VIVA THE ELITE OR POWER TO THE PEOPLE?
A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF SECOND LIFE.

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ABSTRACT

In searching for a more egalitarian future many see emerging technologies as tools that will give voice to the disempowered, creating an alternate power structure and disrupting the discourse of the elite. This paper uses the work of several play theory scholars to question the validity of this view in context of the virtual three dimensional world of Second Life. Using filters of the novice player (technology) and of the player from the Middle East, I look at player agency in expressing cultural identity while looking specifically at the avatar creation process and construction of identity as represented through group membership. In my analysis I argue towards using a combination framework that allows for multiple levels of analysis by aligning the rhetoric of play space with that of procedural rhetoric represented by the code as put forth by Ian Bogost. This allows me to introduce the idea of culturally specific rhetorics of play interacting within the same space and discuss ways in which the technology drives the player towards its own agenda. Using this approach I point to the rhetoric of capital as a subset of the power rhetoric, which when combined with procedural rhetoric diminishes the agency of players who exist outside of the given cultural and technical discourse. I suggest that while Second Life presents players with a new level of agency in regards to avatar creation, the code reflects the biases of the culture by restricting agency on a number of other fronts including the application itself, access method and hardware requirements. What I propose is a new definition for the term Digital Divide not centered on the issue of internet access but rather on a more nuanced approach incorporating the quality and level of access to various global spaces online. The aim is to consider how technology is supporting the elite and creating a new category of “Others.”
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Table of contents

1. Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1
2. Theoretical Foundations ............................................................................................... 10
  2.1 Magic Circle ............................................................................................................. 10
  2.3 Rhetorics present in play spaces .......................................................................... 16
  2.4 Resolution of Narratology versus Ludology ......................................................... 20
  2.5 Agency .................................................................................................................... 25
    2.5.1 Player Agency and Identity............................................................................. 25
    2.5.2 Role of technology ....................................................................................... 31
  2.6 Cultural context of Play ......................................................................................... 38
    2.6.1 Culture and Identity ..................................................................................... 40
3. A brief history of video games ....................................................................................... 45
  3.1 Introduction of the Matrix ..................................................................................... 46
  3.2 The First Virtual World ......................................................................................... 49
  3.3 God-Like Games .................................................................................................... 55
  3.4 Serious Games ....................................................................................................... 57
  3.5 Massive numbers of people, playing online ......................................................... 59
  3.6 Age of Virtuality .................................................................................................... 61
  3.7 Second Life – Brave, brave new world ................................................................. 63
4. Second Life, an analysis ............................................................................................... 67
  4.1 Creation of Player Identity in Second Life ............................................................. 68
  4.2 Construction of Community in Second Life ....................................................... 77
    4.2.1 Searching for Iran, Persia and Persian ......................................................... 79
    4.2.2 Islam in Second Life ..................................................................................... 84
  4.3 Consumption in Second Life .................................................................................. 90
  4.4 Technology in Second Life .................................................................................... 96
    4.4.1 Hardware and software requirements ......................................................... 98
    4.4.2 Internet Access ............................................................................................ 100
    4.4.3 Localization ................................................................................................. 103
    4.4.4 Technology elite ......................................................................................... 105
5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 108
  5.1 For Further Study .................................................................................................. 115
Works Cited ...................................................................................................................... 118
1. Introduction

Every once in a while there comes along a technology that enthralls the media, the enthusiasts and the general public. *Second Life*, the three dimensional virtual world start-up based in San Francisco is one of those companies. What *Second Life* promised was a space within which avatar could frolic, do business, and live virtual lives. From cover of *Businessweek* to serving as a major plot-line in a popular network television shows, the company and technology had captured the imagination of the many.

I was intrigued from the beginning by the possibility of an interactive game that allowed players to create their own identity and their own plot lines along the way. *Second Life*, however, is not the first interactive game that has captured my imagination. That honor goes to Atari console’s *Centipede* in 1984, followed by host of others such as *Galaga*, *Zelda*, *Final Fantasy*, *World of Warcraft* and *Prince of Persia*.

I still remember the excitement with which I bought *Prince of Persia*. The game box promised an interesting story: the Shah and the Prince had defeated the Maharaja of

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1 http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_nobel.html
India, had returned home but had unintentionally let loose an evil curse that must now
be conquered in order to save the kingdom. I was so happy to see the name Persia in any
mass consumer context that did not include the words terrorist or fanatical anywhere
near it. The concept of Evil Vizier who ends up tricking the prince - I could deal with.

