engage in phenomenological reduction, the descriptive approach advises the researcher not to conduct a literature review before conducting the research project. Literature might inform the researcher about the phenomenon, possibly resulting in the development of presuppositions and biases, which will prevent the researcher from achieving a state of transcendental subjectivity or neutrality (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

The interpretive approach takes an opposite stance to the descriptive approach with regards to literature. This approach affirms that the researcher's knowledge base is what leads to specific ideas on how to proceed with the research. Also, a thorough review of literature actually illuminates the areas in which research is needed and

therefore the interpretive approach encourages the researcher to conduct a literature review before embarking on the research project (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

4.   Material

With the descriptive approach, interviews, written accounts, pictures or any other medium depicting in general an experience of a phenomenon are collected and then analysed for what these accounts reveal about the structure of the phenomenon. However, the descriptive school negates the use of a theoretical orientation or conceptual framework that guides the research inquiry (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

The interpretive approach also uses accounts of people's experience, which may include interviews, texts, and dialogue as research material, but in contrast to the descriptive approach, the interpretive approach doesn't discourage the use of any theoretical or conceptual framework as part of the research process (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

5.   Analysis

Once the researcher has an open phenomenological attitude, he or she can describe freshly the lived experience of another person, without his or her own biases influencing the "seeing" of the phenomenon in its "appearing". Thus, after bracketing off (1) preconceptions about the phenomenon, and (2) the natural attitude, the researcher can encounter the phenomenon exactly as it is given, by reading and rereading the accounts. This step is followed by breaking the data into manageable meaning units and then this data is organised and articulated from a discipline specific perspective. After precisely describing the ideographic experiences of the phenomenon, the researcher moves towards the universal, through eidetic intuition and imaginative variation. Imaginative variation is the process of considering the phenomenon from

different perspectives by varying the features of the phenomenon allowing contingents to fall away, and permitting only the essential structure to remain behind (Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 1997; Langdridge, 2007).

In contrast to the descriptive approach's complete suspension of the outer world, the interpretive approach highlights *dasein,* which refers to the temporal and historical situatedness of the person. The interpretive researcher acknowledges and allows his or her own historical understanding, prejudices and background knowledge to inform the research. Analysis involves a circular process moving to and fro between the *fore-structures* (prior elemental knowledge, for example culture, life-story, and experience) of the researcher, as well as the researcher's own understanding of the phenomenon, and the material accumulated in the investigation from the participants. There is thus a blending of meanings between the researcher's understanding and the participant's understanding of the phenomenon. The steps involved in hermeneutic analysis are summarised as: "...(a) isolating paradigm cases, (b) identifying repetitious themes found in accounts, and (c) selecting exemplary quotes to illustrate themes" (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 177).

6.   Quality

The descriptive approach encourages scientific rigour. In order to achieve maximum research quality, the researcher must continuously strive towards transcendental subjectivity by consistently neutralising biases that might arise during the analysis. The descriptive scientist stays with the evidence, regardless of how it is presented and does not go beyond the data. Finally, the researcher returns to the original naive account to verify the legitimacy of the discipline specific description (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 1992; Langdridge, 2007; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Since the interpretive approach asserts that there is a positive relationship between truth and prejudice, the researcher is encouraged to become familiar with the phenomenon being studied. The interpreter must furthermore go beyond the data by

making interpretations about ambiguous meanings. This is done by way of assumptions, theory, hypothesis or pragmatics. Finally, validity is determined by returning to the subjects for confirmation or rejection of the authenticity of the meanings derived (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 1992; Langdridge, 2007; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

7.   Outcome

Descriptive phenomenology aspires to highlight common features of a phenomenon that is true for all who experience it. Therefore the conclusion of descriptive research is a phenomenological description that illuminates the essential aspects of the phenomenon, and so reveals the structure of the phenomenon, which is and should be true for all who experience that particular phenomenon (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi 1992; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

In contrast to the descriptive approach's rendering of universalities, the interpretive approach reveals the idiosyncrasies and variations of the experience for all involved. The end product is thus the uncovering of concealed meanings embedded in the words of the participants living the experience (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi 1992; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

8.   Criticism

Interpretivists criticise the descriptive approach declaring bracketing impossible and needless and advocate that going beyond the data, through interpretation, is essential. Reasons offered in favour of interpretation include: (1) the presence and ambiguity of the unconscious mind; (2) a need to account for certain gaps in the data; and (3) the self-interpretive nature of human beings, a condition that makes interpretation essential (Giorgi, 1992). Furthermore, because of the descriptive school's emphasis on rigour, it can be seen as slanting towards positivism and can be evaluated as a modernist project

focused on describing the real world out there, rather than capturing the qualitative aspect of the experience (Finlay, 2009).

In opposition to the interpretivist school, the descriptive approach considers going beyond the data totally unnecessary. They assert that interpretation is loaded with the researcher's own meanings and subjectivity, which consequently leaves truth to be a matter of perspective. It further criticises the interpretive approach for its vague boundaries when it comes to interpretation, resulting in the researcher interpreting the participant's interpretation when he or she should be describing the participant's interpretations. This leaves the research vulnerable to pragmatic concerns and the researcher's motives. Furthermore, the interpretive approach advocates anti-foundationalism, but in fact specifies good and bad interpretations, which suggests that there are at least some foundations at work (Giorgi, 1992). Lastly, Finlay (2009) describes the interpretive approach as "artistically orientated" because it employs methods that go beyond the scientific in order to retain the "...concrete, mooded, sensed, imaginative and embodied nature..." (p. 14) of the experience, which stands in contrast to the descriptive approach's requirement for scientific rigour.

2.3   DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY AS RESEARCH POSITION

Based on the preceding discussion, it becomes apparent that descriptive phenomenology is ontologically situated within the constructivist paradigm because of its focus on consciousness. However, epistemologically, descriptive phenomenology seems to be situated closer towards positivism, because of its focus on scientific rigour and describing the structure of the phenomenon, as opposed to describing the meaning the phenomenon has for the person. In this regard, descriptive phenomenology seems to be situated between the realms of realism and relativism. Descriptive phenomenology is not interested in identifying or understanding causality though, but simply aspires to describe in detail a phenomenon as it appears to people's consciousnesses, and subsequently identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon found in these individual accounts. Practically, this results in: "...(i) a focus on first-person accounts of

experience, (ii) an analysis that seeks to discern the underlying structure of an experience and (iii) the production of findings that describe both the universal structure (essence) of the experience and individual idiosyncratic meanings" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 86).

Conclusion

In this chapter three research positions were highlighted, namely positivism, constructivism and constructionism. The chapter focused on the historical development of phenomenology and also addressed phenomenology's distinction between the descriptive tradition and the interpretative tradition. Phenomenology seems to be situated primarily within the constructivist paradigm, because of its focus on consciousness, although descriptive phenomenology seems to slant towards the positivist paradigm in terms of its epistemology and methodology. The chapter concluded with a brief summary on implementing a research project from the descriptive phenomenology perspective. In the following chapter, the methodology of this research project, as it functions in the descriptive framework will be presented.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I briefly consider the two different contexts in which the research takes place, as well as how these contexts might interact to produce scientific knowledge. A description of the sampling method, as well as a description of the demographic characteristics of the participant group follows. Subsequent to the discussion of the participants, I delineate how the research material was generated, analysed and rendered. This is followed by an outline of the steps taken to enhance the quality of the research. Finally, the ethical concerns that impact this study are addressed.

3.1   RESEARCH CONTEXT

Two contexts are relevant to this study. Firstly, the context of SL as exemplified in the first chapter; and secondly, the UP as part of an academic milieu.

Working within an academic and scientific context, I am required to render scientifically generated knowledge. In order for the knowledge to be considered valid it should be: (1) systematic, suggesting that the different segments of the knowledge relate to each other and are regulated or patterned in some way; (2) methodical, implying that a scientific method was employed to obtain the knowledge and that this method is accessible to other scholars should they wish to replicate or examine the information; (3) general, which relates to knowledge being applicable beyond the study, although the specific context of SL is expected to limit findings; and lastly (4) critical, requiring that findings not merely be accepted, but be scrutinised and critically evaluated by scholars and scientists within the scientific community (Giorgi, 1997).

SL's viability as a social research platform has been demonstrated within the scientific research community, as was illustrated in an earlier segment of this text. Research

inquiries from varied disciplines have been conducted in SL with great success (please see section 1.1.2.5 [4]). Therefore it has been established that the academic context and the context of SL can work together to facilitate the generation of quality knowledge, with the proviso that the researcher in the research process adheres to the above-mentioned criteria for scientific rigour.

3.2   RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In the following sections, I discuss the process of sampling, inclusion criteria, and the demographic characteristics of the participant group. Table 1 offers a summary of these characteristics.

A convenient sampling method was used, by which I released a request for participants through the bulk Second Life Educators List (SLED) and the Second Life Researchers List (SLR). Unexpectedly, most respondents were above what was expected to be the mean age of participation in SL, and ranged between the ages of 45 – 79 years. Because of this development, I decided to focus the study on older people's experience of SL.

Inclusion in the study was dependent on two eligibility criteria: (1) SL residency of six months or longer; and (2) being 60 years of age or older. Apart from being in the same age cohort and participating in SL, the participants share two other major demographic characteristics, namely: (1) their USA citizenship, and (2) a tertiary qualification. The average age of the participant group at the time of the research was 66.8 years and ages ranged between 60 – 79 years. SL residency ranged between nine months to four years and four months, with the average being three years and three months. Time spent in SL per day ranged between 30 minutes to approximately six hours, with the average amount of time spent in SL per day accumulating to two hours and 40 minutes. Table 1 provides a visual summation of the participant group. The ensuing chapters are demarcated to individual participants and depict the results of the analyses as it pertains to each individual.

Table 1: Demographic Variables of Participants

Demographics	PC[5]	PL	PI	PB	PP	Average
Age	60	79	64	70	61	66.8
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	
Nationality	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	
Marital Status	Widow	Married	Divorced	Divorced	Married	
Qualification	BS	PhD	MA	MA	PhD	
Profession	Financial Consultant	Professor	Librarian	Publisher	Scientist/ Lecturer	
Employment Status	Employed Full Time	Consultant	Employed Full Time	Semi-retired Self-employed	Employed Full Time	
SL Residency	4 years & 4 months	3 years & 8 months	9 months	3 years & 11 months	4 years & 2 months	3 years & 3 months
Time spent in SL per day	5-6 hours	2 hours	½ hour	1½ hours	2 hours	2 hours & 40 minutes

3.3   RESEARCH MATERIAL

This section delineates how the research material was generated, processed and rendered. I specifically describe how the research material was produced, transcribed, analysed and portrayed.

3.3.1 Producing the Research Material

The duration of the research stretched from 2009 – 2010, and because participants are situated in the USA, cyberspace was the place of contact. Participants were asked to write accounts of their experience in SL in as much detail as possible. Upon receiving the signed consent form, the research question was released: *Please describe in as much detail as possible your participation in SL*. After completing the written account, participants emailed the account back for analysis.

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[5] Participant names were disguised in order to conceal their identities.

3.3.2 Transcribing the Research Material

The electronic Microsoft Word documents were deconstructed into single sentences and numbered for analysis. This simplified the analysis phase of the research, which aims to break down the text into smaller parts, in order to identify themes and meaning units. Identified meaning units were then systematically analysed with the purpose of transcribing the text from a naive description, into psychological language. Thus, in the process I worked with three sources of text; (1) the original naive descriptive text; (2) the individual phenomenological description; and (3) the post analysis psychological significant description.

3.3.3 Analysing the Research Material

Giorgi's method (De Castro, 2003; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 1997; Langdridge, 2007) of descriptive phenomenological analysis was used. His method consists of four distinct phases or steps: (1) reading to gain a sense of the whole; (2) discipline specific reading in order to break the whole text into meaningful parts (units); (3) transformation of the text from everyday language into discipline specific language whilst remaining focussed on the phenomenon being studied; and lastly, (4) synthesis of the transformed material to reveal the structure of the experience, in this case, how people above 60 years of age experience SL. Following is an outline of the process I followed at each of the different phases:

(1) Whole: Initially I read through the text to familiarise myself with the protocol and gain an overall sense of the document. This was done in order to get a clearer understanding of the writer's use of language, the meaning they intended, and to get a better sense of the whole. Each individual sentence was then examined to identify the primary theme and additional secondary themes. This process took place in the context of the epochè in which I attempted to bracket off any preconceptions I had about the topic. I read the text with a sense of

discovery and finally verified the meaning of the text with the text itself.

(2)	Units:	Once I was confident that I had a grasp on the whole, I proceeded to read through the text again. I did this with the purpose of dividing the description into meaning units that expressed a self-contained meaning from a psychological perspective, by considering different key terms, experiential aspects, gains, values and attitudes. In other words, I adopted a psychological attitude whilst reading the text, which allowed experiences, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours related to SL as a place to be revealed. I took great care during this phase not to impose meaning on units that were not intended by the participant, and I did so by remaining in the epochè and by maintaining awareness of the essential whole of the text.
(3)	Transform:	After the meaning units were captured, I set out to transform these meaning units into psychological language. As part of this stage I rewrote each meaning unit into my own language, and later proceeded to "interrogate" each meaning unit by considering the research question in conjunction with the unit, in order to give it psychological significance.
(4)	Synthesise:	Synthesis was done in order to find a final description of the psychological structure under study. After I produced particular descriptions of the SL phenomenon for each participant individually, I interrogated the meaning units from the different protocols with the purpose of discovering what all of them share. By doing this, and engaging in imaginative variation, the essential aspects for older adults' participation in the SL phenomenon were illuminated.

3.3.4 Portraying the Research Material

The results obtained from each participant by use of the above procedure, is comprehensively reported in Chapter 4 to Chapter 8. An integration and discussion of the results follows in Chapter 9, in which the answer to the question posed at the outset of the research inquiry will be revealed. Chapter 10 will present an interplay between the literature review and the results of this study. Chapter 11 will conclude with a summary of the research findings and how the findings impact psychological practice.

3.4 RESEARCH QUALITY

Best research practice within the qualitative research design is promoted by *credibility*, *transferability* and *dependability* (Maggs-Rapport, 2001). Krefting (1990) discusses Guba's model of trustworthiness of qualitative research in which she contrasts best research practice criteria for the quantitative and qualitative research designs. In the next section, the three key elements for ensuring high quality research within the qualitative approach, as identified by Krefting (1990) will be delineated.

3.4.1 Credibility

The qualitative research design accepts that there are multiple realities within the social world, not just one objective reality. Thus, when a researcher works from this perspective it becomes the researcher's responsibility to represent adequately those realities presented by the different participants. Ensuring credibility then involves testing findings against either the participant group or people who are familiar with the topic under investigation. It is suggested that once people who have a similar experience recognise the descriptions as accurately representing the phenomenon, a high level of credibility is then achieved.

3.4.2 Transferability

Applicability refers to the degree to which findings can be generalised to fit other contexts, settings and groups, and is highly relevant to the quantitative research design. Transferability is the term used in the qualitative research method to refer to a similar condition in which findings fit to other similar contexts outside the research context. Importantly, Krefting (1990) refers to Lincoln and Guba who maintain that the responsibility for transferability of findings rests not with the original researcher, but with the party who desires to apply the findings to an alternative context. In other words the researcher is considered to have addressed the criterion of applicability, or more appropriately transferability, adequately when they have described the phenomenon in sufficient detail to allow for such future comparisons.

3.4.3 Dependability

Because of the expected variability within the qualitative research approach, the criterion of consistency is re-conceptualised as dependability, implying that the source of variation must be identifiable. In other words, the research remains dependable even when findings are not replicated as long as the source of variance can be identified. Variability in social research can be ascribed to multiple sources because qualitative research considers the range, rather than the average of experience. The following measures were applied to ensure adherence to the above three criteria:

a) Supervision: Prof Lourens Human, a Counselling Psychologist and lecturer in the Department of Psychology, as well as Dr Machdel Matthee from the Department of Informatics, agreed to act as my supervisors for the duration of the research.

b) Peer review: Fellow Masters Students within the Counselling course were asked to review and scrutinise the work produced throughout the research process.

c) Text review: The analysis of the material and the results obtained were taken back and considered in the context of the text in an attempt to raise the credibility of the research.

3.5   RESEARCH ETHICS

The APA requires that researchers make every effort to comply with ethical standards. Below is a discussion on the ethical considerations pertaining to the current study.

3.5.1   Research Permission

The Postgraduate Committee and Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities of the UP granted me permission to carry out this research, after considering the research proposal.

3.5.2   Research Consent

Each research participants received, signed and returned a consent letter. Section A of the letter comprehensively delineated the conditions of participation, including the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, benefits and rights, confidentiality and future use of research materials. The returned signed section B of the document signified an agreement to informed voluntary participation in the study.