Unfortunately, as I started the game session, I realized that there were a few other things
the Prince had picked up along the way and brought back home, like the dome from the
Taj Mahal. The scenery was so unexpected, with lush jungles and medieval castles that
looked more Scottish than Persian. The lovely princess Farah looked like Jasmine from
Aladdin\(^2\), and the game had the general ambience of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.\(^3\)
The prince had dark hair but reminded me of Wolverine.

It is this re-appropriation, redistribution and redefinition of cultural symbols and, by
extension, cultural identity, that serve as the inspiration for the work provided here.

Video games have quickly become the major cultural productions of our time,
developed mainly in the U.S. and Japan for a global audience. Today, this medium is
arguably as influential in the youth market as television shows were two decades ago,
parting lessons on morality, choice making and history on a daily basis.

The re-appropriation, redistribution and redefinition, however, are in conflict with the
discourse of technology liberation as espoused by visionaries like McLuhan and Toffler.

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2 Disney Animation.
3 Released in 1944 featuring John Hall and Maria Montez.
In electronic media, Marshall McLuhan saw the promise of an “electronic ‘global village,’” which would bridge some of the divide created between the mind and the body; as well as nations. In discussing television, the new technology of his time, he believed that the globally broadcast signals would bring together people from around the world within the community that “they had enjoyed in preindustrialized society, ‘retribalized’ by participation in global television” (Kline: 34).

Ironically, while futurist Alvin Toffler saw television as a tool of massification, perpetuating oppression and homogenization, he saw the possibility of real change with the proliferation of personal computers. With his “Third Wave” theory, Toffler foresaw the rise of the prosumer\(^4\), and thought that the personal computer would pave the wave for massive societal change (Kline: 5). Yet, in this particular case, however, technology was being used to bring people together but to perpetuate stereotypes. In *Prince of Persia* we saw a re-imagined native.

The discourse of technology liberation is not unique to McLuhan or Toffler. From the early days of the internet, to early chat rooms, to YouTube to blogs, there has always existed fervor around the promise of a new world where individuals can assert their power and where those on the margins can reclaim center stage. These new spaces are supposed to allow for unfolding of narratives previously untold, censored and

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\(^4\) A consumer that also produces cultural products or an empowered consumer bypassing gaining control over means of production.
unrealized; hailed at every turn by the media as mankind’s salvation. The launch of the new three dimensional world of Second Life was simply the latest.

Upon its launch, Time magazine hailed its lack of formal structure and wondered at a place that would allow you to build what you want and be who you wanted to be. Lost in all the press coverage, interviews and discussion was the question of why Second Life was created, by whom and for what purpose. Second Life does provide a unique environmental analysis in that it allows for the creation of the personal narrative/self/identity in an environment that does not provide a linear storyline with pre-populated characters. This experience is very different from the example of Prince of Persia I used earlier in which the player has no choice of which character represents him or her but must play the game as the Prince, as designed, as imagined by the developers.

Progress within Prince of Persia is also dependent on the player’s willingness to acquiesce to the rules of the space. You can only get to the door if you go through the archway; you can only get to the top of the tower after killing all the bad guys that come your way. You can only kill the bad guys by using your sword as designed.

Second Life does not provide such obvious paths for players to follow. As a player, you can give your character any physical characteristics you want. You can be male or female, short or tall, fat or not; and your skin can be brown, yellow or blue. You don’t
have to do anything and you don’t have to go anywhere. Second Life is a digital stage where you can perform yourself, your other self, or someone else.

But what if what you want to express is something much less drastic? What if your intent is to simply express your cultural identity? Does Second Life’s new world provide a new means for that expression or not? The purpose of my study is to ask whether the politics of the code hinder or help that expression; especially that of a technological novice or someone coming from a non-industrialized society, specifically the Orient.

In order to answer my research question, my thesis is divided into three chapters. The chapter that follows elaborates on the theoretical framework used in my analysis. To make my case, I draw upon works from diverse academic areas such as play theory, technological determinism and cultural studies. The first question tackled in this section is the definition of Second Life as a space and what it represents beyond the technology. Second Life can be considered a contested space and clarifying this question is essential to creating a framework for the analysis. Through combining the works of several scholars I propose that Second Life is a space of play imbued with multiple rhetorics. I accomplish this after having reviewed key concepts and classifications of play and game.
Having made the case that *Second Life* is space of play and a game, I next address the debate within the field of game studies regarding using textual analysis methods. This debate is better known with the field as the issue of narratology versus ludology. The argument partly stems from game study scholars who feel that by using textual analysis, the scholar is simplifying the study and not addressing the technology. In other words, the analysis will miss what is unique about interactive games – the technology itself.

The second part of the debate revolves around the definition of narrative. For some, the emergent nature of the interactive video game makes it difficult to define a set narrative. The basic premise of this medium is that the game changes with every play and with every new player; rendering the narrative analysis obsolete as soon as it is complete. On the other side of the debate are two groups. There are those that apply genre definitions as a way around the issue and those who see these games as new narrative spaces, making the case that regardless of technology, there is always an undercurrent of story. After presenting both sides of the argument, I discuss the approach which I am taking in my analysis.

The next theoretical area discussed in chapter two is that of agency. This is where I provide the basis for my assertion that code is political – or at a minimum ideological. While agency can be defined in many ways, my first definition specifically centers on player identity. I ask who it is that we choose to be when we go online and what level of
control we have over that choice. This discussion serves to bind the broadness of the subject of identity.

The second definition focuses on the role of technology as both an agent in itself and as the developer’s means of exerting control over the play space. The argument to be made about this duality is that the code upon which the technology is based has an ideology, a point of view, from day one. I contend that this point of view belongs to the developer or the publisher of the game. Once the development phase is finished and the game is released, the code begins to exert control. Once the player interacts with the technology, the technology sets the rules to be followed, exerts control over the choices that the player makes and determines the course of events. As we shall see in the analysis chapter, this goes beyond the code itself explicitly to the technology’s ability impact experience by simply not working or by occurrences such as the computer itself crashing.

The last section of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of culture. Here I lay the groundwork for a discussion of different cultural approaches to definition of play, to the act of play, as well as how culturally driven definitions create uneven level of participation in today’s global play space. Furthermore, I expand my discussion of the individual to the interplay between identity and cultural context.
Chapter three provides a history of some of the key developments in video games and virtual spaces. To provide some background on the cultural legacy of Second Life, I briefly highlight some of the main video game genres, outline the evolution of the technology and introduce the early history of Second Life.

Chapter four contains my analysis of Second Life. Here, I provide my observations gathered during a two week period of time in the winter of 2008 as a resident within the world. The discussion begins with a review of how identity is created with the tools provided and how it is constructed specifically vis-à-vis communities. I restrict my unit of analysis of identity construction to group membership and community because, as I argue in chapter two, one of the key differences between the Western culture as represented by the world of Second Life, and the Middle Eastern cultural filter I am using, is that of the individual versus communal definitions of play. This is not to say that constructing one’s identity is limited to group membership, but to identify for the reader definitional choices made for the purposes of scope and clarity in my work.

Another key area covered in my analysis in this chapter is that of the technology effect. This is done through a review of how technology mediates player experience within this world, as well as an examination of a number of factors such as system requirements for downloading the client and entering Second Life, as well as access methods, use of search and use of construction tools when in-world.
In the end, my analysis reveals that not only is there a technological bias within the system but there is also an economic one. I find that the *Second Life* is a commoditized space, driven in most aspects by commerce. While the initial experience with identity creation does not support my hypothesis about the limitations placed on cultural expression of identity, the technological and economic biases do act as restrictive variables in ways that are impactful. In my conclusion, I make the case that there is an ideology behind the code that leads to the creation of a biased virtual world.
2. Theoretical Foundations

In this chapter, I will introduce some of the key concepts used in my analysis, which come from several fields of scholarship such as play theory, video games studies, technological determinism and cultural studies. I use a combination of these ideas to ground and shape my analysis in chapter four.

2.1 Magic Circle

Second Life as a unit of analysis requires classification beyond the label of virtual world. Some people describe Second Life as a game, some as a precursor to the three-dimensional internet and some see it as just an experiment. In this section, I will draw upon works of several play scholars to refine my definition of the space as that of play and game. As a side note, throughout this paper I use the terms play and games interchangeably, while acknowledging that games can be thought of as a subset of play.

Huizinga’s Homo Ludens and Caillois’ Man, Play and Games each provide us with a blueprint of classification and definitions that are foundational in the evolution of play theory. The two men’s approach to play encompasses many and most areas of life today, broadening the early twentieth century notions of it which limited the concept of play to that of child’s play and games. Their stance can be seen as a reaction to the assumed frivolity of the activity. Their ideas are still relevant today for study of today’s games. In fact, video games theoreticians use the frameworks provided by the two men as a
starting point for further exploration of an activity that also suffers the same fate, as interactive games have also been given the label of frivolous. Next I will explore some of the key concepts and classifications introduced by these two scholars.