3.5.3   Research Confidentiality

Since there was no anonymity in communications between myself as the researcher and participants, strict confidentiality was maintained throughout the entire research process. For the purpose of ensuring lasting confidentiality, participants' names are disguised and no personally identifiable information from SL or RL was used in reporting the results.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to describe the interaction between the academic and SL environments and how they constitute the research context of this study. Subsequently, the sampling method was disclosed and the research participants were introduced. The research material and research design was discussed next in terms of producing, transcribing, analysing and lastly, portraying the material. The chapter concluded by outlining efforts directed at enhancing the quality of the research and adhering to ethical requirements. The upcoming chapters will feature an analysis of each participant's account in detail.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participant PP

Second Life as a "Feminine Place"

Introduction

PP is a 61 year old physics professor, who has been married for 35 years in RL. He resides in the USA and his highest qualification is a PhD. He is a scientist and lecturer by profession and currently works full time. PP has been a SL resident for four years and two months and spends approximately 120 minutes a day inworld.

From the analysis of PP's written account, it seems that five main themes (T) emerged, namely: (1) "Discovering Second Life" (T1); (2) "Working in Second Life" (T2); (3) "Playing in Second Life" (T3); (4) "Connecting in Second Life" (T4); as well as (5) "Second Life as a Commentary on Real Life" (T5). These five themes will be subsequently discussed.

4.1 THEME 1: DISCOVERING SECOND LIFE

From the analysis it seems that the first main theme in the written account is comprised of two sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as an Unfamiliar Place" (T1a); and (2) "Second Life as an Explorative Place" (T1b).

4.1.1 Theme 1a: Second Life as an Unfamiliar Place

PP came to SL in 2006 because of his RL workplace. He writes:

My workplace had decided to use Second Life to stream a live science event …
Since we were going to stream the event into Second Life, I decided to get some
experience in Second Life before the program. So I entered...

PP decided to enter SL primarily because of his work's decision to broadcast a science
program inworld, however, he took the initiative to gain some prior experience before
the program was to be streamed.

4.1.2 Theme 1b: Second Life as an Explorative Place

Before PP could enter SL, he had to create a virtual representation of himself. In this
regard PP explains:

> … I was given the choice of a male or female avatar. I am a heterosexual male
> who has been married for 35 years, but I have always been interested in life from
> the perspective of a woman, so I immediately chose a female avatar... With
> experience and advice from women friends in SL I have created a much more
> reasonable feminine version of [myself].

PP, who is a male in RL, indicates that he has always been curious about life from a
female perspective and so he took the opportunity to embody a female avatar. This
decision was possibly directed towards exploring life as a female avatar or a need for
him to express his inherent feminine side. Initially his avatar was not very feminine,
however, he states that with increased experience and through input from his female
friends, his avatar became more womanly, and he is able, through the SL script, to
physically express this feminine aspect. He goes on to say:

> Also at first people quickly figured out I was a guy in RL. However, with time I
> became better and now I can play a woman well enough that few figure out I am a
> guy …

Although PP succeeded in projecting the more obvious physical aspect of femininity, he initially had difficulty convincing people that he was a woman in the way he interrelated with others in SL. However, through increased experience and practice inworld, he now plays a woman very convincingly.

4.2   THEME 2: WORKING IN SECOND LIFE

The second main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes. These sub-themes are: (1) "Second Life as a Professional Place" (T2a); (2) "Second Life as a Creating Place" (T2b); and (3) "Second Life as a Learing Place" (T2c).

4.2.1   Theme 2a: Second Life as a Professional Place

PP originally entered SL in his professional capacity and has continued to interact in this way. He states:

> I do also have a male avatar. There are times when I have to give professional presentations in SL to groups who are not as open minded as those who live near me in RL … I have given several science presentations to audiences in SL.

Although the above text contains many other thematical components, including having a second avatar that is male (since it is not always possible for PP to be a female in SL, because of bias), he specifically refers to himself giving professional presentations to audiences and so acts in a professional capacity. Thus SL seems to be favourable for professional interactions.

4.2.2   Theme 2b: Second Life as a Creating Place

PP has spent much of his time inworld creating and constructing a virtual replica of a science museum and the exhibits it holds. In terms of this creating process he writes:

> In SL I had great fun creating interactive science museum exhibits. The joy of creation motivated me to press on through the difficulties of learning.

It would seem that PP is a highly creative individual who enjoys the creative process. In this regard SL can be seen as a place that facilitates such creativity through many tools that enable residents to virtually construct anything that their imaginations can conceive.

4.2.3 Theme 2c: Second Life as a Learning Place

As previously mentioned, SL provides different tools for creativity, however, before being able to make use of their potential, one must gain knowledge of how they work. PP comments:

> I was thrilled by the challenge of learning a new way to program … SL provided me [the] motivation to learn how to use these new tools. I could immediately apply everything I learned to bring interactive science exhibits to life for the hundreds of visitors I receive at my SL museums each week.

PP expresses exhilaration at the learning process for different reasons. Firstly, he finds great satisfaction in the learning process in itself and for itself. Secondly, he enjoys being able to immediately apply this new knowledge to create his museum exhibits. Lastly, it seems as though he finds great pleasure in giving pleasure to others, through the creations housed in his virtual museums.

4.3 THEME 3: PLAYING IN SECOND LIFE

The third main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Recreational Place" (T3a); (2) "Second Life as a Social Place" (T3b); and (3) "Second Life as a Fantasy Place" (T3c) .

4.3.1   Theme 3a: Second Life as a Recreational Place

SL provides different leisure activities and recreational places where people can meet and relate. In this regard PP recalls:

> One other experience I had was meeting a woman from work in SL … she knows me and knows who I am in SL. One day around a pool she convinced me to wear a bikini.

PP describes a recreational activity of being around a pool with a friend. He must have felt comfortable, relaxed and feminine, since he reports that his friend convinced him to wear a bikini, which he did.

4.3.2   Theme 3b: Second Life as a Social Place

As can be seen, PP engages with different people on different levels. In terms of social interaction, PP writes:

> I now have many friends in SL who I see on a weekly basis. I love fitting in with them as [my female avatar] … One day a woman, KB, met me … I took her to my museum … It turns out she was extremely sick and bedridden. SL was her social life.

PP specifies that he has many friends in SL who he engages with socially on a regular basis as his feminine self. Furthermore he relates the story of woman who he befriended. He goes on to mention that she had a medical condition that rendered her bedridden and that SL provided her with social interactions she would otherwise not have been able to have.

4.3.3 Theme 3c: Second Life as a Fantasy Place

SL is mostly a simulation of RL and is therefore largely based on reality, however, elements of fantasy provide a sparkle to this world. PP explains:

> On another occasion I found a dragon avatar that can be controlled in flight by a rider. I became the dragon and she [another woman, not KB or SE] became my rider. It was a fun and joyous experience being flown around by another avatar.

PP recounts how he and his friend re-embodied themselves into fantasy characters and it appears that PP totally immersed himself in this particular experience. Interestingly, PP chose to become the dragon, which placed him in a submissive role characterised by being controlled. Traditionally, the submissive role in relationships was assigned to women, which possibly influenced his decision to take on this position and so experience this aspect of femininity. He describes that being flown around by another was an elating experience. It would appear as though SL provides more than merely a simulation of RL with seemingly endless opportunities for experiencing life differently to the usual, albeit in virtual form.

4.4 THEME 4: CONNECTING IN SECOND LIFE

The fourth main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have four sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Conversational Place (T4a)"; (2) "Second Life as a Friendship Place" (T4b); (3) "Second Life as an Intimate Place" (T4c); and (4) "Second Life as a Sexual Place" (T4d).

4.4.1 Theme 4a: Second Life as a Conversational Place

Implicit in most of PP's account thus far, is the fact that SL facilitates communication between people. This aspect is made explicit in the following text:

When we have difficulties in our RL relationships we meet to discuss them in SL. The Instant Message, IM, channel in SL is a secure and private way to talk … I do have male avatar friends as well, but I enjoy my conversations with the female avatars more...

Two different reasons for communication are highlighted here. Firstly, PP notes that he and his "pool" friend meet in SL to resolve difficulties they experience in their RL relationship. He stresses that through the IM channel they can talk privately and securely. Secondly, PP mentions that he enjoys presumably casual conversations in SL, and more so with people who present themselves as female avatars.

4.4.2 Theme 4b: Second Life as a Friendship Place

During the time PP resided in SL, he has formed many friendships. He writes:

As we were around the pool she invited me to lie down and place my head in her lap. I did this. It was the gesture of warm friendship and I was touched by her offer. She is still my good friend in RL and SL … My best friends in SL have female avatars. I know that many of these female avatar friends in SL are also men in RL.

Here PP describes a rather intimate display of friendship he experienced with one of his good friends. Because SL allows people to behave freely, people are able to express their feelings with spontaneous gestures and in manners comfortable to them, which are also understood by others. PP also stipulates that he enjoys interacting with female avatars most of all, who he knows might also be men in RL.

4.4.3 Theme 4c: Second Life as an Intimate Place

While PP had a relationship with KB, he met another woman who he grew fond of. He writes:

After a year I met another woman, SE… I fell in love with [her]. After a while [she] confessed to me that she was a post-op transsexual as I confessed to her I was a male… Eventually we met in RL and have become purely platonic best friends...

In his relationship with SE, PP seemingly experienced a deeper level of intimacy than he did with KB and describes feelings of being in love. Also, he notes that they "confessed" private details of their real lives to each other, which contributed to increased intimacy between them, resulting in the culmination of their platonic friendship in RL. SL is thus a space that allows for deep, intimate and authentic interactions between two people, seemingly allowing the consciousness or the essence of the person to be experienced.

4.4.4 Theme 4d: Second Life as a Sexual Place

SL does not only allow for emotional intimacy, but also allows people to become sexually intimate. PP explains:

Eventually she found out I was not a woman but it didn't matter to her. … [KB] was also into pixel sex, sex acts in a virtual world. We engaged in passionate sex for a year …

KB realised or "found out" that PP was a man, which reportedly did not offend her. The two of them entered into a sexual relationship, which lasted approximately one year. PP describes her as being "into" pixel sex, suggesting that KB gained satisfaction from sexual encounters in SL. As was mentioned earlier in this document sex and sexuality is a prominent feature of SL.

4.5   THEME 5: SECOND LIFE AS A COMMENTARY ON REAL LIFE

The fifth main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes, namely: (1) "Second Life as an Inclusive Place" (T5a); (2) "Second Life as an Enlightning Place" (T5b) and (3) "Second Life as a Practice Place" (T5c).

4.5.1   Theme 5a: Second Life as an Inclusive Place

It appears as though, because of SL, PP has experienced significant changes in his relationships with female colleagues. He writes:

> Other women at work know I have a female avatar in SL and they talk to me differently now in RL. I am included in conversations about relationships and clothing that I have never been included in before.

PP acknowledges a direct relationship between him having a female avatar in SL and him being included in conversations with women at work in RL. In these conversations they discuss issues considered to be of a feminine nature. We can only imagine why women now choose to allow him to take part in these interactions, possibly because he is a man who is comfortable with exploring femininity and shows respect for it.

4.5.2   Theme 5b: Second Life as an Enlightening Place

As part of the recreational activity, that of being around the pool wearing a bikini, highlighted earlier, PP writes:

> While doing this I got a glimpse into what women must go through when they wear a bathing suit that bares a lot of their bodies; worry about body image. Remember in SL P [PP's female avatar] is heavier than most female avatars … A great RL lesson provided by SL.

PP experiences SL as enlightening, since it allows him to experience life in a manner that is mostly unavailable to him in RL. Because he is seemingly immersed in the role of a woman and he uses words such as "worry", "body image" and "heavier" one can imagine that he experienced some self-consciousness possibly accompanied by various other emotions. He does express that SL provided him with a great RL lesson of life as women experience it, possibly making him more understanding and compassionate towards the female sex in this regard. PP also mentions the potential for SL as an edifying place for men:

> It was a shock playing a woman avatar in SL. I was stunned by the crude sexual pick-up lines employed by males. I think that all college age males should live as a woman in SL for a month just to get over the crude pick-up lines they might try to use in RL.

SL allowed PP not only to experience what being a woman might be like, but also what it is like to be a woman interacting with men. He notes that this was not always a pleasant experience since men can be very crude and overly sexual in the way they approach and relate to women. PP experienced shock at this situation and proposes that all college age males should spend time in SL as a woman to obtain experience from the other side.

4.5.3 Theme 5c: Second Life as a Practice Place

In conjunction with SL being an enlightening and edifying space, it is also experienced as a place to practice. PP writes:

> After being a woman for a year in SL I decided to be a cross-dresser more often in RL. Today I go out dressed as a woman at least once a week. I still view myself as a male, who loves women. But I enjoy dressing as a woman on these occasions.

Again PP draws a direct relationship between being in the role of a woman for a year in SL and his decision to cross dress at least once a week in RL. One can only speculate as to the nature of this relationship, perhaps thinking that he has gained more confidence in his role as a female or perhaps he gets increased enjoyment from expressing his femininity and so needs to experience it more often in RL. This connection between SL and RL activities implies permeability between the two realities. PP goes on to give an explanation of his gender identity as that of a male, attracted to women, but who enjoys dressing as a woman from time to time.

Conclusion

In relating the above-mentioned to the research question in Chapter 1, it seems that PP experiences his participation in SL as enriching on many different levels. He describes how SL has not only afforded him the opportunity to create and expand on his skill repertoire, but also taught him different RL lessons. He actually recommends this world as a teaching ground to others, since it allows a person to experience different sides to life. Primarily, however, PP has enjoyed SL as a place where he can be feminine and have his femininity appreciated. Interestingly, this increased experience with femininity has spilt over into his RL and has had a ripple effect for his interaction with the RL world and the RL world's interaction with him. It would appear as though SL allows PP extra space to express and live a life in addition to what he has chosen for himself in RL.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participant PC

Second Life as a "Social Place"

Introduction

PC is a 60 year old female, who is a widow in RL. She resides in the USA and has a Bachelors of Science degree, graduate studies, and a teaching certification in History, Social Sciences and Anthropology. Currently she is a full-time employee working in financial services. She has been a SL resident for four years and four months and spends between 300 to 360 minutes (five to six hours) a day inworld.

From the analysis of PC's written account, it seems that three main themes emerged, namely (1) "Encountering Second Life" (T1); (2) "Second Life as a Familiar Place" (T2), and lastly (3) "Second Life as a Place to Connect" (T3). These three main these will be subsequently discussed.

5.1   THEME 1: ENCOUNTERING SECOND LIFE

From the analysis it seems that the first main theme in the written account is constituted by three sub-themes, being (1) "Second Life as an Unknown Place" (T1a); (2) "Second Life as an Abandoned Place" (T1b); "Second Life as an Embarrassing Place" (T1c); and "Second Life as a Family Place (T1d).

5.1.1 Theme 1a: Second Life as an Unknown Place

PC came across SL by way of her online interactions. She explains:

When Second Life first came online, I learned about it through my online communities... All of the talk was about the new "world" that was created and I promptly checked it out.

PC mentions her affiliation with different online communities, which suggests that she is a very social person, who seemingly enjoys belonging to different social groups. SL generated avid discussions within these different communities, creating a degree of curiosity within PC, which consequently resulted in her desire to explore this new world.

5.1.2 Theme 1b: Second Life as an Abandoned Place

PC decided to look into SL, however, when she entered this world, her experience was anything but enjoyable. She writes:

…trust me, even back then, SL on dial-up was really a pathetic experience. There didn't seem to be anything to "DO"... I left poor B [PC's avatar] stuck in a bush and never logged in again.

Clearly SL did not meet PC's expectations and she found nothing to do in this world. Seemingly with humour PC explains how she deserted SL and her avatar self, named B, in a virtual bush.

5.1.3 Theme 1c: Second Life as an Embarrassing Place

After this experience PC was totally uninterested in SL, until one of her fellow online community members, H, was going to deliver a speech in SL. She describes her decision to attempt SL for a second time as follows:

Curious enough to… attend this speech… I tried to log in and found that my account had been deleted, so I re-created B… I still had all of the usual problems a newbie [a newbie is someone who is unfamiliar or new to the SL script]

has navigating and ended up sitting on H's head at one point. Embarrassed, I logged off and was never going to darken the doors of SL again...

PC discarded SL after her initial trial of this world. However, because she wanted to show support for her friend and because she was curious about his speech, she attempted to log in again. She recreated her avatar self and explains that she experienced all of the problems of being a newbie she had experienced before. She specifically refers to one "embarrassing" situation in which she mistakenly ended up sitting on H's head in her attempt to navigate this environment. It is evident that her experience of embarrassment was felt in her RL self, suggesting that what happens to the avatar in SL affects the person behind the avatar in RL to a large extent. She decided that she would never again attempt SL.

5.1.4   Theme 1d: Second Life as a Family Place

After this embarrassing experience though, PC discovered that both her children are active inworld. She clarifies:

> … My daughter was starting her BUCKET podcast with her then husband. My son was very involved with the furries.

As PC decided to disengage from SL completely, she realised that her children have avatars inworld and are very busy within their own communities. Specifically, she explains her daughter was starting her BUCKET podcast and her son was associated with the furry community, a community associated with avatars that have both human and animal qualities. This type of lifestyle is also known as anthropomorphism. Having both her children in SL seemingly made her rethink her decision of leaving SL just yet.