One of the central concepts in play theory, game and video game studies is that of the *Magic Circle* introduced by Huizinga. The Magic Circle is a sacred space of play that suspends what is real and what is not real; it is entered voluntarily by the players and it has its own set of rules that are binding. These tenants are central to Huizinga’s philosophy in that for him these spaces are no different than the majority of other spaces or institutions created by man in everyday life such as court of law, a trade association, or a democracy. All of these spaces are in essence, he argues, magic circles where individuals agree to a set of rules that binds them to a code of behavior while within the space. Huizinga argues challenges the concept that there is a “real” set of rules that “real” life is bound by, and a “made up” set of rules that is created during play. Huizinga sees play as what civilized mankind and brought it around the same table.

There is some circularity to Huizinga’s argument in that he blurs the line between play and life; while at the same time remaining adamant that pure space of play can exist only if the real world is kept out. Nevertheless, he gives a framework that can be applied in analysis of video games and virtual worlds. This framework gains additional importance in the discussion of a contested space. By contested space, I am referring to
earlier mentioned question about whether *Second Life* can be thought of as a game or not. Huizinga’s definition of play is as follows:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social grouping which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their differences from the common world by disguise or other means. (13)

While Huizinga’s work lays the groundwork, in 1958’s *Man, Play and Games* Roger Caillois expands upon it. Caillois uses the same definition quoted above to tackle some of what he calls the “gaps” in Huizinga’s approach and attempts to create a foundation that can be applied to a variety of game play. Caillois’ critique of Huizinga primarily comes from his belief that Huizinga’s definition of play is “at the same time too broad and too narrow” (4). Some specific areas Caillois tackles in his work are the presence of institutions around play, the possibility of unproductive property exchange⁵, and the relativity of the rules within game space. The relativity of rules within game space, comes from Caillois’ belief that some games such as make-belief; do not have absolute rules known to the players prior to the commencement of game play. This is opposite of Huizinga’s call for absolute rules within the magic circle.

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⁵ As in gambling, in which one player wins while the other loses. There is no overall addition to the whole, just an exchange of properties (money, items, etc.).
Both stances prove to be problematic for my analysis in that they do not address the impact of pre-existing cultural norms on players. While both address the existence of culturally specific definitions of play later on in their work, their eventual definition of the space presents both the play space and the player as a tabula rasa. In the case of the player specifically, we are to assume that they mostly adapt to the new environment without the intrusion of prior or “outside roles” into the space as man has adapted to society.

Putting aside momentarily the issue of roles outside of the play space it is important to talk about Caillois classifications of games, an important contribution to the discourse at hand. Caillois classifies games as belonging to one of four types: *Agon* (competition), *Alea* (chance), *Mimicry* (simulation), *Ilinx* (vertigo) (36). *Agon* are competitive games where rivals or contestants are given the same set of tools to compete with, in a defined space within which they adhere to a pre-determined set of rules. Some examples of games in this category are boxing or fencing. *Agon* also includes games such as chess – which are competitive and whose outcome is not based on pure chance, but rather based on the skill of the player. *Alea* represents games of chance and is the opposite of *agon*. In these games, the outcome is not based on player skill but on pure chance. Players have no control over the outcome in a game of roulette or in a lottery. Caillois distinguishes between *agon* and *alea* by stating that “In contrast to *agon*, *alea* negates hard work, patience, experience and qualifications” (17).
Mimicry is the third and broadest category, involving games of make-belief, as well as theatrical presentations. Caillois calls out mimicry as the category of games that does not adhere to the rules set forth. He writes that “Mimicry is incessant innovation” (23). This separation of mimicry from the other categories of play resurfaces in the debate amongst scholars as to the nature of video games for several reasons. As we shall see later in this chapter, for some the idea of mimicry is well aligned with the emergent nature of narrative in video games. For others, the presence of technology necessitates the presence of rules (i.e. code) which makes innovation during game play difficult. Out of the four groups defined, Second Life is most closely aligned with this category.

The last category of games is ilinx, involving physical activities that disrupt the senses and the sense of reality itself. Caillois cites the Whirling Dervishes (religious sect) as an example of play in this category. It can be argued that virtual reality will perform the same function by disrupting the sense of reality but the technology is still in its infancy and therefore not included in the discussion here.