5.2 THEME 2: SECOND LIFE AS A FAMILIAR PLACE

The second main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes. These sub-themes are: (1) "Reattempting Second Life" (T2a); (2) "Second Life as a Make-Over Place" (T2b); and (3) "Second Life as a Creative Place" (T2c).

5.2.1 Theme 2a: Reattempting Second Life

PC attempted SL for a third time, ostensibly after finding out her children enjoyed this world. She tells:

> And so I meandered back inworld and poked around – a little short, pudgey avatar with prim red hair, freckles and glasses...

PC describes how she re-entered SL and poked around seemingly without too much zeal. She then goes on to describe her avatar's physical appearance, a little short, plump avatar, with red hair, freckles and glasses.

5.2.2 Theme 2b: Second Life as a Make-Over Place

While PC was looking around and becoming more familiar with this world, she did very little to change her newbie avatar's appearance. She writes:

> I looked like that for months. I didn't touch the sliders and changed until I bought a top I liked from Nyte 'N Day and it didn't fit. Slimming down for that top is what started B on the path to what she looks like today.

PC explains that she did not change her appearance until she bought a shirt from a shop called Nyte 'N Day and it didn't fit her avatar. She decided to alter her physical shape in order to fit into the top. This was the onset of PC's fashioning of what B looks like at present. It would appear that after the initial period of exploring, PC became more

familiar with the SL territory and felt comfortable enough to begin expressing herself in this world, through changing her avatar. Seemingly SL allows its residents to experiment with different physical avatar shapes and appearances, which possibly gives them a different experience of what they may experience in RL.

5.2.3 Theme 2c: Second Life as a Creative Place

Apart from being creative in designing her avatar's appearance, PC also creatively applies herself in other areas of SL. She writes:

> I never did learn to build, but landscaping and creating environments is something that I have become very involved with.

It would appear as though PC enjoys the opportunity SL provides her to create environments and also do landscaping. This speaks of her enjoyment of creating, but also of the freedom and opportunity SL provides her to pursue these interests. Her ability to participate in such activities is indicative of her being more familiar with SL and the tools used to manipulate the world.

5.3 THEME 3: SECOND LIFE AS A PLACE TO CONNECT

The third main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have four sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Networking Place" (T3a); (2) "Second Life as a Recreational Place" (T3b); (3) "Second Life as a Supportive Place" (T3c); and (4) "Second Life as a Communities Place" (T3d).

5.3.1 Theme 3a: Second Life as a Networking Place

PC stresses that SL is a place to form connections. In this regard she explains:

What I learned very quickly about SL was that it is all about connections you make. Originally my toehold in world came through my daughter's contacts with the podcasters – which led me to the music community. The groups that I joined reflected those connections.

In this segment of PC's account it becomes evident that SL promotes social connectedness. According to PC, this is a large part of what SL offers its residents. She herself got her footing in SL through her daughter and her contact with the podcasters, presumably a specific community in SL. Her affiliation with them resulted in her attraction to the music community and her subsequently joining of related groups. By and large this is very similar to RL networking.

5.3.2 Theme 3b: Second Life as a Recreational Place

PC also enjoys another side of SL outside of her daughter's communities. She tells:

> Outside of that milieu, I joined the Silver Dollar and spent many hours line dancing and talking to the people around me and discovered the joys of camping for L$.

PC joined the Silver Dollar, which a strip club and brothel in SL, to participate in line dancing. Here she spent a lot of time interacting with people through dancing and conversation. She also enjoys camping for L$. Camping for L$ is very common in SL where people spend a large amount of time in a single region with the purpose of attracting avatars, consequently increasing traffic to that area.

5.3.3 Theme 3c: Second Life as a Supportive Place

SL appears to be a place where people help each other. PC herself plays a helping role:

> By the end of my first year, I was helping newcomers with the steep learning curve that SL can present.

PC extended her SL experience and knowledge to others in order to help them become more familiar with the intricacies of this environment. To some extent we can presume that this made PC feel useful and also gave her a certain purpose in SL.

5.3.4 Theme 3d: Second Life as a Communities Place

Diverse communities exist within the realm of SL, PC notes those that B is a member of:

> Today B remains strongly identified with the mentoring... and music communities. I have five alts for different sets of communities – two for Gor and BDSM, one child avatar that keeps me connected to the very lively child community, one nekko and one martian.

At present B remains involved with mentoring and music communities. PC states that she has five alternative (alts) avatars for the different communities she frequents. These are the Gor (short for Gorian) and BDSM (dominance and submission and sadism and masochism) communities in SL that enjoy master slave role playing games that may or may not be of a sexual nature. PC also has a child avatar which she explains keeps her connected to the lively child community in SL. The Neko community in SL is a group of avatars who have catlike features, most often ears and tails, striped skin or paws, and who value catlike attributes. The Martian community of SL is a community from a Mars simulation in SL.

It becomes clear that SL does not restrict a person to only one avatar or personal representation, and thus one can truly experiment with many different identities inworld, without it affecting one's other identities or relationships.

Conclusion

In relating the above-mentioned to the research question in Chapter 1, it seems that SL's social life is what most attracts PC to participate in this world. Although her initial

experience of SL was less than satisfactory, she later found it to be of value and presently spends many hours a day in this world. PC mostly writes about how SL is a place for her to connect with her children and other people, through socializing and engaging in virtual activities for entertainment purposes. Also, SL provides PC the opportunity to express different qualities of herself and also experiment with different ways of being, by allowing her to create multiple avatars for the many and diverse communities to which she belongs.

CHAPTER 6

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants PB

Second Life as a "Place of Opportunity, with Restrictions"

Introduction

PB is a 70 year old male to female transgender divorcee in RL. She resides in the USA and her highest qualification is a Masters degree. She works in publishing and is currently semi-retired and self-employed. PB has been a SL resident for three years and 11 months now and spends approximately 90 minutes a day inworld.

From the analysis of PB's written account, it seems that six main themes emerged, namely: (1) "Discovering Second Life" (T1); (2) "Educating in Second Life" (T2); (3) "Working in Second Life" (T3); (4) "Leisure in Second Life" (T4); (5) "Connecting in Second Life" (T5); and (6) "Second Life as a Restrictive Place" (T6). These six main themes will be subsequently discussed.

6.1 THEME 1: DISCOVERING SECOND LIFE

From the analysis it seems that the first main theme in the written account is constituted by two sub-themes, being (1) "Second Life as an Unknown Place" (T1a) and (2) "Second Life as an Ideal Place" (T1b).

6.1.1 Theme 1a: Second Life as an Unknown Place

Originally PB aspired to create a non-profit online college, and it is because of this objective that she discovered SL. She explains:

Even before I had heard of Second Life, I had filed incorporation papers in 2004

to found a non-profit online college, called [BC] … By mid-2006, when I discovered Second Life, it seemed the answer to my dreams.

It would appear as though initially, the creation of BC, an online non-profit educational institution was the primary reason PB was interested in SL. She discovered this virtual world two years after beginning the process of establishing BC College and it appeared to be the ideal space in which to pursue her dream.

6.1.2   Theme 1b: Second Life as the Ideal Place

As PB spent more time inworld she found many reasons why SL was such an opportune environment for education and elaborates on the attributes that contributed to this:

> Not only was it 3-D, but there was already a community of educators, some schools which had whole islands (sims) built like campuses, there were talks, and SL tools for teaching … So, I decided to devote my energies toward developing my college in Second Life … For me, Second Life has been like opening a door to myself as well as to the future …

Multiple factors contributed to this space being ideal for PB's purpose of building BC College, and it becomes clear that she spent a good deal of time researching this environment. She names various programs and functions that operate in SL to facilitate the educational process. As she learnt about and became more familiar with this world she decided to devote herself to developing her college here. She later goes on to state that SL opened a door to her own self and the future, leading the researcher to believe that she finds this world to be enriching and challenging.

6.2 THEME 2: EDUCATING IN SECOND LIFE

The second main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have two sub-themes. These sub-themes are: (1) "Second Life as a Campus" (T2a); and (2) "Second Life as an Edifying Place" (T2b).

6.2.1 Theme 2a: Second Life as a Campus

PB spent a lot of time and energy creating a virtual campus. She explains:

> I converted one building to create a four-story U-shaped structure with a wide porch and balcony to be the main educational site, a friend built another structure in an interesting fashion for me, I bought or acquired a few other houses and structures that would be suitable.

Seemingly SL provided PB the opportunity to make manifest her vision of what a virtual campus looked like. She describes converting a four-story U-shaped building, which would be the main educational site with other satellite buildings surrounding it. Implicit in this text is the fact that PB worked hard and extensively in putting together her campus, using a lot of vision and creative energy. Creatively assembling virtual campuses is apparently a topic of discussion in SL, PB notes:

> Discussion among educators raised the question for everyone: Should a college just replicate its own campus in Second Life, or should they use the resources of Second Life in more creative ways?

Many RL Colleges and campuses have assimilated islands in SL and this discussion questions whether these RL campuses should replicate their physical structure inworld, or whether these colleges and universities should use SL virtual resources more creatively, seemingly to promote education and the learning process. Educating and

learning differently, is an opportunity that SL provides educators and students respectively.

6.2.2 Theme 2b: Second Life as an Edifying Place

SL is not only a learning environment for students, but also a place that provides educators with challenges that edify. PB explains:

> One of the Germans [another avatar in SL] came up with the idea of creating, or recreating historical events … I settled on the Summer of Love 1967 … with the help of the three of them and another couple of people, we spent 4 months creating a "reverse archaeology" project, again, designed for students to participate. It was a great learning experience for me, and I assume for my co-builders, but although we had visitors, we again did not attract students.

In an attempt to attract students to participate in BC College events, PB together with another few people created a "reverse archaeology" project. They spent four months on this task and PB notes that it was a great learning experience for her, and presumably for her co-creators. Unfortunately, although they attracted many visitors to the event they did not attract students, which seemingly was very disappointing to PB. She had the physical and educational structure of the campus in place, but attracting students to attend courses became the next challenge. Implicit in this text is the opportunity SL affords professionals to collaborate and work together, to for example try and overcome challenges. In this specific occasion educators worked together to co-construct a learning experience.

6.3 THEME 3: WORKING IN SECOND LIFE

The third main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Cost-Effective Place" (T3a); (2) "Second Life as a Creative Place" (T3b); and (3) "Second Life as a Commercial Place" (T3c) .

6.3.1 Theme 3a: Second Life as a Cost-Effective Place

The opportunity SL provides professionals to cooperate in a working environment was referred to in the previous section of this chapter (T2b). One of the reasons why SL is such an opportune working environment is largely because it is so cost-effective. In this regard PB writes:

> I bought a whole island. At $150US per month, it was way cheaper than even the smallest RL (Real Life) office would cost... That put me on a better basis for actual planning a campus...

SL provided PB with the means to transform an island into her vision of an ideal campus. In this segment of the text she also draws an economic comparison between RL and SL, as places of work, stipulating that SL is financially more viable than RL. This is one factor that placed her in a better position to construct her virtual College.

6.3.2. Theme 3b: Second Life as a Creative Place

Apart from being a place that fosters creativity and originality, SL is also a place filled with creation. PB tells:

> Here I could build anything I wanted … The first thing I built was a small stage with a band shell in one corner. One of my interests was languages, and I'd discovered that SL was international, so I set out to create a French house, an English house, a meeting room, [and] a Spanish house.

PB appears to be excited at the thought of building and creating virtually anything she could think up. Initially she built a small stage and an area for a band to perform. In doing so, she apparently recognised people's expectation for socialising and recreation when logging into SL. PB also states that she is interested in languages. SL, because it is international, provides her the opportunity to be exposed to different languages and

cultures. For this purpose, she created different houses for the different nationalities active in this world.

6.3.3 Theme 3c: Second Life as a Commercial Place

Accordingly, because of SL international status it is rendered an enormous and diverse marketplace, which affords people the opportunity to generate income. PB decided to make use of this opportunity:

> I decided to help fund the monthly payment by renting some parcels, as I'd seen done on at least two other education islands. And I put in a small harbour in one corner, with a few shops, with the idea that a little commerce might draw some traffic.

Instead of paying the US$150 out of her own pocket, PB acted in an enterprising manner and made her assets work for her. Specifically, she leased some parcels of land to other SL residents to use for their own purposes. She explains that she saw this done on other educational islands. Another innovative manoeuvre was to bring in a harbour with shops. She did this in an attempt to draw people (traffic) to the island and BC College.

6.4 THEME 4: LEISURE IN SECOND LIFE

The fourth main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have two sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Recreational Place" (T4a); and (2) "Second Life as an Artistic Place" (T4b).

6.4.1 Theme 4a: Second Life as a Recreational Place

Earlier we touched on PB's incorporation of recreational spaces in her campus. She seemingly values recreation as part of the educational atmosphere and explains:

I acquired that plot … and decided to treat it as a recreation area, with a shack and a swimming pool … And I devoted one area to a full-sized soccer field, with goals and marker lines and a few stadium seats.

PB apparently worked hard at creating an optimal educational milieu, not only catering for the academic aspect and the cultural component, but also ensuring opportunities for socialising, sport and recreation. Seemingly SL allows a person a truly broad experience of virtual physical activity.

6.4.2 Theme 4b: Second Life as an Artistic Place

SL not only allows a person to physically express himself or herself, but it also affords people the opportunity to express themselves mentally and aesthetically. PB recounts:

> … another resident persuaded me to allow him to use the space for part of an art show … The pieces he had on my island included French railway cars, a space capsule [and] an environmental piece - all requiring a lot of space.

Apparently PB accommodated another SL artist to use a certain space on her island for his art exhibition. The works of art were of a diverse nature, but all of the pieces required lots of space. Implied in the latter part of the text is the manner in which the SL environment simulates the RL physical environment. It would appear that even though SL is a virtual world, there seems to be physical dimensions to this world and certain physical laws act within it. This might at times restrict a person and so force them to work within these "laws", much like we are expected to do in RL. These laws, however, are seemingly less restrictive then RL and allows a person (avatar) more mental and physical freedom.

6.5   THEME 5: CONNECTING IN SECOND LIFE

The fith main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Community Place" (T5a); (2) "Second Life as a Place of Support" (T5b); and (3) "Second Life as a Place of Diversity" (T5c) .

6.5.1   Theme 5a: Second Life as a Community Place

PB initiated and joined different communities as part of her SL experience. She writes:

> I created the "[BTC]" group for teachers, as well as a "BC" group. Meanwhile, I was getting to know other educators, [and] what they were doing … I attended, and continue to attend, educator get-togethers … I continue to participate in educational events in SL. I was invited to set up a project in a new library island, showing innovation … And I have been accepted into a community of innovators on a quiet island …

This segment of PB's account illustrates how SL affords people the opportunity to belong to different communities and be connected. She herself created two groups, one for teachers and the other a seemingly general group for avatars who enjoy being members of BC College. The educators in SL appear to be a very active community, who enjoy participating in meetings and educational events in this virtual world. PB also mentions that she was invited to participate in an innovative project on a library island. This not only shows collaboration between people and academic disciplines, but it is also indicative of how SL allows people to network and further their "virtual careers". Another community PB belongs to is a community of innovators, who gather together on a quiet island.

6.5.2   Theme 5b: Second Life as a Place of Support

PB experienced a lot of support from people within SL. She tells:

> [I] found, along the way, a number of people who were willing to help me for free, which seemed to be the culture, at least among educators in SL … I relinquished the [BC] to a friend who is pursuing similar goals, and I'll be on the Board…My learning experience has been that it is a different culture, with a tremendous amount of good will and cooperation …

Seemingly PB is very grateful for all the help she received in pursuing her dreams. She makes an interesting remark about the help offered within the educator's community as being unconditional or in her own words "for free", suggestive of great support and benevolence. She describes how she relinquished BC College to a friend of hers who has similar aspirations, which also shows a tremendous amount of good will on her part. She, however, will be acting on the board, possibly in a supportive or advisory role, since she has gained much experience from her time in SL. Lastly, although SL is comprised of a diversity of cultures, she ascribes to SL its own unique culture with attributes of remarkable goodwill and cooperation.

6.5.3 Theme 5c: Second Life, a Place of Diversity

Because of SL's international status, it is host to many different cultures and a variety of languages are spoken here. Avatars sharing RL or virtual culture and language congregate to form their own virtual communities and settlements inworld. PB, with her interest in languages tells:

> I made an enormous map of Europe covering half the soccer field, and created landmark posts, one for each linguistic community, with landmarks to other sites in Second Life speaking that language. In the process, someone from the Basque country wanted a landmark too, and another for Esperanto. I set up a line-up of speakers and created one area for the talks…

PB created a linguistic educational event in which she constructed a map of Europe with landmark posts associated with each of the linguistic communities she accommodated

in this event. Landmark posts are used to identify specific sites in SL and in accessing such landmark posts, one can instantly teleport to that region and gain an experience with the people and of the culture in that region. She recounts that in this process an avatar from the Basque country, an autonomous community situated in Northern Spain, requested such a landmark.

PB set up another landmark for Esperanto. Interestingly, Esperanto is not a country, however, it is a recognised as an international language that was created by Dr Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof between the late 1870s and early 1880s (Stavans, 2009). He created this language with the intention of it becoming a global international language, spoken by all nations. His hope was that this language would result in improved understanding between the nations of the world, and because it is free from prejudice, it would foster harmony and peace in world relations. Seemingly this language is gaining prominence in our contemporary time (Harlow, 1998). The interested reader is referred to the following website for more information and resources on the topic of Esperanto (http://192.220.96.203/efaq.html).

6.6   THEME 6: SECOND LIFE AS A RESTRICTIVE PLACE

The sixth main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have four sub-themes, namely: (1) "Second Life as a Frustrating Place" (T6a); (2) "Second Life as Place for Teens" (T6b); (3) "Second Life as a Biased Place" (T6c); and "Second Life as a Discouraging Place" (T6d).

6.6.1 Theme 6a: Second Life as a Frustrating Place

Although SL provided PB with the opportunities she needed to create her virtual campus, it did at times leave her frustrated and dispirited. She explains:

> … the island monthly fee began to be a problem. Still no students, and the teachers coming didn't come with students. At this stage, it wasn't apparent to

me that young people were not attracted to Second Life, they found "nothing to do". And I was running into an issue that I started devoting a lot of time to: Second Life Main Grid was not open to people under the age of 18.

One of the difficulties PB encountered was of a financial nature. A second difficulty was a lack of student support for her College. With increased experience in SL, PB found that young people were not attracted to SL. According to her, they found "nothing to do" in SL. Because of these issues, she experienced sustaining her College difficult and frustrating at times. After realising that teenagers were not allowed onto SL's Main Grid, PB started researching SL's Teen Grid, in an attempt to increase the likelihood that students would come to BC College.

6.6.2 Theme 6b: Second Life as a Place for Teens

SL has two Grids, a Main Grid for adults, and a Teen Grid for youth under the age of 18 years. PB created a second avatar to enter the Teen Grid. She explains:

> They had a Teen Grid for 13-17 year-olds, and I developed a second avatar to go there and see if it was [sic] possible to bridge that gap. My intended audience of students were both under and over 18 … I expected to find eager students. Instead, the teens there…didn't go there to learn.

PB desired to bridge the gap between the two Grids, which would allow adults access to the teen world, and teens access to the adult world. PB intended for this gap to be a portal of education for the teens, since she expected to find eager students, however, she was again disappointed. She found that similarly to Main Grid, the youth in Teen Grid didn't go there to learn.

6.6.3 Theme 6c: Second Life as a Biased Place

Because of her attempts to bridge the gap, PB encountered opposition and

counteraction, which led to steps being taken against her by the Director of Teen Grid. She writes:

> … when I tried to set up SLOODLE so that youth on both Grids could participate, the director of the island on the Teen Grid prohibited it, and banned me from the island, in order to protect the teens from any contamination from outside…she saw her duty, and did it.

While PB attempted to set up SLOODLE (Simulation Linked Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment)[6], a programme that integrates the multi-user virtual environment of SL and which provides a range of tools that support education in immersive worlds, she was expelled from the island by the director of Teen Grid. She seemingly has no animosity against the director, explaining that she merely did her duty to protect the teenagers from possible outside contamination that could be of a questionable nature. In this regard then it could be said that PB experienced some bias and found aspects of SL to be restrictive.

6.6.4 Theme 6d: Second Life as a Discouraging Place

After this experience PB refocused on Main Grid, however, she experienced the lack of students here to be highly disappointing. She writes:

> Back on Main Grid, I was discouraged about no students … After two years on the island, I became discouraged with the campus … I was at the point of destroying everything that I'd built …

Clearly PB found SL to be discouraging, mainly because she was unable to attract students to BC College. For this reason she became discouraged with the campus, so much so that she felt like destroying all that she had built in the two years' time she invested in SL.

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[6]   More information can be found on http://www.sloodle.org/moodle/.

Conclusion

In relating the above-mentioned to the research question in Chapter 1, it seems that PB thought SL to be a place of opportunity in which she could realise her dreams of establishing an online college. She spent a great amount of time and effort building her campus in SL. Unfortunately, however, she encountered some difficulties, primarily with attracting students to her online college. She made several attempts to draw students to her college and showed substantial perseverance. Later, after all her efforts she understandably became somewhat discouraged. She construed that youth don't go to SL to learn, but have other motivations for entering this online reality, exploring other opportunities apart from the educational context. In her experience then it appears as though this opportune world presented her with multiple restrictions.

Finally, she relinquished her college to one of her friends who also aspires towards creating different types of educational opportunities within SL. Even though PB's main motivation for participating in SL waned, she continues to take part in other prospects this world offers her and remains an active SL participant.

CHAPTER 7

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participant PL

Second Life as an "Educational Place"

Introduction

PL is a 79 year old male, who is married in RL. He resides in the USA and his highest qualifications are PhDs in Sociology and Human Relations. He currently works on a consultancy bases. He has been a SL resident for three years and eight months and spends approximately 120 minutes a day inworld.

From the analysis of PL's written account, it seems that three main themes emerged, namely: (1) "Enrolling in Second Life" (T1); (2) "Second Life as a Campus" (T2); and lastly (3) "Second Life and Challenges" (T3). These three main themes will be discussed subsequently.

7.1   THEME 1: ENROLLING IN SECOND LIFE

PL stumbled across SL whilst he was considering online teaching initiatives. He explains:

> My original interest in SL resulted from my founding, along with my wife, … the Hispanic Addictions Studies Program (HASP) … In pursuing the possibilities of online teaching programs and methods, I learned of the Berkman Center at Harvard and their innovative work in Second Life.

PL and his wife founded the HASP, an addictions study programme specifically focused on the Hispanic population. PL wanted to make HASP available online and began to

research online teaching programmes and methods. He learned about innovative work being done in SL by Harvard University and he decided to examine this world.

7.2   THEME 2: SECOND LIFE AS A CAMPUS

The second main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have four sub-themes. These sub-themes are: (1) "Second Life as an Outreach Place" (T2a); (2) "Second Life as a Meeting Place" (T2b); (3) "Second Life as a Cultural and Recreational Place" (T2c); and "Second Life as a Teaching Place" (T2d).

7.2.1   Theme 2a: Second Life as an Outreach Place

PL discovered that SL would well suit his purpose of making HASP available online. He began the process of establishing this educational programme in SL. He writes:

> We persuaded the administration…to purchase an island in SL…where we would develop bilingual programs and courses…that would reach out to scholars and students throughout the Spanish speaking countries and those in the U.S. that were working in this field.

PL convinced the University administration to purchase an island in SL where he and his wife would develop bilingual (Spanish and English) programmes and courses. The courses were designed to extend information to scholars and students within the Spanish speaking countries as well as the Spanish communities residing in the USA who had any interest in the field of addiction.

7.2.2   Theme 2b: Second Life as a Meeting Place

With this goal in mind, they constructed a physical space conducive to information dissemination. PL provides the following details:

…we began the creation of buildings that would provide information, research papers, available on-line books, etc., as well as meeting places, both academic and social, enabling participants to come together for formal and informal exchange of ideas.

In this description, PL paints the picture of an online campus, with the physical infrastructure usually associated therewith. True to the original, they established buildings for the purpose of holding information, research papers and online books, much like a library. They created meeting places for both social and academic encounters. Here groups of people could collaboratively engage in an informal or social way, as well as a more formal or professional way.

7.2.3 Theme 2c: Second Life as a Cultural and Recreational Place

PL specifically set out to attract Hispanic and Spanish youths to HASP and wanted to ensure that the simulation attracted this particular target group. He tells that:

In visiting many other sites in SL … it became apparent to me that the content of our simulation could best be utilized not only through specific intellectual approaches but also through cultural cues that make participants feel comfortable: art, artefacts, music, food, dance, etc., in brief, as many elements of Hispanic cultures as we could squeeze in. I envisioned a rotating art collection, a social room with food and dancing, a caretaker's apartment, as well as the conference rooms, a library, and classrooms with PowerPoint presentations and Video.

PL came to the realisation that to attract as many people as possible, he should not only have an intellectual component to his simulation, but also cultural and recreational components aimed specifically at Spanish and Hispanic cultures. He imagined including many different Hispanic cultural cues, including art. He wanted a social room with food and dance where people could entertain themselves or be entertained. Clearly PL

appreciated that many people come to SL for social interactions and other forms of entertainment. Primarily, however, he envisioned an academic milieu comprising of different elements conducive to the learning process.

Seemingly, SL is a free space through which PL travelled and learnt from other people and simulations. Subsequently he reformulated and applied this newfound knowledge to create a simulation ideal for his own unique purpose. Furthermore, there appears to be a strong cultural component to this world, not only allowing for the shared SL culture, but also accommodating already established cultures of RL, such as the Hispanic culture. Another important theme that becomes evident from this segment is that SL facilitates both social and academic interactions.

7.2.4 Theme 2d: Second Life as a Place of Teaching

PL wanted to use SL as a teaching ground to educate people about addiction. In this regard he notes:

> The more I explored the possibilities of the addictions research information I could deliver, the more I learned about and could foresee the possibilities of online education using synchronous formats as compared to the static asynchronous online courses I had thought little of during my teaching days.

PL saw immense possibilities for delivering addiction information in SL because it is synchronised, allowing for real-time interaction between multiple participants. Aligned with his aims, it offers the possibility of a virtual classroom where a group of people can have interactive discussions. He goes on to compare this format to asynchronous formats, which are characterised by delayed threaded responses very similar to email communications. He remarks that, in contrast to SL, he thought little of this type of online course in his teaching days.

7.3 THEME 3: SECOND LIFE AND CHALLENGES

The third main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have three sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as a Work Place" (T3a); (2) "Second Life as a Conversational Place" (T3c); and (3) "Second Life as a Satisfying Place" (T3d).

7.3.1 Theme 3a: Second Life as a Work Place

Apart from describing SL as an educational context, PL also mentions various work related activities that challenged him at the outset. He goes on to explain:

> …since we had no IT people to help us, I (trained primarily in theoretical sociology and psychology) had to do it myself for whatever we wanted done in SL. This was not an easy task, especially at my age (without knowledge of the technical language so many others in SL seem to bandy about) but the satisfaction I got from teaching myself to design, build, create, maintain, and deliver services in SL was more than I had ever expected and the more I did, the more I enjoyed working in SL.

Initially PL points out that they had no Information Technology (IT) professionals to help them create the infrastructure and other adjuncts they needed in SL, and creating everything they needed was solely his responsibility. He explains that this was no easy task and provides two reasons for this. Firstly, he was trained in theoretical sociology and psychology and did not have the technical knowledge and IT language proficiency others in SL had; he had to acquire it. Secondly, he mentions that his age (79 years old) at times proved to be another challenge. However, he recounts that he achieved immense satisfaction and enjoyment from working in SL, engaging in activities such as creating, designing, building, maintaining and delivering services inworld. Seemingly, SL does not discriminate between age and profession and will accommodate any person who embraces a challenge, and is willing to put in the effort.

7.3.2 Theme 3b: Second Life as a Conversational Place

As well as being a place that challenges, SL also provides tools and functionalities that help people overcome their own challenges. PL explains:

> As someone who is linguistically challenged, the use of chat translators in SL has given me new opportunities (without having to use an intermediate person) to directly relate to others whose language I do not speak.

SL affords PL the opportunity to relate, interact and connect with people from other nationalities and languages, without the use of a translator. One can deduce that PL recognises the limitations of relating through an intermediate person, and seems excited about the ability to have a different type of interaction. Seemingly SL allows people to cross cultural, geographical and language barriers.

7.3.3 Theme 3c: Second Life as a Satisfying Place

As part of SL challenging him intellectually and helping him overcome his linguistic limitations, PL experiences a great deal of satisfaction from his participation in SL. He expresses:

> SL opened a whole new world to me of creativity and three-dimensional thinking about presentations and communications. I feel extremely proud at having accomplished almost every one of the tasks I set out to do … my experiences in SL have been very positive … It not only has opened up a new way of communicating educational information for me but also has given me great intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction.

PL stipulates two reasons why he finds his participation in SL satisfying, both intellectually and aesthetically. Firstly, SL expanded his thinking about presentations and communications, and he is now able to inform and educate differently and in a

more creative manner. Secondly, because of the various challenges PL had to conquer, he now feels a sense of pride and reward.

Conclusion

In relating the above-mentioned to the research question in Chapter 1, it seems that PL pursued SL primarily for the possibilities it afforded him and his wife to educate people, especially Hispanic people, about addiction. In the process of establishing HASP within SL, PL experienced himself differently and overcame most of the challenges this virtual world and its new technology posed to him. He moved beyond limitations of age, profession and technology. Seemingly, PL has created a successful outreach programme that brings together Spanish speaking people around the world and also those who aspire to work in the field of addiction. SL has furthermore offered PL the opportunity to relate to other cultures in a very personal and unique manner through the tools that are available in this virtual world. He describes his experience of SL as positive and highly satisfying.

CHAPTER 8
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participant PI
Second Life as a "Librarian's Place"

Introduction

PI is a 64 year old lady, who is divorced in RL. She resides in the USA and has various Master's degrees. Currently she is a part-time employee, but has worked as a librarian for some time. PI entered SL in June 2009 and spends approximately 30 minutes a day inworld.

From the analysis of PI's written account, it seems that three main themes emerged, namely: (1) "Engaging in Second Life" (T1); (2) "Librarian Community in Second Life" (T2), as well as (3) "Disengaging from Second Life (T3)."

8.1   THEME 1: ENGAGING IN SECOND LIFE

From the analysis it seems that the first main theme in the written account is constituted by three sub-themes, being: (1) "Avoiding Second Life" (T1a); (2) "Approaching Second Life" (T1b); as well as (3) "Second Life and Me" (T1c).

8.1.1 Theme 1a: Avoiding Second Life

The first time PI entered SL she experienced the world as foreign and as a place that she didn't understand. She states:

> I remember trying out … Second Life … and not being impressed … [T]he first thing they wanted you to do … was fuss with your appearance. Since I don't fuss with myself in real life, the idea of fussing with my avatar in a virtual world seemed

tedious and silly. I didn't run into anyone interesting to talk to in either world. I just didn't get it.

Two reasons are indicated for PI's initial discomfort with and avoidance of SL. Firstly, fussing with her physical appearance in both RL and SL was unlike her and something she experienced as inane. Secondly, she didn't encounter satisfying interpersonal interactions.

8.1.2 Theme 1b: Approaching Second Life

PI's initial avoidance of SL was cut short after she read enthusiastic posts about SL, which convinced her to approach this world again. She writes:

> ...in 2006 a group of intrepid librarians decided that Second Life was a place to explore and started posting very enthusiastic reports of what they were doing in Second Life. No point in resisting. I got back on in June 2006 and this time I got it.

Subsequent to finding out that there were numerous interesting things to do in SL, PI was motivated to enter this world for a second time. PI began to better understand this world and some of what it had to offer.

8.1.3 Theme 1c: Second Life and Me

One gains access to SL through a virtual representation, called an avatar. In this regard PI describes how she entered SL after fashioning her virtual self:

> I was deliberate about picking out an avatar that seemed to fit in with the communities I frequented – and I was not interested in taking a motherly – or a grandmotherly role. I'm happy to tell people my real age and my profession…

PI was influenced by two factors when constructing her virtual self-representation. The first factor, she stipulates, is the desire to fit into the communities to which she belonged. Rejecting "motherly" roles is the second influencing factor she mentions. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that although PI is honest about her RL, she enjoys the freedom to explore other identities and interactions apart from what she possibly experiences in RL. PI's evolving virtual identity commenced with winning a makeover. She explains:

> … [F]ixing your avatar up in Second Life is an indicator that you are fully engaged and ready to present yourself as something other than a newbie … Still not good at fashion I was lucky enough to win a makeover and now have a reasonably nice shape and skin, some prim hair, and a few other accoutrements …

This segment suggests that personalising your avatar communicates a degree of earnestness and commitment when engaging in SL. Initially, this condition caused PI some discomfort because she experiences herself as lacking fashion sense and does not enjoy worrying about her appearance, however, she was fortunate to win a makeover that enhanced her avatar presentation. She seemingly values and enjoys her new look, possibly more so because she received it as opposed to actively creating it herself. SL allows her, through her avatar, to engage with the world, others and especially herself in a novel way. This, together with other factors is highlighted in the following segment of her account:

> My avatar probably looks about 25 – not 64 my true age. Does this have to do with ageism? … What kind of world is Second Life if it seems that many avatars are young, handsome and mostly white? What about making other choices? Why not take the shape of a pitcher of Kool-Aid or a bunny – or an older person?

It becomes evident that SL affords PI the opportunity to interact with herself differently, specifically from an age point of view. However, it would appear that the age discrepancy between her RL self and her avatar generates some conflict within her.

Another observation she made inworld, which she identifies and reflects on in the above segment of text, is the SL trend of presenting yourself as young, handsome and white. Appearing rather dissatisfied with this norm, she provides three alternative "forms" for engaging in this world, and interestingly offers an inanimate object associated with childhood, an animal and a shape that is true for her RL self.