Caillois further differentiates games by placing them on a spectrum at one end anchored by the concept of paidia and on the other by the concept of ludus. In describing the two Caillois writes:

Rules are inseparable from play as soon as the latter becomes institutionalized. From this moment on they become part of its nature. They transform it into an instrument of fecund and decisive culture. But a basic freedom is central to play in order to stimulate distraction and
fantasy. This liberty is its indispensable motive power and is basic to the most complex and carefully organized forms of play. Such a primary power of improvisation and joy, which I call *paidia*, is allied to the taste for gratuitous difficulty that I propose to call *ludus*, in order to encompass the various games to which, without exaggeration, a civilizing quality can be attributed. In fact, they reflect the moral and intellectual values of a culture, as well as contribute to their refinement and development. (27)

This concept further validates the use of *Second Life* as the key part of my analysis into since it helps explains how it is possible for *Second Life*, which is thought of as a space of freedom, enforces cultural and institutional norms. In this approach ludus is the “metamorphosis” of *paidia* (33). I propose that this statement by Caillois can be used to further refine both his and Huizinga’s argument of the nature of the rule set within the game space in that while the game play may or may not have a set of rules at the onset; the rules, once defined, are influenced by player norms as well as institutional norms. This line of thinking changes the idea of the magic circle as a pure space. While both scholars’ believe that liberty and freedom are foundational to play, they disagree about the impact of reality’s intrusion into it. Of the two, only Caillois addresses what happens when play is “contaminated by the real world” (44).

Where as for Huizinga the game ends at the moment the real world intrudes, for Caillois, it becomes corrupted. Caillois’ framework has two levels of intrusion, institutionalization and corruption. For example he correlates stock market speculation as an “institutional form” of *alea* integrated in the real world, but astrology as its
corruption. Similarly he calls economic competitiveness as the institutional form of *agon* and violence as its corruption (54).

Based on this, I contend that there are no pure spaces of play outside of child’s play and that every other instance of play is imbued with real world intent. This is particularly true of constructed spaces of play, and even more so spaces created by code. Therefore, *Second Life* has a real world intent that shapes the experience people have within it, based on a set of cultural and institutional norms. In the next few sections I will examine the impact of these norms, starting with the role of rhetoric in play.

### 2.3 Rhetorics present in play spaces

Politics of the code is representative of an ideology. The *raison d'ètre* of ideology is to persuade and it does so through the use of rhetoric. *Rhetoric* as an idea and as an approach, occupies a central part of this analysis. In this section I will discuss the works of two scholars who leverage rhetoric in their discussion of play spaces. The first is Brian Sutton-Smith’s discussion of rhetoric of play; the second is Ian Bogost’s discussion of procedural rhetoric. Both works help traverse the space between play as a neutral activity and space, to one that is imbued with rhetoric. By using these ideas, I can not only explore rhetorics embedded within the codes of *Second Life* but also look at which rhetorics are privileged within the space.
In his book, *The Ambiguity of Play* Sutton-Smith puts forth different theoretical approaches that have been taken by various scholars in analyzing play. He summarizes the scholarship into seven rhetorics. While Sutton-Smith’s work brings together several frameworks, it itself acts as a way of thinking about games useful in constructing a framework. The seven rhetorics that he identifies are that of play as progress, as fate, as power, as identity, as imaginary, as self, and as frivolous (9). Sutton-Smith groups these rhetorics into ancient rhetorics of progress, fate, power, identity and frivolity and the modern ones of progress, imaginary and the self. Based on his classification the latter three are outcome of the past three centuries of western civilization and the ideas of “Enlightenment, romanticism and individualism.” The rhetoric of progress distinguishes play of children (and by extension animals) with that of adult play activity. This rhetoric also embraces the idea that play activity has a purpose beyond just itself, just as bonding or emotional experience (30) which is well aligned with the earlier mentioned concept of intent within the space. While true that that this is in direct conflict with Huizinga’s belief that play is without purpose, I submit that it provides a more balanced view.

The rhetorics of fate are well aligned with *alea*, and encompass the idea that the player exerts little control over the outcome of the game (53). The rhetorics of power are of particular interest because they assert that play is an “individual expression of power” (74). Therefore it would seem that the player has/should have agency within the game. Sutton-Smith discusses the rhetoric by stating that
On the social play level, the general idea of the power rhetoric is that play or games or sports or athletics that have to do with some kind of context and reflect a struggle for superiority between two groups (two people, two communities, two tribes, two social classes, two ethnic groups, two or more nations) exist because they give some kind of representation or expression to the existing real conflict between these groups. Whichever side wins the game or contest is said to bring glory to its own group, bonding the members together through their common contestive identity. (75)

Furthermore, Sutton-Smith refers to conflict enculturation theory of games which sees patterns of child-rearing being culture specific and directly bearing on the skills that a child or adult bring to the game (82). Therefore not all people play a game in the same way, which is why we to need to define how the rules of the game are set in the beginning and by whom. This line of thinking challenges the notion that rivals in a contest start the game with the same odds of winning; introducing the possibility that variables outside of the magic circle can impact the outcome.