8.2   THEME 2: LIBRARIAN COMMUNITY IN SECOND LIFE

The second main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have various sub-themes that make up this main theme. These sub-themes are: (1) "Second Life as a Meeting Place" (T2a); (2) "Second Life as a Working Place" (T2b); (3) "Second Life as a Networking Place" (T2c); (4) "Second Life as a Conversational Place (T2d); as well as (5) "Second Life as an Entertaining Place" (T2e).

It is important to note that there are a multitude of different communities in SL, each established for a different purpose, aiming to satisfy the different and diverse needs of people inworld. Examples of these communities are the Gorean, Steampunk, Blingtard, Furries and Vampire communities who actively engage in role-play. There are also communities established for business, artistic and musical interests. One such a sub-group within the larger educational society is the librarian community.

8.2.1 Theme 2a: Second Life as a Meeting Place

PI interacts with other librarians in Cybrary City, a library simulation in SL. Seemingly here librarians meet, collaborate and stay in touch with others in the librarian community. She states:

> … I realized that we had both set up accounts and arranged to meet on Cybrary City … [W]e ran into [L, another avatar], one of the movers and shakers among the librarians on SL … In real life two of us were in Tampa and [L] was in Illinois. That didn't stop us from discussing where the furniture should go and getting the

furniture in place. That real time shared experience helped me get that there was something going on in a virtual world environment that wasn't the same as the experience of a threaded discussion inside of Blackboard.

Although a vast geographical distance of approximately 1617.05 km[7] existed between PI and L in RL, SL allowed them to meet in cyberspace and interact in a synchronised manner and so enjoy a shared experience. Seemingly SL is a place for close cooperative interactions between people professionally and personally, often having real personal meaning for the parties involved.

8.2.2 Theme 2b: Second Life as a Working Place

Bearing in mind that SL is an ideal meeting place, it follows that SL would also be an appropriate setting to establish a work place. PI explains:

[L] quickly offered us a free plot of land and a building … [She] also helped us out with a few pieces of furniture to get us started … [A] couple of other librarians [got] involved and sort of set up this building and had offices on one of the islands … One librarian … continued to attend meetings related to genealogy – an area in which he publishes and presents national meetings.

As with a RL workplace, the SL work environment also comprises of the physical elements including land, buildings, offices and furniture, but it also consists of the social elements of support, cooperation and goodwill provided by a group of professionals. Regular academic presentations also feature as part of the librarian workplace situated within the educational milieu.

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7   See: http://www.distance-calculator.co.uk/usa-distance-chicago-to-tampa.htm.

8.2.3 Theme 2c: Second Life as a Networking Place

Another benefit related to the professional facet of SL is that it provides a unique opportunity for professionals to connect and to keep in touch with each other. In this regard PI writes:

> I retired from my long-held librarian position about six months ago. I'm trying to keep up professionally hoping to find another job and Second Life is one vehicle for keeping in touch with other librarians …

As a result of the innovative professional and workplace possibilities SL provides, together with its effective communication systems, this world is a unique and viable space for networking and keeping abreast of developments and opportunities, including career advancement, in different subject fields.

8.2.4 Theme 2d: Second Life as an Entertaining Place

SL does not function exclusively for professional reasons, but provides a wide range of entertainment to its residents. Included in this category is the social or nightlife of SL and recreational activities or events available inworld. PI explains:

> One librarian got caught up in the social life on Second Life and has a second avatar, who has many friends and acquaintances and attends dances and parties on a regular basis. I too got myself a "non-professional avatar" to use for social life, but it turns out that just like in real life, I'm not all that sociable.

The social life of SL, with specific reference to dances, parties and friends appears to be vibrant and captivating, at times seemingly ensnaring some SL residents. Even though PI does not experience herself as overly sociable in RL she did attempt to explore and experience this facet of SL, however, found it to be less charming then other avatars. She seems to enjoy more solitary adventures:

I've been to art exhibitions... I've been fascinated by the SpacePort museum. I've enjoyed visiting the Lost Gardens of Apollo. I've been fishing, horseback riding, and sailing. I currently have a pleasant house on a pleasant island filled with palm trees where I can sit and watch the moon rise.

PI mentions many activities that she enjoys on an aesthetic, intellectual, and recreational and possibly even a spiritual level, and it would appear as though she engages in these forms of entertainment alone. SL thus offers both group and individual entertainment opportunities to its residents.

8.2.5 Theme 2e: Second Life as a Conversational Place

As a result of SL bringing people together, it is a great forum to address different issues that especially educators experience inworld and also in RL. PI comments:

The SLED discussion list was (and is) lively with reports of new activities and resources, arguments about presentation of self in Second Life, design of educational spaces, lectures vs. activities as models for educational experiences, etc.

SL provides wonderful opportunities for communication where participants can engage in conversation, fervent discussions, have arguments, present lectures and the like. PI specifically names one forum for conversation, the SLED discussion list. However, as was mentioned previously, many other communication channels exist inworld and include IM, local chat and voice chat.

8.3 THEME 3: DISENGAGING FROM SECOND LIFE

The third main theme that emerged from the analysis seems to have two sub-themes, being: (1) "Second Life as an Unfiendly Place" (T3a); and (2) "Second Life as a Sexual Place" (T3b).

8.3.1 Theme 3a: Second Life as an Unfriendly Place

PI had some experiences in SL that can be considered unwanted and unfriendly, however, these harsh encounters did not discourage her. She recounts:

> I've had exactly one encounter with a griefer [an internet prankster]. I was kicked out of an area by some unfriendly avatar. Logging off took care of that problem. I had one unpleasant "friend" who insisted that he was suicidal but was not amenable to any suggestions about what to do about it. That is the only person that I ever had to block on Second Life.

With each unfriendly encounter, PI responded aptly by protecting herself from other avatars with sinister intentions through built-in procedures provided by the SL script. As a resident in this world, you appear to have rights and choices and the means to enforce them when necessary.

8.3.2 Theme 3b: Second Life as a Sexual Place

Even though a sexual component exists inworld, PI herself has not encountered much sexual behaviour.

> I have not encounter[ed] a lot of overt sexual behaviour – but I haven't spent much time away from the islands populated by educators.

PI mostly remains on educational islands, posibly since she feels most comfortable within the educational context and other milieus in SL cause her discomfort. Implicit in the text, however, is that she has encountered some sexual behaviour and is aware of this facet in the world.

Conclusion

In relating the above-mentioned to the research question in Chapter 1, it seems that PI experiences her participation in SL as mostly positive. Although PI originally avoided SL, she found it to be meaningful the second time around. For PI, engaging in SL revolves around being connected to educational circles, more specifically the Librarian Community, which gives her the opportunity for a professional outlet and social interactions. Finally, it would appear as though SL allows PI to express her RL self within a virtual realm, without compromising her own nature, but simultaneously affording her flexibility to explore and experiment with various ways of being different.

CHAPTER 9
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to elucidate the experiential themes shared by all the participants of this research project. I will discuss each of these major themes and their various nuances in the upcoming pages. This study revealed three major themes or essences in relation to older people's participation in SL, namely: (1) "Familiarisation with Second Life"; (2) "Connecting in Second Life"; and (3) "Second Life as a Place of Recreation". In the following section each of these three themes will further be described by exploring the nuances associated with them. The three primary themes featured in all of the participants' experiences of SL. However, the nuances highlighted as part of each primary theme reflect individual ways participants experienced these three primary themes.

9.1   THEME 1: FAMILIARISATION WITH SECOND LIFE

Each of the participants began their account by explaining how they originally discovered SL. In unpacking the first theme, different elements come to light. At the outset, each participant was completely unfamiliar with this world and how it worked. In addition, all the participants had some motivation to enter and explore SL. These motivations will be illuminated shortly in themes T1b to T1d, but first I will present descriptions of how participants became acquainted with SL and their experiences of acquiring the needed skills to be able to use this world optimally.

9.1.1 Theme 1a: Familiarisation through Technical Skill

Seeing that all of the participants were initially unfamiliar with SL, it is reasonable to assume that all of them shared the experience of being a newbie avatar, having to learn

to navigate SL. For example, PC specifically mentions the challenge of being a newbie avatar:

> I still had all of the usual problems a newbie has navigating and ended up sitting on H's head at one point. Embarrassed, I logged off and was never going to darken the doors of SL again... (Chapter 5, T1c).

Later in her account PC asserts that SL presents newcomers with a rather steep learning curve. Some of the other participants actually commented on this facet of their experience, and portray the SL learning experience as exceptionally positive. For example, PL recounts that:

> ...the satisfaction I got from teaching myself to design, build, create, maintain, and deliver services in SL was more than I had ever expected and the more I did, the more I enjoyed working in SL" (Chapter 7, T3a).

PL, with his purpose in mind of creating the HASP outreach programme, had to learn to use the many different programs and tools available in SL in order to build his centre. Moreover, PP stated that:

> In SL I had great fun creating interactive science museum exhibits. The joy of creation motivated me to press on through the difficulties of learning...I was thrilled by the challenge of learning a new way to program… SL provided me [the] motivation to learn how to use these new tools (Chapter 4, T2b & T2c).

Seemingly all of the participants had the ordeal of acquiring the necessary skills to move around in SL and learn how to use SL tools effectively, although not all of them commented on this aspect specifically. The level of skill needed for different endeavours in SL varies and so the degree of skill acquired possibly also differed between participants. However, it is apparent that all of the participants had to acquire at least some basic skills and knowledge associated with the SL program in order to move

around in this world. All of them were apparently motivated to master these challenges in order to become familiar with SL. Most of them expressed delight at being triumphant over these challenges, and in how they extended themselves beyond their own expectations.

The second element that becomes apparent, as part of the first main theme, is that all participants had some purpose in mind when seeking out SL. Although all of them had a purpose in mind, the nature of the purpose varied between participants. The varied reasons for seeking out SL include: "Familiarisation to Realise Dreams" (T1b); "Familiarisation because of Work" (T1c); and "Familiarisation because of Other Online Communities" (T1d). These three nuances associated with different participants and as part of the first main theme, will be discussed subsequently.

9.1.2 Theme 1b: Familiarisation in order to Realise Dreams

As can be seen in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, PB and PL respectively entered this world because they believed that SL would aid the realisation of their individual aspirations of educating, and reaching out to people. PL and PB wanted to create new educational facilities that will enhance the lives and educational experiences of the youth and educators who move about in SL. PB recounts:

> Even before I had heard of Second Life, I had filed incorporation papers in 2004 to found a non-profit online college, called [BC]… By mid-2006, when I discovered Second Life, it seemed the answer to my dreams... Not only was it 3-D, but there was already a community of educators, some schools which had whole islands (sims) built like campuses, there were talks, and SL tools for teaching… So, I decided to devote my energies toward developing my college in Second Life… (Chapter 6, T1a & T1b).

PB's long time dream of creating a virtual campus seemed attainable through SL, therefore upon discovering this world she immediately decided to devote herself to

creating BC College here. PL was pursuing a similar dream to PB's when he discovered SL. His dream, however, was both an educational facility and an outreach programme for individuals who are dealing with addiction. He tells:

> My original interest in SL resulted from my founding along with my wife … the Hispanic Addictions Studies Program (HASP) … In pursuing the possibilities of online teaching programs and methods, I learned of … innovative work in Second Life … [Here] we would develop bilingual programs and courses … that would reach out to scholars and students throughout the Spanish speaking countries and those in the U.S. that were working in this field (Chapter 7, T1 & T2a).

Both PB and PL entered SL with the intention of accomplishing their personal goals of establishing online campuses and educational programmes. Clearly both of them have a passion for education and a desire to utilise new technological innovations such as virtual worlds, to give new meaning to the educational experience. Clearly, these individuals are actively pursuing their interests and contribute valuably to society.

9.1.3 Theme 1c: Familiarisation because of Work

Different RL organisations assimilate islands in SL to create virtual offices and replicas of their RL premises inworld. These organisations find value in the virtual environment for diverse reasons and agendas for employing the virtual world for business-related activities differ greatly. PP specifically entered SL motivated by work related responsibilities. He writes:

> My workplace had decided to use Second Life to stream a live science event... [and since]... I was the science host of the television broadcast of the event in real life... I decided to get some experience in Second Life before the program. So I entered... (Chapter 4, T1a).

PP's original reason for seeking out SL was work related. He took the initiative to become acquainted with SL prior to streaming a televised broadcast into this world, which he was to present. However, after entering SL, he became interested in the other facets this world has to offer apart from the work context.

9.1.4 Theme 1d: Familiarisation because of Other Online Communities

PC (Chapter 5, T1a & T1b) and PI (Chapter 8, T1b), both encountered SL because of their involvement with other online communities. Initially PC entered because she was curious about this new world, however, she was unimpressed. She explains:

> When Second Life first came online, I learned about it through my online communities... All of the talk was about the new "world" that was created and I promptly checked it out... There didn't seem to be anything to "DO"... and [I] never logged in again (Chapter 5, T1a & T1b).

PC, however, reattempted SL after her first encounter, in order to show support for a friend from the Brainstorm online community. She also learnt at this stage that both her children were residents of SL and decided to be a part of this world too.

Similarly to PC, PI also had a less than pleasant initial experience with SL. Her dissatisfaction resulted from having to fuss with her avatar's physical appearance, which she thought to be tedious and silly. However, after reading interesting posts about the Librarian community in SL, PI became curious again. She recounts:

> ...in 2006 a group of intrepid librarians decided that Second Life was a place to explore and started posting very enthusiastic reports of what they were doing in Second Life. No point in resisting. I got back on in June 2006 and this time I got it (Chapter 8, T1b).

Because PC and PI were involved with other cyber communities, they again became aware of the possibilities that SL has to offer. It is because of keeping in touch with these communities and their own courage to enter SL again, that they have found value in their SL participation some time later.

Taking together the discussion of the first theme, it is important to restate that all participants initially had to acquire SL skills in order to use this world effectively. The level of skill and knowledge probably differed between participants depending on their individual motivations for seeking out this world. Another important element that forms part of the first theme is that the incentives for initiating and maintaining participation in SL seemed to be diverse within the participant group. As noted throughout the different individual accounts, reason for continuing with SL participation ranged across the board from professional, recreational, interpersonal to intrapersonal motivations. Outwardly this is indicative of the diversity within the participant group. Appreciating the different motivations for becoming acquainted with SL leads the discussion to the second major theme identified in this research project.

9.2   THEME 2: CONNECTING IN SECOND LIFE

Connecting in SL is the second theme identified in this research and was shared by all members in the participant group. Each participant connected to others in some manner, either through conversation, work-related activities, educational endeavours, social interactions, or personal meetings. These nuances of the second theme, as experienced by individual members in the participant group, will be outlined below, namely: (1) "Connecting through Conversation" (T2a); (2) "Connecting through Work-related Activities" (T2b); (3) "Connecting through Educational Endeavours" (T2c); (4) "Connecting through Social Interactions" (T2d); and (5) "Connecting through Personal Meetings" (T2e).

9.2.1 Theme 2a: Connecting through Conversation

PP, PL and PI highlighted the fact that SL is a place for connecting through conversation. PP specifically experiences SL as a place in which he can connect to others through conversation. He especially enjoys conversations with his female avatar friends in which he also presents himself as a female. In addition, he and one of his RL friends meet in SL to talk over difficulties they experience in RL (see Chapter 4, T4a). PL also addresses this facet of the SL experience, saying that he enjoys conversing with others whose language he doesn't speak, an opportunity made possible through chat translators available in SL. He shares:

> As someone who is linguistically challenged, the use of chat translators in SL has given me new opportunities (without having to use an intermediate person) to directly relate to others whose language I do not speak (Chapter 7, T3b).

Seeing that PL is very interested in the Spanish and Hispanic communities, this is possibly one facet of the SL experience that he values. PI also remarks on the opportunity SL provides for casual conversation, but also of the opportunity it provides for more formal discussions between educators and librarians (see Chapter 8, T2e). It would appear as though SL is a place that fosters conversation and communication that not only promotes possibilities for social interactions, but also professional interactions.

9.2.2 Theme 2b: Connecting through Work-related Activities

All of the participants, apart from PC, engaged in some form of professional or work-related activity in SL. PP has presented many science presentations in SL, and so has connected to different audiences in this world (see Chapter 4, T2a). PB and PL both furthered their professional careers in academics in SL, and have connected to students and other educators in this world (Chapter 6 & Chapter 7). PB describes some of the facets that make SL an efficient workplace saying it is: (1) a cost-effective place (see Chapter 6, T3a); (2) a place filled with creation (see Chapter 6, T3b); and (3) a place

filled with commerce (see Chapter 6, T3c). One can visit the SL market place in which people connect over a selection of virtual products and virtual services. PI also addresses work activities in SL by telling how she collaborated with other librarians to establish a physical workplace. In this regard PI explains:

> [L] quickly offered us a free plot of land and a building… [She] also helped us out with a few pieces of furniture to get us started… [We]... set up this building and had offices on one of the islands… (Chapter 8, T2b).

PI collaborated with other librarians within a SL virtual workplace, whilst performing different work-related activities. SL thus allows participants to establish physical work environments in which it is possible to collaborate and work with others. Work related activities amongst the participants included, giving presentations, building museum exhibits, building virtual offices, creating campuses and hosting many different educational events. Education appears to be an important component to the SL experience and seemingly educational endeavours encourage interaction between people.

9.2.3 Theme 2c: Connecting through Educational Endeavours

PP, PB and PL all engaged in some form of educational activity. PB specifically created many different groups and joined different communities based on her interest in educating in SL. She explains:

> I created the "[BTC]" group for teachers, as well as a "BC" group. Meanwhile, I was getting to know other educators, what they were doing… I attended, and continue to attend, educator get-togethers… I continue to participate in educational events in SL. I was invited to set up a project in a new library island, showing innovation… And I have been accepted into a community of innovators on a quiet island... (Chapter 6, T5a).

Education is a rather large facet of the SL experience and there is a community of educators who work in this world. Connecting to others through education is a prominent component in this research, since this participant group specifically formed part of the SL educator's community. In PB's account, it is clear that educators connect intra- and interdisciplinary in SL. PL specifically connected to people who are experiencing addiction, and he did this through educational means (see Chapter 7). PP educated many audiences through his presentations (see Chapter 4, T2a). In SL educators seemingly collaborate to use the virtual environment not only to connect to each other, but also to connect to educational material and the learning experience in a different manner.

9.2.4 Theme 2d: Connecting through Social Interactions

PP and PC primarily described their participation in SL in terms of the social opportunities it provides. PC specifically names the various communities to which she belongs:

> B remains strongly identified with the mentoring... and music communities. I have five alts for different sets of communities – two for Gor and BDSM, one child avatar that keeps me connected to the very lively child community, one nekko and one martian (Chapter 5, T3d).

SL seemingly offers residents the opportunity to connect and belong to many different communities. These communities seem to satisfy the needs of their members. These needs may include recreation, fun and fantasy, the professional, business and personal networking needs, as well as needs for support and friendship. PP writes:

> I now have many friends in SL who I see on a weekly basis. I love fitting in with them as P… One day a woman, KB, met me… I took her to my museum… It turns out she was extremely sick and bedridden. SL was her social life (Chapter 4, T3b).

PP supported KB as a friend in her time of need, and he, in turn, was supported by his own friendship circle in SL. This virtual environment seemingly is a space in which people can connect with each other on many different social levels. It is also a place in which two people can meet in a more intimate manner.

9.2.5 Theme 2e: Connecting through Personal Meetings

Connecting to others through personal meetings was touched on by PP. He specifically knows SL as a place in which one can connect with others intimately and sexually. In the following segment of text, he describes how he related to two different women in these two different manners. He explains:

> [KB] found out I was not a woman but it didn't matter to her. This same woman was also into pixel sex, sex acts in a virtual world. We engaged in passionate sex for a year… After a year I met another woman, SE… I fell in love with [her]. After a while [she] confessed to me that she was a post-op transsexual as I confessed to her I was a male… Eventually we met in RL and have become purely platonic best friends...

Seemingly SL affords two people the ability to become intimately connected to each other, be it on an emotional, intellectual or sexual level. In addition, these initially virtual relationships have the potential to flow over into the person's RL, resulting in an increase in social resources for that person, as can be seen in the case of PP and SE.

Therefore it would appear that connecting to others and becoming part of some type of community, project or friendship circle, is an experience all participants shared. PC truly captures this facet of the SL experience when she states that: "What I learned very quickly about SL was that it is all about the connections you make" (Chapter 5, T3a).

In addition, four of the five participants indicated that in SL, they connected with themselves differently by experimenting with different identities, roles or challenges. PL

was challenged in SL and became familiar with disciplines not part of his original educational experience (see Chapter 7, T3a & T3b). PP, a male, lives in SL as a female, and once as a dragon (see Chapter 4, T1b & T3c) while PC expresses herself in SL through six different avatars, each having its own unique identity, lifestyle and belonging to its own community (see Chapter 5, T3d). After winning a makeover, PI seemingly connected with her fashionable side, the side that might like to fuss with appearance (Chapter 8, T1c). Although PB does not explicitly make clear how she perhaps experienced herself differently in SL, she does state that "[f]or her, Second Life has been like opening a door to [herself..." (Chapter 6, T1b), therefore signalling that SL facilitated a process of increased self-awareness.

Thus, in addition to SL allowing older individuals to form close and supportive relationships with other individuals, groups and communities, SL also affords older individuals an opportunity to engage with themselves differently and experiment with roles, careers, relationships and whatever the virtual environment allows them to do. Exploring the virtual environment and finding value in the various forms of entertainment it offers, is the final theme that this research revealed.

9.3   THEME 3: SECOND LIFE AS A PLACE OF RECREATION

All of the accounts revealed that recreation was an integral part of the SL experience. As part of this theme, it is possible to make two distinctions in how the participants engaged in recreation in SL. Two of the participants, PB and PL, apparently deem recreational activities to be highly valuable and incorporated entertainment and leisure opportunities into their educational facilities. The remainder of the participant group, PC, PP and PI, stipulate that they actively take part in entertainment opportunities provided by SL. These two nuances as part of the third theme are clarified next, namely: (1) "Actively Pursuing Recreation" (T3a); and (2) "Actively Incorporating Recreation" (T3b).

9.3.1 Theme 3a: Actively Pursuing Recreation

PP writes about how he once spent time around the pool with a friend (see Chapter 4, T3a). He presents this incident as a daring experience because he wore a bikini that day. Ultimately, PP enjoyed the challenge and found it to be rather valuable in the end. PC tells of how she enjoys line dancing at the Silver Dollar Club and camping for L$ (see Chapter 5, T3b). She adds that during these activities she spends time talking and relating to other people. PI also enjoys the entertainment available in SL. She recounts how she visits art exhibitions, goes fishing, horseback riding, and sailing in SL (see Chapter 8, T2d). There appears to be an assortment of recreation and entertainment opportunities available in SL and is seemingly one of the main attractions for people to this world.

9.3.2 Theme 3b: Actively Incorporating Recreation

PB, as part of BC Campus, built a live music area, a swimming pool and a soccer stadium, which students could use for recreational purposes. She also hosted different art exhibitions on her educational island (see Chapter 6, T4a & T4b). PL also envisioned incorporated leisure as part of the HASP premises, which included a social room, filled with art, food and dancing (see Chapter 7, T2c). Both these participants recognised the human desire for pleasurable experiences together with the fact that people predominantly seek out SL to have fun, and thus they incorporated art, dance, food, and sport as part of their educational premises.

Although the participant group experienced recreation in SL differently (PP, PC and PI actively pursued recreational activities, and PB and PL incorporated recreation into their educational programmes) they all placed some value on this part of the SL experience. Therefore recreation appears to be an essential part of the SL experience.

Conclusion

Taken together, these three themes, together with their constituent nuances, demonstrate that the elderly population appears to be lively, adventurous, productive, creative and dynamic participants of SL. They are eager and motivated to learn and experience this new reality. In SL, they belong to different organisations, and participate in a range of events. They form professional affiliations, but also form personally supportive relationships and groups. They appear to be fully integrated, engaged and contributing members of the SL community, who look forward to what the future holds with enthusiasm and a sense of readiness. In the upcoming chapter I will consider these findings in conjunction with current literature and research in gerontology and geropsychology.

CHAPTER 10
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Up to this point, the technological advancement and the development of SL, the research position, as well as the methodology of the study were discussed. Furthermore, the participants and their accounts of their experience of SL were examined. In the following chapter, the focus will be on human maturation with a comprehensive consideration of the last stage of human development.

Human development refers to the systematic continuities and changes that occur within an individual from conception to death. Development is related to the biological, psychological, social and educational strata of the human experience and for this reason the study of human maturation is a multidisciplinary enterprise fascinating biologists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, educators, and historians alike (Shaffer, 2002).

Previously, the early stages of human development received the bulk of research attention and it is only recently that the later stages of adulthood have been given due consideration from the scientific community. A possible reason why researchers are more interested in old age nowadays is because life expectancy within the world population has increased. In the past, factors such as disease, war, famine or working conditions were the cause of death for most individuals in early to middle adulthood. Today, better sanitation, laws governing labour policy and exceptional medical care have reduced mortality in adulthood and people are able to live longer lives. Demographics project that by 2020 the older population of individuals aged 65 years and up, will constitute between 9.1% and 14.6% of the population (Crandall, 1980). A paper published by the Harvard Initiative for Global Health also comments on the change in age structure dynamics coupled with global increased population growth,

saying that by 2050, the number associated with the aged population would have quadrupled (Bloom & Canning, 2005).

In the following section, I will provide a literature and research overview of gerontology. This will be achieved by firstly defining gerontology and placing it into the context of scientific enquiry. Subsequently, the different theories pertaining to gerontology will be presented and finally a research review of gerontology will follow.

10.1   DEFINITION

Gerontology refers to the scientific study of old age. The term is of Greek origin and is a compilation of the words *geras*, meaning old age, and *logos*, implying the study of a phenomenon (Crandall, 1980). Academic interest in gerontology has expanded over the last few decades and stretches across various disciplines including medicine, biology, political science, anthropology, education, psychology and sociology.

10.2   DISCIPLINES

The medical interest and care for elderly people is termed geriatrics, which can also be defined as the study of the medical aspects of old age. Another discipline related to gerontology is called gerontocracy, and considers political aspects of societies governed by elders. Social gerontology is concerned with the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society and the value society places on certain physical conditions of getting older. Educational gerontology is interested in developing education programmes for the aged as a means of adding meaning to their lives (Crandall, 1980).

The mental health facet of gerontology and the study of the aged is concerned with "...developmental psychology, motor performance, mental functioning and psychological reactions to aging [sic]" (Crandall, 1980, p. 242). Psychogeriatrics is a relatively new term in the overarching field of gerontology, which the "Online Merriam-Webster Medical

Dictionary" defines as "a branch of psychiatry concerned with behavioural and emotional disorders among the elderly" ("Merriam-Webster", 2010c). Geropsychology is considered a branch of psychology that is specifically interested in the psychosocial aspects of ageing, including the mental, emotional, physical and social functioning of older people (APA, 2010).

Each of these disciplines boast a number of theories intended to explore and explain the phenomenon of ageing. Why are some people able to run marathons in their 90s whilst others appear frail at the age of 60? What causes ageing? How does one prevent premature ageing? What are the realities and myths about the ageing process and living in old age? How do people experience growing older? Questions such as these have intrigued thinkers for millennia and a multitude of ancient texts capture the progression on thinking of growing older. Contemporarily, scientific theories set out to answer these diverse questions from a wide range of disciplines.

10.3   THEORIES

The scientific study of ageing is approximately three-quarters of a century old (Bengtson, Gans, Putney, & Silverstein, 2009), while hypotheses of ageing date back thousands of years (Achenbaum, 2009). The epic of Gilgamesh and his search for immortality originated 3000 B.C.E. in ancient Babylonia. Other Middle Eastern and Eastern philosophies, including Taoism, Christianity and Islam, all have, over the course of time, offered thoughts on the meaning of life in old age (Crandall, 1980).

Contemporary philosophies pertaining to life in old age and the ageing process can be divided into earlier and more recent theoretical developments. I will briefly outline theories in Gerontology in conjunction with this study's research findings, were appropriate, in the following section.

10.3.1 Traditional Theories

In order to understand the theoretical development of gerontology as the study of ageing, it is important to consider the primary gerontological theories that were constructed by gerontologists. These theories include the disengagement theory, activity theory, personality theory, subculture theory, role theory and labelling theory. Each one of these theories will be presented successively, according to the work of Crandall (1980) who is considered to be an important proponent in the development of gerontology as a scientific discipline.

10.3.1.1   Disengagement Theory

The disengagement theory emerged in 1960, and is considered to be a highly controversial theory within gerontology today. It maintains that when a person enters old age, they must begin to relinquish important roles they hold within society and accept that there are younger, more competent people who can fulfil these roles. This is thought to be a mutually satisfying process for both society and the older person, since younger people are given opportunities and older people relinquish roles associated with demands, anxieties, and pressures. This theory has received a great deal of criticism for its simplicity (also see Achenbaum, 2009).

The research findings seemingly challenge the propositions of this theory. Firstly, it would seem that SL affords older people an opportunity to engage in life and society, albeit in the virtual realm, and they seemingly embrace the opportunity to do so. Secondly, although SL does host younger individuals who are expected to be more skilled in new technology, these older participants are very competent and able to assimilate the needed knowledge and skill to effectively use this new technology of SL, apparently as effectively as younger individuals. Thus, although RL society might expect older people to retire and disengage from certain roles they hold within the social order, SL allows older individuals to take on new roles and re-engage in the SL community.

10.3.1.2   Activity Theory

The activity theory, which could be described as the antithesis to the disengagement theory, was developed to reveal the weaknesses of the latter. The theory advocates for a "golden-years" approach to ageing, where the ideal is that older people keep busy in order to remain happy. In other words, this theory maintains that happiness and life satisfaction are achieved by denying old age and remaining in middle age. As with the disengagement theory, there is evidence that support and refute the assumptions of activity theory (also see Achenbaum, 2009).

The research results indicated that "connecting" through various means and for different reasons was a factor that motivated all the participants within the research group. Different activities they performed as part of their connections to others and to self, seemingly provided all of the participants with enriching experiences. PL (Chapter 7) gained satisfaction from learning new skills and interacting with others. PB actively contributes to different communities to which she belongs (Chapter 6) as do PC (Chapter 5), PP (Chapter 4) and PI (Chapter 8). The three last mentioned participants also actively seek out recreational activities in SL. Therefore it would seem that remaining active (especially socially, mentally, recreationally, and within a community) might add to older individuals' enjoyment of later life.

10.3.1.3   Personality Theory

Havighurst's personality theory argues that depending on the person's personality type, life satisfaction in old age is a function of either disengagement or sustained activity. In other words, depending on a person's personality, increased life satisfaction is associated with disengagement, maintained activity or finding a new balance on the continuum. Havighurst suggests that the *reorganiser* personality type seeks to sustain activity and find new roles to replace previous roles. People with a *disengager* type of personality prefer a "rocking chair" approach to life and voluntarily relinquish most of their roles resulting in high life satisfaction for them (Crandall, 1980).

It would seem as though the participants of this research project did "reorganise" their roles and experiences from RL to SL to some extent. Their personalities were reflected in the manner in which they chose to engage in SL and that they chose to engage in SL in the first place. For example, although PI extended her RL role as a librarian into SL, she assumed a younger identity, since she "...was not interested in taking a motherly - or a grandmotherly role" (Chapter 8, T1c). In addition, PP (Chapter 4) reorganised his expression of himself in SL to reflect a female role or identity, and PC (Chapter 5) invests her personality/identity in six different avatars that compliment different aspects of who she experiences herself to be. Therefore it would appear that upon choosing to engage in SL, older individuals have a real opportunity to fashion their experience and live out their preferred roles.

10.3.1.4 Subculture Theory

Rose proposed the aged subculture theory in 1962. A subculture may be defined as a faction of individuals who group together based on specific and unique characteristics that distinguish them from larger society. Variables such as an increased population number of aged individuals, and segregation of the aged from participation in general society, has resulted in an enhanced age consciousness, which produced an aged subculture. The aged subculture is not a homogeneous group, however. There are variables such as wealth, health and education that cause the formation of groups within the subculture or a totally different type of aged subculture all together. This theory may be considered a very general theory in gerontology because of such diversity in the aged population (Crandall, 1980).

Although the research findings did not reveal an "aged subculture" within SL, subcultures do seem to exist within this world as was made evident by the different types of communities and groups to which participants belonged. Some of the subcultures that emerged as part of this research include the "educators", the "innovators", the Gorean, the Furries and the Nekko communities, who all have their unique interests and characteristics. A factor pertaining to older participants of SL that

did, however, become apparent, as part of this research project, is that there is much diversity within this age group. This last mentioned finding is in accordance with the subculture theory that argues that the aged subculture is a heterogeneous population group.

10.3.1.5   Role Theory

The role theory emerged in the late 1960s in the work of sociologists such as C. H. Cooley, W.I Thomas, and G.H. Mead. A role can be defined as a set of behaviours that is expected from individuals in certain positions, for example the role of grandmother. Role theorists use a very eloquent dramaturgical metaphor of actors on stage portraying a specific role, to illuminate the fundamentals of this theory. According to this metaphor, actors are influenced by a number of factors including a script, the director, their own interpretation of the role, fellow actors on stage and the audience. In much the same manner, variables such as these influence people to behave in accordance with specific prescribed roles in RL (Crandall, 1980).

The research seems to reveal that although older individuals continued some of their RL roles as part of their SL experience, for example being educators, they also explored and adopted new roles inside SL. It would seem as though SL permits role exploration and extends a certain amount of freedom to older individuals to experiment with and revisit different aspects of themselves and try out new and alternative roles in the virtual realm. It would appear as though there are less social scripts and directions that guide acceptance of prescribed roles (grandmother or mother, male or female), and they seemingly embrace the opportunity to live out their own interpretations and choice of roles.

10.3.1.6   Labelling Theory

The labelling theory is closely linked to role theory and suggests that when we are given a label, such as depressed, old or senile, we are forced into acting out these respective

roles. This occurs because labelled individuals are treated differently by others and so they start to act in accordance with their awarded label, also known in psychology as the self fulfilling prophesy. Labelled individuals thus take on new identities, behaviours and roles, because of how others perceive, judge and interact with them. The label becomes what Crandall (1980) describes as a master status and this status overrides all other statuses, becoming the one to which others tend to respond.