*Rhetorics of identity* are another way in which communities define and assert their identities. Sutton-Smith defines this category as forms of bonding including “exhibition and validation or parody of membership and traditions in a community. This expression is most often found in parades, celebrations, carnivals, and the use of play as a sanction for community” (91).
Rhetorics of imaginary are described as ways of thinking about culture and reading play as text. This category includes work of the imagination such as art and literature; but also includes child’s fantasy and performance. Rhetorics of self, has its foundation in early twentieth century psychology and focuses on the play experience of the individual, be it wish fulfillment or stimulus seeking. In this rhetoric, play is an attitude and a state of the mind that challenges any efforts to categorize activities into play and non-play activities since the answer is the mind of the player (174). Finally we have the Rhetorics of frivolity, which Sutton-Smith again ties back to Huizinga’s work; as one that stands up to the seriousness of all preceding rhetorics.

In Sutton-Smith’s work, the ancient (fate, power, identity and frivolity) and the modern (progress, imaginary and the self) categories of rhetoric are exclusive in that he contends that the modern rejects the ancient. One of the differences between the earlier approaches discussed and the scholarship presented by Sutton-Smith is that there is a distinction made between modern rhetorics which rest on the voluntary and the ancient which rest on the obligatory nature of player participation; the ancient as rhetorics about group and the modern as that of the individual (52). Again, here we encounter the idea that not all play activity is about freedom, some are about rituals that are intricately tied to cultural foundations.

However, before delving into these issues further, I must address the topic of reading games as text because it directly bears on the methodology used in this study. There are
many game scholars that will argue that the analysis methods inherited from older forms of media should not be applied to video games; and others who see video games as an extension of what has already come before it. This debate needs to be addressed before beginning the discussion of cultural context and agency.

2.4 Resolution of Narratology versus Ludology

For some, virtual spaces are just a new mode of technology, a new distribution system for signs and symbols which offer a new level of audience interactivity lacked by the old media. For others, virtual spaces are a new performance stage for the self. There are others who see virtual spaces as more than just a performance space that brings together mythology and audience participation; but one that signals a move away from asynchronous narratives dependent on print and film to one that allows for an emergent narrative based on audience participation.

Game Studies pioneer Espen Aarseth is one of the scholars who have been wary of the encroachment of textual analysis into the field (Bogost: 51). Aarseth’s concern stems from what he sees as the subjugation of Game Studies to other well established disciplines such as Media Studies. He is especially cautious of readings conducted by scholars who do not play games.

In First Person, New Media as Story, Performance, and Game, Markku Eskelinen presents a case for the incompatibility of new and old media vis-à-vis traditional
definitions of narrative. He makes the distinction between new and old media based on the fact that that in multi-player games, the “positions of players constantly affect each other…Such an arrangement would be very unusual but not impossible to execute in narrative fiction. The way I read *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky 1955) would then change other people’s *idiots*, or their readers possibilities when reading them, and vice versa” (38).

The flexibility inherent in the game play continuously changes the narrative. In the same volume, Espen Aarseth attempts to resolve the conflict by using John Caweltis’s genre theory, pointing out that we can distinguish “between ‘underlying form’ and specific cultural conventions;” which would tell us that “the underlying form (narrative structure or game rules) remains untranslatable, but the cultural conventions, such as the setting and character types…are translated” (50).

True, use of genre and the allowance for varying levels of textuality, opens the door for discussion of cultural context and filters in games applied in this study; but neither arguments provide a satisfying answer to the question of the meta-narrative or structure that is posed by the game itself. Aarseth and Eskelinen’s positions also support my focus on the role of technology. But the assertion that an entire game (engine and software) is within a *magic circle* that defies analysis is a claim that must be disputed if game studies is to ever become a strong discipline.

In fact, the circularity of meaning is even more apparent in the context of video games since the interactivity allows production of meaning in new ways, which turns gamers
into authors themselves, who in turn produce meaning. Hence, the boy, named Jordan Mechner, who grew up reading *A Thousand and One Nights* built a game using the stories and metaphors of that text, calling it *Prince of Persia*; is the same person who is now in pre-production for a movie, based on Mechner’s video game that is based on a book and informed by dozens of cinematic adaptations of the same theme.

Returning to the issue of narrative emergence, I propose that there is a limit to how emergent interactive games can be. Admittedly this is a line that will continuously shift with new technological developments. Some open spaces such as *Second Life* provide an environment that is more conducive to emergent narratives both because of the fact that the composition of players can change at any given point in time and the landscape or topography of the game itself can change in new and unexpected ways at any given point in time. This leads to interactions and experiences that are potentially unique in each instance of game play. Why is this different than Aarseth’s point about use of genre to define the narrative structure and potential for emergency within a game? It is different because genre does not address the restrictions placed by hardware and architecture on the nature of the game from the get-go.

To present the other side of the narrative debate, I turn to Marie-Laure Ryan. In her article “Beyond Myth and Metaphor,” she tackles the question of narrative head on.

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6 Even though Frasca & Juul would argue that there can be no narrative during periods of interaction.

7 IMDB – Charlie Clausen, an Australian actor
Some of the criteria she uses to define a working definition of narrative in context of digital stories are:

A narrative is a sign with a signifier (discourse) and a signified (story, mental image, semantic representation). The signifier can have many different semiotic manifestations. It can consist for instance of a verbal act of story-telling (diegetic narration), or of gestures and dialogue performed by actors (mimetic, or dramatic narration).

The narrativity of a text is located on the level of the signified. Narrativity should therefore be defined in semantic terms. The definition should be medium-free.

Narrativity is a matter of degree. Postmodern novels are less narrative than simple forms such as fables or fairy tales; popular literature is usually more narrative than avant-garde fiction.

For Ryan, narrative precedes media and is independent of it – which is similar to the distinction Huizinga makes between play and culture. However, I see the same issue with her definition in that while encouraging a structuralist approach, the technology: the physics engine, the available character choices, etc. is not included as a main actor and its impact on the narrative itself is not central to the discussion.

For the analysis in this paper, I have decided to combine methodologies as suggested by Diane Carr [of the University of London]. She addresses the question of analysis approach in her column “Un-Situated Play? Textual Analysis and Digital Games.” In this column she pulls from the works for Roland Barthes to suggest that both textual and
structural analysis should be used in games study. Based on her analysis of Barthes’ work, she states that structural analysis can be used to study “… things like navigation, genre, affect, design, typologies, rules, as well as (when generically appropriate) narrative elements and aspects of characterization.” Textual analysis, she states:

So, Barthes’ work on textuality indicates, to me at least, that a media-sensitive model of textual analysis would attend to the mobilising or actualising of the aforementioned game-as-structure during play, as well as to questions of signification. This means that the topics that would fall within the ambit of textual analysis would include things like the relationship between structure and play, the tensions between rules, play and interpretation, and the dynamics of intertextuality and (culturally situated) subjectivity.

Ultimately, regardless of the method of analysis and definition of narrative chosen, the main challenge in analyzing a video game is the many variables that can impact/influence player experience during game play. In order to be complete, the analysis must contain not just a review of the static elements of the game but also address what happens during the times of interactivity.

In order to address both the structural and textual elements of the game, I will build on the discussions above and next explore the issue of agency. The first question that I will present is about the player’s ability to transcend existing cultural pattern built into the game; and the second is the role that technology plays in supporting or hindering the player’s attempts to do so.
2.5 Agency

Agency is an important topic for the analysis at hand because it is correlated with freedom; in this context the individual’s freedom to express cultural identity within Second Life. There are obvious instances of games used to further national agenda’s as in the case of America’s Army – in which those outside of that particular national discourse become the Other. Second Life represents a different genre of game and interactivity. Going back to Aarseth’s point about the impact of genre on the narrative within the game, in this section I ask if and to what degree genre impacts the degree of agency accorded to the player.

2.5.1 Player Agency and Identity

Each of the scholarly works discussed so far attribute different levels of agency to the player engaged in a game. For Huizinga, freedom is the essence of and at the very heart of play. The player voluntarily enters into the magic circle, this act presupposing that she is in agreement to abide by all the rules of the game and that she can leave the circle at anytime (9).

Caillouïs offers a more layered construct in his use of pure, institutional and corrupt instances of play. Each of the instances of play (alea, agon, mimicry and ilinx) have the three variations which allows for a discussion of the interaction between society and play, as well as power and play. So the question becomes, what happens to the rules of the game when it is corrupted? The answer to this question bears directly on the issue of
player agency as it asks how the corruption privileges the corrupter. It also begs the question, does an institutional form of the game privilege the institution?