It would seem like older people in SL are not labelled as "old". They appear to be free to choose the identities, behaviours, labels and roles they want to assume, possibly because SL affords them a certain degree of anonymity. This research does not preclude the possibility that labelling does occur in SL, however, it would seem as though people have more autonomy in "choosing" a label, by belonging to selected communities, and not by being "assigned" one because of RL circumstances. Cyber-life is apparently giving older people an opportunity to redefine themselves personally and collectively.

In recent years most of the above-mentioned older theories have received less attention from the scientific community. However, because of the changing demographic profile, scientific inquiry into ageing and life in old age has increased and there have been new theoretical developments.

10.3.2 Modern Theories

Recently there has been an explosion of scientific theories in an attempt to explain, understand and manage life in old age. These newer theories tend to be discipline specific and investigate ageing and life in old age from a specific discipline's perspective. A discussion of these theoretical developments is beyond the scope of this work, however, I will briefly mention some of the more recent theoretical developments within gerontology.

10.3.2.1 Physiological Theories

Biological theories formulated to investigate and appreciate the mechanisms of cellular deterioration and ageing include: the immunological theory (Effros, 2009); the evolutionary theory of ageing (Martin, 2009); the mouse model system to the neuroscientific theory of ageing (Woodruff-Pak, Foy, & Thompson, 2009); the programmed theories of ageing and longevity (Gonidakis & Longo, 2009); and also theories that evaluate the impact of free radicals and oxidative stress on ageing (Shringarpure & Davies, 2009).

Seeing that this research explored older people's experiences of SL as a form of computer mediated interaction, the focus is less on how participation in SL affects the physiology of the aged. However, perhaps research could explore the possible physiological benefits, such as hypothesised increments in older people's immune systems, as a result of increased psychological wellbeing due to engaging in SL. Satisfaction in taking on learning challenges in SL, connecting to others and engaging in recreational activities might contribute to overall life satisfaction, positive effects and happiness and psychological states, which research has shown to promote immune defences (Barak, 2006). Apart from biological theories on ageing there have also been recent theoretical developments considering psychological, social, and cultural aspects of ageing.

10.3.2.2 Psychosocial Theories

The psychosocial theory of development by Erikson is a prominent theory in psychology used to conceptualise development across the lifespan. The model is based on the epigenetic principle, which holds that development occurs in sequential, clearly defined stages, each of which must be resolved in order for the individual to develop in a satisfactory manner (Erikson, 1980).

Erikson considered the expanding social world a key contributor to the person's development at each stage. The external reality, in conjunction with physical, cognitive, instinctual and sexual changes within the person, triggers a crisis that needs to be resolved. There are eight stages in this model with the last stage, called "Integrity versus Despair and Disgust", being of primary significance to this research (Erikson, 1980).

This final psychosocial stage of development commences roughly at the age of 60 and lasts till death. This is thought of as an "ending off" stage in which the individual reviews his or her life. At this stage people might either experience satisfaction with their life as they have lived it, or experience a general dissatisfaction with life, resulting respectively in either integrity or despair. Erikson (1980) defines integrity as "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (p. 104). For this stage to be considered successful the person will experience a sense of responsibility for his life, together with the virtue of wisdom and integrity. People who have attained this virtue will have a general sense of well-being and will have the ability to tolerate the idea of imminent death but also still have an active interest in life, albeit in an appropriate emotionally detached way. Different strengths that a person exhibits at successful resolution of this stage may include calmness, peace of mind, and no regrets.

Failure associated with this stage appears in an individual's deep abhorrence with the external world and an intense disgust, which masks an underlying and profound fear of death. People on this side of the pole experience a sense of desolation that their time has run out and that they are unable to start anew and improve on the life they lived (Sadock & Sadock, 2007). They often look back at life with a sense of desperation, possibly feeling unfulfilled and miserable, accompanied by disdain (Erikson, 1978; Erikson, 1980).

The results of this inquiry seemingly contradict these postulations of the eighth stage of the psychosocial model. People between the ages of 60 to 79 years and engaged in SL, are not merely looking back and reflecting on the memories they have collected throughout their lives, they are actively creating new ones. Furthermore, they are fully integrated and contributing members of their individual communities and groups, as well as the larger SL community. SL seemingly provides them the opportunity to remain alive and they are again exploring with identity, intimacy, and generativity, tasks associated with the earlier stages in Erikson's model.

Apparently, technology is creating new opportunities for social reality, from which the elderly population should not be excluded. These findings are supported by other research, which suggests that social exchange is not declining, rather social exchange is moving in a different direction towards the virtual (Wellman, 1999, 2001; Lin, 2001, as cited in Blit-Cohen & Litwin, 2004). SL's virtual world is seemingly a place in which continued psychosocial development can take place.

Recently there have been other theoretical developments within the social sciences considering the psychological and social aspects of ageing. Psychological theories of ageing consider social relationships (Antonucci, Birditt, & Akiyama, 2009), social context and cognition (Blanchard-Fields & Kalinauskas, 2009; Labouvie-Vief, 2009), cognitive plasticity (Willis, Schaie, & Martin, 2009) and emotional well-being in relation to successful ageing (Kryla-Lighthhall & Mather, 2009). Other theories explore ageing across cultures (Dilworth-Anderson & Cohen, 2009), ageing within families (Allen & Walker, 2009), and public policy and society's impact on life in old age (Hudson, 2009; Kail, Quadagno, & Keene, 2009; Marchall, 2009; Phillipson, 2009; Thorslund & Silverstein, 2009).

Successful ageing is a broad concept that encompasses how older adults manage the different facets of their stage of life. In an article exploring the different components associated with successful ageing, Dillaway and Byrnes (2009) assert that individuals who age successfully "… will show a low probability of disease and disease related

disability, or low risk factors for disease; a high functional level that includes both a physical component and a cognitive component; and active engagement with life" (p. 705). Generally considering the research findings of the current study with these components related to successful ageing, it would appear as though SL contributes to at least some of these facets, including cognitive stimulation and active engagement in life. SL also seemingly creates a context in which older adults can create and maintain social relationships, which apparently enhances the likelihood of successful ageing as well.

As is evident from the above-mentioned, there is a wealth of recent theoretical knowledge across disciplines about ageing in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, the quest for more integration among disciplines and the discovery of a more complex model for gerontological examination has begun. In this regard, Bass (2009) offers the social gerontological model, which will be discussed subsequently.

10.3.2.3   Interdisciplinary Theory

According to Bass, a truly integrative theory of gerontology is one that "blends a macro-perspective that examines the larger social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political contexts that influence human behaviour and health with the micro-perspective and individual and family perspectives along the very same dimensions" (2009, p. 360). Bass presents a conceptual work-in-progress of a visual model for an integrative theory of social gerontology. This model considers multiple variables interacting with the individual, including (2009, p. 362):

1.   Family, religion, and cultural traditions and expectations.
2.   Macro- and microeconomic circumstances and individual assets.
3.   Public policy, health services and social support systems, and government programmes.
4.   Social constructs (e.g., status, power, and social stratification).
5.   Residual historical contexts.

6.   The individual genetic, physiological and psychological condition.

Conceptualising gerontology in this manner cuts across the social sciences to incorporate diverse disciplines and their understanding of ageing and thus move towards a more integrated understanding of gerontological matters. Bass (2009), however, makes a distinction between gerontology and the study of ageing.

The study of ageing occurs from a specific discipline's perspective. Once investigators from disciplines such as medicine, social work, education and psychology enquire into gerontological topics using their paradigms, it is usually not considered gerontology but rather the study of ageing. For that reason the current inquiry into the experience of SL for people older than 60, should be considered as the study of ageing, or in other words geropsychology, although the theoretical underpinnings of gerontology is still highly valuable and valid within this context. Presently there appears to be some overlap in theory, ideas and research topics between the study of ageing and gerontology.

10.4   STEREOTYPES

Ageism, according to Robert Butler (in Achenbaum, 2009), is "a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender" (p. 33). There is a stigma associated with old age, partly due to a global emphasis on youth with specific reference to youthful appearance and values. In the market place young people are considered more knowledgeable and in possession of the most current knowledge, while older employees are considered to be dated. At one time, new entrants learned skills from older mentors, however, the roles have now largely been reversed so that older employees are being trained by these newly graduated entrants (Crandall, 1980).

The current research challenges this stereotype of older people, since it demonstrates that older individuals are capable and enthusiastic learners. When motivated, older individuals have the ability to use the most recent technology and use it creatively. PL,

as the oldest participant (79 years at the outset of the research project) specifically illustrates this point when he describes how he created HASP: "...we had no IT people to help us, [and] I (trained primarily in theoretical sociology and psychology) had to do it myself ..." (Chapter 7, T3a). PL at his advanced age was both enthusiastic and proficient in acquiring these new skills.

A study exploring students' view of activities of the elderly found that undergraduate students have a fairly passive and negative view of the prospect of old age (Wurtele, 2009). Young children also appear to experience the elderly as pessimistic, conservative and petulant. Overall society tends to exclude the elderly, considering them to be incompetent and unable to fulfil responsible and meaningful roles within communities. In other words, many older individuals are denied work based on chronological age and its associated stereotypes of being incapable, weak and out-dated (Crandall, 1980).

This study revealed that many older individuals are not only informed about new technological innovations but are also capable of learning how to use these new technologies effectively. Furthermore they also don't seem to be discouraged by the challenges posed to them by SL and demonstrated valour and perseverance in their attempts to create their virtual lives and contribute meaningfully to their SL communities.

Terms such as 'greedy geezer', 'over the hill', and 'senile' are some of the stereotypes elderly people contend with. Phenix (2007) is of the opinion that the media have a tremendous influence on how the elderly population is viewed by other age groups and themselves. These portrayals of the elderly are often inaccurate and negative, which become a concern when one realises that these images, comments and suggestions shape public opinion.

One strategy in changing stereotypical thoughts about the elderly is intergenerational contact. For this purpose the creation of intergenerational communities are on the rise, especially in the USA. Reportedly, intergenerational contact and communication results

in benefits not only for the elderly, but also for the younger age grades (Kaplan, 1997; Meshel, 2004; Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2004). More research directed at elucidating and rectifying the stereotypes and myths about old age seems pertinent at this time when the elderly population is considered the fastest growing population group across the world.

SL seems to be a place in which people from different age groups can connect and interact with each other. Seemingly SL is a virtual intergenerational community that not only promotes intergenerational contact, but also interracial contact. This type of increased contact between people from different nationalities and stages of life could discredit stereotypes and increase reciprocal learning experiences between cultures and age cohorts.

10.5 RESEARCH

The goal of this section is to give an overview of the research done on gerontology and the study of ageing. Through the Academic Information Services (AIS) of the UP, I searched the following databases: PsychInfo, Sociological Abstract, Social Services, EbscoHost, Science Direct and Sabinet, from to establish what recent research (from 2003 to 2010) has been done on the aged.

10.5.1 Non-Psychological Research

10.5.1.1 Statistics

As mentioned previously, the global elderly population, consisting of individuals 60 years and older, is expanding at a rate that is greater than any other age group. According to Wisensale (2003), the elderly population will have expanded from 200 million in 1950 to an estimated 1.2 billion in 2025. Currently, we are part of a global culture that is the oldest society in the history of the world, and it is projected that by 2025, one out of every four people will be older than 60 years. This trend is occurring as

a result of longer life expectancy, as well as lower fertility rates, resulting in an 'inverse family pyramid'. In other words, where there was once a pyramid with one or two elders at the top, with their children and their many grandchildren at the bottom, there are now one or two grandchildren at the bottom, their parents with more elders, including grandparents and great grandparents, at the top (Wisensale, 2003).

In 1982, the First World Assembly on Aging was held in Vienna and focussed on the economic, psychosocial and health-care concerns of older people. In April 2002 the United Nations gathered for the Second World Assembly on Aging in Madrid. At this second assembly, two new issues were placed on the table relating to: (1) the growing concerns about fair distribution of limited resources between different age groups, termed intergenerational equity; and (2) the rapid rise of the aged population in developing countries. Today, "...of the approximately 580 million elderly people (60 years of age or older) in the world, about 355 million live in developing nations" (Wisensale, 2003, p. 40). In light of this number, Wisensale (2003) further identifies three potential problems associated with such a trend. Firstly, there is increased pressure on the families of these older dependants and secondly, there is increased pressure on the government to assume more responsibility for basic health services for the elderly. Lastly, there is increased tax responsibility for younger workers to provide for the needs of the aged. The clear increase in the older generation is exerting an enormous influence on especially the social and economic spheres.

10.5.1.2   Economic Considerations

Research considering the economic impact of the tip in the age scale is mainly concerned with whether or not we are financing the growing elderly population at the expense of the children. Bradshaw and Mayhew (2003) considered 21 countries in their research, including the USA, and found that all of the identified countries spent more money per elderly person than they did per child, from 1980 to 1998. However, they also found countries most generous to older people to be more generous to children as well, when compared to other countries. Even though spending more money in one

area will affect expenditure power in another, the researchers concluded that there does not appear to be a shifting of expenditure in favour of the elderly population at the expense of children. They did, however, mention that when considering poverty as a variable, child poverty was higher than elderly poverty in most countries. When considering that increased support for the elderly stem from supplementary support from the government, it becomes important to consider the fact that children, when they reach the labour market and in the form of tax, provide the government with the needed funds to supplement pensions (Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2003).

Esping-Anderson and Sarasa (2002) argue that child poverty has a direct, long-term effect on society. They assert a consequence of child poverty to be low educational achievement, which leads to a poorly skilled work force, which in turn perpetuates the poverty cycle. Little education and an inadequately skilled labour force result in low paying work and an inability to provide financial care to the elderly, albeit privately or in the form of tax, social security or welfare (Esping-Anderson & Sarasa, 2002).

10.5.1.3 Health and Safety Considerations

Geriatric research appears to be the most commonly researched subfield within gerontology, and recent research appears to be concerned with malnutrition in the elderly population. Obtaining adequate nutrition in old age becomes somewhat problematic due to social, psychological and physiological changes, and the elderly may be prone to malnutrition more than any other age group. Malnutrition is associated with increased confusion, lethargy, physiological weakness and increased accident proneness (Crandall, 1980).

Low levels of calorie intake have been identified as one risk factor for poor diet, and lower calorie intake has been positively associated with lower income. Although the higher income elderly group take in more calories and nutrients than the lower income elderly group, both groups consumed less than the recommended amounts of dietary fibre, calcium, magnesium and vitamin E. In terms of meal patterns it was found that

within both groups, breakfast was the most commonly consumed meal of the day, although lower income men were found to be less likely to eat breakfast. Both groups tended to miss lunch most often, and the lower income group reported frequently skipping both lunch and dinner (Guthrie & Lin, 2003).

Other risk factors that have been identified by research include general health status, insecurity, living alone and mobility. Chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes mellitus have specific dietary requirements that might adversely affect the food intake of the elderly (Guthrie & Lin, 2003). The economic and financial situation of countries and the elderly also personally play a major role in the nutritional value of people's diets. Apart from food's nutritional value, it also has a social component. Elderly people living alone might not always enjoy preparing food and dining by themselves. Therefore malnutrition might be precipitated by loneliness (Saava, Abina, Laane, Solodkaya, & Tchaico, 2006).

Another possible risk factor to malnutrition is the change in body composition in old age associated with a loss in lean muscle mass and fat gain. Foods needed to sustain adequate muscle mass are not always obtained by the elderly, resulting in malnutrition. Weight loss and malnutrition may increase the risk of hospital admission within the elderly population (Sanchez-Garcia et al., 2007).

In 2000, falls accounted for 85% of the 73 113 injury-related hospital admissions of people 65 years or older in Canada. Furthermore, one in three elderly people living in communities will experience at least one fall per year (Weir & Culmer, 2004). Risk factors associated with falls include muscle weakness, problems with balance, gait and stability, multiple drug therapies and cardiac disorders. Prevention is focussed on identifying the elderly at risk and modifying these risk factors where feasible. Other strategies pertain to improving building design (such as handrails, change in elevation and lighting), increasing elderly people's confidence and decreasing their fear of falling, exercise programmes and educational sessions on how to prevent falls (Larson & Bergmann, 2008).

Other recent research within the field of geriatrics focus on speech recognition within elderly cochlear implant recipients (Pasaisi et al., 2002), adverse drug reactions within the elderly population (Passarelli, Jacob-Filho, & Figueras, 2005; Sproule, Hardy, & Shulman, 2000), oral health care of elderly in India (Shah, 2004) and physical disability within the elderly population, (Murabito et al., 2008).

10.5.2 Psychological Research

Through searching the above-specified databases with the keywords 'gerontology' and 'psychology', a number of papers were found pertaining to research within this context. Development of, and training in the field of gerontology and geropsychology received the most attention from research in recent years. The progressive development of gerontology as a specialised interdisciplinary field together with training at different levels of geropsychology, including graduate level (Karel & Moye, 2005), doctoral and post-doctoral training (Molinari et al., 2005; Qualls, Segal, Benight, & Kenny, 2005; Zweig et al., 2005; Zweig, Siegel, & Snyder, 2006), integrated training at intern level (Hyer, Leventhal, & Gartenberg, 2005), and general models of training in geropsychology (DeVries, 2005; Hinrichsen & Zweig, 2005) are explored in the scientific literature. The incorporation of gerontological training within family therapy also featured within the literature (Akister, 2003).

Diverse types of psychological distress in the elderly were found to be the second most researched topic. Late-life depression (Munk, 2007), late-life alcoholism (Oslin, 2004), anxiety symptoms and generalised anxiety disorder (Alwahhabi, 2003), together with other generalised forms of psychological distress (Bird & Blair, 2007; Busuttil, 2004; Couture, Lariviere & Lefranços, 2005; Koder & Helmes, 2006) were the focus of inquiry.

Resilience of the eldery was another popular research topic. Resilience was defined by one study as having good outcomes despite adversity through bouncing back after an initial setback, which included functional limitation, bereavement or marital separation and poverty (Netuveli, Wiggins, Montgomery, Hildon & Blane, 2008). Other resilience

studies focussed on the resilience of widowers (Peak, 2005), successful adaptation to stress in later life (Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti & Wallace, 2006) and a consideration of resilience, risk factors and psychological distress among holocaust and non-holocaust survivors in the post-9/11 environment (Lamet, Szuchman, Perkel & Walsh, 2009).

Successful ageing also received attention from the scientific community. Harris (2008) mentions a current contested discourse in gerontology and refers to two conflicting paradigms; with one arguing for a health promotion activity model and another model criticising the concept of successful ageing. He proposes an alternative perspective and argues for the development of resilience in later life by specifically reflecting on the resilience showed by people with Alzheimer's disease. Kinrade (2009) explored successful ageing and health management of the elderly in conjunction with other themes of housing, health care, well-being, the media and interpersonal relationships. The final study of successful ageing set out to shed light on the assumptions underpinning a culturally relevant theoretical framework for the study of successful ageing. It considered how value orientations, time, activity and relationships influence the understanding of this concept within the elderly population (Torres, 2003).

The effects of growing older, the ageing process and the impact of this on identity are also commented on in research (Teghe, 2009). Culture has an immense impact on perceptions and attitudes towards ageing and older people have witnessed continual cultural change during their lifespan. The significance of cultural change and migration through time was considered from a narrative perspective. Four themes emerged from this content analysis, including: (1) general remarks on cultural changes; (2) expanding material opportunities; (3) liberation of relationships; and (4) increasing freedom of choice (Westerhof, 2010).

Life span developmental research paired students with older adults with the purpose of increasing students' knowledge of aspects of ageing. Salient themes that emerged from students personal reflections for the first time in research literature included inspiration, admiration and role modelling by older adults (Zucchero, 2009). Daatland (2007) is the

author of an added source of literature that addresses developmental psychology with specific reference to the elderly.

Barriers to physical activity for the elderly population appears to be another concern in recent research and it was found that well-maintained infrastructure, specifically sidewalks, bike paths or lanes and traffic control are significant to maintain levels of activity (Strath, Isaacs, & Greenwald, 2007). A focus on ageing in context considers how both the macro and micro environments influence the functioning of the aged. This environmental gerontology considers the impact that migration, residential satisfaction, interior living space, neighbourhoods, and technological challenges, such as the Internet and cyberspace, have on the aged (Wahl & Weisman, 2004).

10.5.3   Gerontology and Cyberspace

During the early 1990s, research done by Czaja, Guerrier, Nair and Landauer (1993) found that computer-based systems serve as a valuable tool for older adults. In this early research, the computer-based system comprised of a simple text-editor, basic electronic mail functions and access to information such as news/weather, movie reviews and health information. Nearly two decades later, approximately one third of Internet users are middle aged or older, and this number is expected to grow, as the baby boomers are likely to continue participating in the Internet within the next coming decades (Chadwick-Dias, Bergel, & Tullis, 2007; Henke, 1999). Furthermore, the idea that older adults are not able to learn and acquire the necessary skills to effectively make use of a computer and the Internet at an advanced age, is a myth (Blit-Cohen & Litwin, 2004).

The findings of this study also indicated that not only are older people able to use computers and the Internet, but it would seem that for many of them, these functionalities are an integral part of their daily lives.

Online involvement generates assorted opportunities for the elderly, which may range from increased social involvement and peer relations, access to information and services, to being able to complete daily chores, such as paying bills and grocery shopping. Because of these and many other online opportunities, research appears focused on designing communication technology to ease the use of such technology for the elderly population, and so increase their participation (Chadwick-Dias, Bergel & Tullis, 2007; Eisma et al., 2004; Wherton & Prendergast, 2009). Recently, researchers involved in the Care OnLine (COL) project ascertained that older adults (55 years old and older) can become active computer and Internet users, much to their benefit. As a result of the success of this project, the COL scheme is being rolled out across Leicestershire County, United Kingdom (UK) as part of the county's social services provision, enabling older adults, through training and Internet outlets, to make use of contemporary communication technology (Osman, Poulson, & Nicolle, 2005).

Apart from providing older adults with practical and informational services, cyberspace through SL, seemingly also provides older individuals with entertainment, socialising, and professional opportunities. Although RL society might expect older individuals to disengage at retirement age, SL outwardly extends an opportunity to them to re-engage in another society. Familiarity with computers, the Internet and cyberspace is on the increase, and with the baby boom generation expected to continue their cyber participation, more people can be expected to live virtual lives. The virtual realm seemingly is already another functional sphere of life.

Research conducted by Wright (2000) indicated that increased Internet involvement appears to provide support and companionship to older adults. It also allows older adults to come into contact with people from different ethnicities and different age groups, diversifying their social network. Increased contact with online groups and communities seemingly allows older adults to feel more integrated and part of society. Finally, greater involvement in online communities was predictive of lower perceived life stress.

Other researchers consider the nature and meaning of elder participation in cyberspace and whether or not such computer-mediated communication actually increases their social capital. According to Blit-Cohen and Litwin (2004), social capital refers to the "...institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions" (p. 387). This term, however, also includes "…warm feelings … and … benefits that flow from trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation that characterize social networks" (Blit-Cohen and Litwin, 2004, p. 387), resulting in a sense of belonging and connectedness. These researchers identified three themes: (1) in using computers, participants felt they had not only gained skills for themselves, but also enhanced connections with their group and social network; (2) older people who participated in cyberspace tended to look forward and ahead in time to welcome new experiences and challenges, whereas non-cyber-participants tended to look to the past; (3) older people humanised their computers, by attributing human qualities to it and were able to form connections to the computer. This research suggests that cyberspace is an important arena capable of contributing to the social capital of older adults (Blit-Cohen & Litwin, 2004).

The current research generated similar findings to that of Blit-Cohen and Litwin (2004). Participation in SL appeared to increase the participant group's social capital. Participants reported creating, connecting and belonging to institutions and communities that promote social interactions. Some of the participants reported forming relationships that were characterised by warm feelings, trust, reciprocity and cooperation, be it on a personal or on a professional level. In addition, it would appear that the research participants of this study had a future orientation coupled with a positive attitude in welcoming challenges posed to them by the SL virtual world.

Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to create an interplay between the research findings and existing theoretical and research literature pertaining to the elderly. Initially, gerontology was defined and placed into the broader context of scientific enquiry. Different theories were

also presented and considered in conjunction with the findings of the study. Finally, I presented a research review of gerontology with commentary based on the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 11

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this chapter a brief summary of the research findings will be presented, followed by a discussion on the possible implications of the research findings for older adults and for the discipline of psychology. The chapter is concluded by declaring the limitations of the study.

11.1 DISCUSSION

The goal of this research project was to understand how people aged 60 years or older experience their participation in SL, a virtual world. Three primary themes were identified (see Chapter 9) as forming part of older individuals' experience of SL. The first main theme was "Familiarisation with Second Life" (T1), which encompassed different subthemes including "Familiarisation through Technical Skill" (T1a); "Familiarisation in order to Realise Dreams" (T1b); "Familiarisation because of Work" (T1c); and "Familiarisation because of Other Online Communities" (T1d). This theme firstly illustrated that although participants were initially unfamiliar with SL, they were able to master this new technology, as a novel computer mediated communication system. This implied that all the participants had to acquire the necessary SL skills to negotiate this world effectively. Previous research generated similar findings, which demonstrated that older individuals are not only able to learn how to use the Internet and cyberspace effectively (Blit-Cohen & Litwin, 2004) but that they also actually benefit from Internet and cyberspace participation (Blit-Cohen & Litwin, 2004; Osman, Poulson, & Nicolle, 2005; Sum et al., 2008; Wright, 2000). To reiterate, this research demonstrated that older individuals can learn how to operate in SL and use its different functionalities effectively. Secondly, this first theme demonstrated that all the participants had some purpose in mind for seeking out and becoming acquainted with SL. All of the

participants in the research group were actively pursuing their individual interests through SL.

The second primary theme identified was "Connecting in Second Life" (T2). This theme has five subthemes which highlight the different manners in which participants go about connecting in SL, including "Connecting through Conversation" (T2a); "Connecting through Work-related Activities" (T2b); "Connecting through Educational Endeavours" (T2c); "Connecting through Social Interactions" (T2d); and "Connecting through Personal Meetings" (T2e). This theme seems to indicate that older adults enjoy SL for the opportunities it provides them to connect to other people, groups and themselves in different ways and on various levels, be it professionally or personally.

The third and final theme identified by this research was "Second Life as a Place of Recreation" (T3), and it comprised of two subthemes, including "Actively Pursuing Recreation" (T3a) and "Actively Incorporating Recreation" (T3b). This theme indicated that older adults find value in the recreational and entertainment opportunities available in SL, and believe it to be an essential element to the SL experience.

Based on the research findings it seems that older adults appraise their experience of SL as positive and enriching. The participant group's experience of SL is captured by PL, the oldest participant in the group, when he stated " … my experiences in SL have been very positive … It not only has opened up a new way of communicating … but also has given me great intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction" (Chapter 7, T3c). It therefore appears that SL provides older adults who participate in this world with an opportunity to live life differently and as they chose, not in a way that is imposed on them by society, or by the label of being "old". Seemingly SL can add great value to older adults' professional, personal and interpersonal lives and provide them with a space for continued development and activity.

11.2   IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The changing demographic profile of the world, together with opportunities made possible by technological advances, have actual implications for people, society and psychology. Making financial, health and other provisions for a longer life (and for retirement) becomes necessary for the individual, as well as society at large that will have to make provisions for the needs of an older community. Rethinking ageing in the 21st century by taking into account opportunities made possible by virtual worlds, might be valuable to society, psychology and the individual.

RL old-age homes and communities catering to the needs of older adults could incorporate the Internet and virtual worlds into their facilities in order to promote social contact and increase recreational opportunities. By participating in SL, older adults are seemingly stimulated cognitively, socially and recreationally. As has previously been demonstrated, older individuals who have had limited experience with computers and the Internet can learn how to make full use of these new technologies, and as indicated in this study, older people can learn to move confidently within virtual worlds.

SL not only makes real-time interaction between people who are geographically separated possible, it makes it experientially interesting as well. In the South African context for example, if computer and Internet facilities are made available to the older populous, who are often geographically separated from their families, they will have a means of spending time with family members in a unique manner. Spending time together in a virtual world does seem to have real effects on the participants, according to National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) scientists. NASA is working towards using SL to connect the first astronauts to land on Mars, interplanetary, with their families. Daniel Laughlin, learning technologies project manager at NASA asserts that when people meet in SL or other virtual worlds to interact, both participants have the sense of being in the same place and time overlaid on their sense of physical location, and the experience is encoded into their memories as such (Holden, 2008). It is evident that SL affords people a unique and inexpensive opportunity to connect and

engage in a variety of activities with loved ones and other people of different backgrounds and life stages.

In this regard, SL is a great arena for intergenerational contact. As was noted earlier, intergenerational contact is one very effective means of eradicating stereotypes pertaining to older adults, and SL currently functions as a virtual intergenerational community, excluding the age groups that belong to SL teen grid. What's more, because of SL's international status, it is a fantastic arena for interaction between different nationalities, and offers people the opportunity to interact with the different cultures of the world.

Finally, SL could serve as a source of purpose, perhaps even income, for older residents who decide to volunteer for charity or work inworld. Most of the participants of this study did perform some work-related activities inworld, however, none of them specified whether or not their services were salaried. Despite whether or not they did generate an income because of their SL participation, the participants extended their career lives virtually, which seemingly provides them with a sense of purpose.

11.3   IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

In completing this research, I considered possible implications for the practice of psychology, which psychologists and other mental health professionals might find of interest. I specifically take into account the already mentioned psychosocial theory of development.

Seemingly, the principle finding from this study renders the final developmental stage as proposed by Erik Erikson questionable, at least for those who participate in SL. It could be argued that in accordance with Erikson's theory, older participants who participate in SL might be experiencing failure at this stage, and are using SL in an attempt to relive their lives out of a desperate need to create something more substantial and satisfactory. However, this was not found to be the case amongst the participants in the

research group. Contrary to the psychosocial theory's description of people who achieve success in the last stage of development, through a process of reviewing their lives and feeling content therewith, this study has shown that participants in this particular age cohort are active, generative and purposeful in their personal SL lives and the SL community. They are looking to the future and utilising the benefits of this virtual realm, moving about in SL confidently, creating new experiences, enjoying and contributing to what this virtual world has to offer. Thus, because of technological advances and the existence of cyberspace, the psychosocial model cannot be applied blindly, especially to people in the final stage of development. It becomes essential that the person's entire context and life world be considered by mental health professionals attempting to understand and work with people in the identified age group.

Furthermore, it would seem that older adults, especially those who participate in SL, long for, enjoy and maintain a certain degree of activity and involvement in life. This makes it important to consider the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of older adults in modern society and also sets the stage for exploring possible contributions older people are capable of making in our contemporary world.

Based on demographic data it would appear as though 60 years no longer qualifies as late life. Perhaps 60 years could be seen as the beginning of a stage between middle adulthood and late life and as a time in which the individual still might aspire towards continued integration and engagement. Engagement, re-engagement or disengagement will, however, be mediated by diverse variables such as a person's mental and physical health, family obligations, financial situation, personal preferences and the person's unique personality. Crandall (1980) asserts that there is great diversity within the aged population that results in the assorted requirements and needs associated with the aged subculture. Particularly in this research study, the heterogeneity of the participant group was exemplified by their diverse interests, activities and affiliations in SL. Therefore it becomes important that mental health professionals take cognisance of the individual needs of older people as well as demographic projections of life expectancy, in order to

help older individuals plan towards a satisfying longer life that they can evaluate and appreciate to be successful ageing for them.

Another implication for the mental health practice that became apparent in conducting this research is that SL could be an appropriate arena in which psychologists might help people become aware of, confront and overcome stereotypes of race, gender and age. Another possible example for therapeutic application of the virtual world might be "virtual exposure" in conjunction with the other Cognitive Behavioural Therapy techniques of "imaginal exposure" and "in vivo exposure". Social Constructionism and Narrative Therapy could employ the virtual world and the people who move therein as witnesses to a client's authoring of their alternative story/identity. The prospect SL holds for therapeutic experiences is vast.

Considering virtual career opportunities, not only for older adults, but for all age groups become important. Psycho-education in SL is yet another opportunity, not only as applied in the traditional group context, but also in the form of experiential learning, by perhaps helping a person adopt a certain role or interaction style that has therapeutic value. Mental health professionals might also consider SL as a source of stimulation for the elderly, since it provides opportunities to engage on cognitive, emotional, behavioural, relational, aesthetic and spiritual levels.

11.4 LIMITATIONS

This study has certain limitations. The first limitation pertains to data collection. As part of this research, written accounts were used to gain an understanding of participants' involvement in SL. In future research, interviews could be conducted inside of SL through the IM channel, which could perhaps yield more information because the interviewer has the opportunity to clarify certain aspects of the experience with the interviewee. A completely different research design might also be considered in future research. Perhaps in approaching SL research from a social constructionist perspective,

research could provide new insights into cultural stories operating in this virtual realm and how people story their identities differently in this world as opposed to RL.

The second limitation has to do with the demographics of the participant group and usefulness for generalisation. All of the participants were highly educated individuals. This might have contributed to their motivation to enter SL in the first place, since SL seemingly stimulates people on an intellectual level. It might also have promoted their ability to acquire the skills necessary to move around in SL. Related to this, another possible limitation of the study is that the SLED and SLR bulk emailing lists were used, restricting the pool of possible participants to educators and researchers in SL. Making use of other bulk emailing lists should be considered in future research. The small participant group is another limitation and future researchers should consider using a larger group of participants. Lastly, all the participants came from the USA. It would have been exceedingly valuable if a more internationally diverse participant group had participated in the research project.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to highlight how the results in the form of the three identified essential themes function in the context of specifically developmental psychology. The three themes and their implications for specifically the last stage of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development were addressed. Furthermore other possible implications of the findings for the elderly and for the practice of psychology were considered. Lastly the limitations of the study were declared.

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