However, Caillois also addresses agency indirectly in an opposite way when he categorizes ludus, as expressed in the form of *hobby*, as a reaction against the industrial revolution which he describes as “primarily a compensation for the injury to personality caused by bondage to work of an automatic and picayune character….He not only avenges himself upon reality, but in a positive and creative way” (32). Here the act of play becomes something larger than itself, allowing man to recapture agency lost to technology. This poses an interesting dilemma in context of the *hobby* of video gaming.

Sutton-Smith presents a much less utopian view of the sacredness of the game space. As discussed in previous sections, Sutton-Smith sees play as a form of rhetoric and rhetoric’s role is to persuade. Therefore all games have a purpose to them from day one. He writes:

> That the group that maintains the rhetoric benefits by the exercise of hegemony over the players, over their competitors, or over those who are excluded from the play. This postulate makes explicit why the present approach to play centers on the rhetorics of the theorists rather than, more simply, on the narratives they tell themselves. Rhetorics are narratives that have the intent to persuade because there is some kind of gain for those who are successful in their persuasion. Telling plausible stories would not be enough (16).
Sutton-Smith’s definition brings back the question of whose intent is embedded within the game. Furthermore, his definition of the rhetorics discussed earlier, makes the case for the presence of different levels of agency within each of the rhetorics. This is most evident in his discussion of the rhetorics of power in which the game is used to play-out real world conflicts (74). Additionally, recall that Sutton-Smith describes some of the rhetorics as those which promote group unity and community in opposition to other rhetorics which are about the individual. It is this point that leads me to extend the ideas of culturally differentiated definitions of play and that of the rhetoric shaping the rules to the concept of games promoting the rhetoric of the culture that they were created in. That is why video games developed in the U.S. are from the onset imbued the local cultural rhetoric; leaving the players outside of that local construct with an ideological disadvantage.

The culture of the player is as important in this analysis as the culture that is represented in the game. Two key parts of defining the culture of the player are to answer who it is we choose to be when we play the game and how much control do we have over making that happen? For example, I may want to play the role of an old wise woman in Prince of Persia but that is not a choice that is given to be by the game. I may also decide to go online as a man or as a chair. My position in this paper is that this expression is limited by the politics of code. There are many different ways in which the expression can be defined and therefore I need to explain which identity I am referring to.
First let us separate the question of who we create from how we create; the latter becoming more of a technical discussion that I address in chapter four. The question of the identity we choose to perform when we go online can be looked at from many perspectives such as gender or race just to name two. In my analysis I focus on cultural identity, expressions of which can be seen in clothing, language, community association, ethnicity, etc. While my scope is limited, I will use the next few paragraphs to provide a more comprehensive background in order to ground the discussion.

There are five views as to what our online selves as seen through the avatar, represent. Those views are that our online self is 1) an idealized version of ourselves, 2) a vehicle through which the real self can be expressed 3) true manifestation of our fluid self 4) who we in everyday life, and 5) a rhetorical self. I will cover each point of view below, after which I will argue that the answer to this question is dependent on the type of play space or genre.

Some scholars argue that when an individual creates and performs a character online, they are in fact performing an idealized version of themselves. In *The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft* (WoW), Katherine Bessiere, A. Fleming Seay and Sara Kiesler looked at the identity that WoW players create in-game. They found that players “create their main character more similar to their ideal self than the players themselves.” In the book *Smartbomb*, Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby tackle a similar question and introduce us to David Reber, “a thirty-year-old ex-Navy serviceman who
works as merchandiser for a Best Buy (156).” David has multiple online identities traveling through many online worlds, but in describing them, he grounds their attributes based on himself. In both of these studies, even though the player and the online characters are conceptually linked, they are distinctly separate from the player perspective. In other words, the online self is not necessarily me.

Other scholars point to the possibility that players do not create an ideal self, but rather have the opportunity to express their real self because of the freedom afforded to them by the technology and the anonymity of these online spaces. In their article on Japanese housewives interactions in chat rooms, Hirofumi Katsuno and Christine Yano point to the empowering nature of online spaces for these women. In their study of chat spaces they found that the housewives exhibited characteristics not inline with their socially prescribed roles and cultural expectations. Katsuno and Yano conclusion was that the anonymity of the chat room, emboldened the housewives to go-around their culturally mandated roles and express an inner self normally not sanctioned by their society.

These two approaches are based on the assumption that there is a fixed self. There are many who challenge the idea that there is an ideal or one true self. Sherry Turkle, a pioneer in the field, sees the creation of multiple identities online as a full expression of man’s postmodern reality. In Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet, she states that “when we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. This reconstruction is our cultural work in progress” (176). For Turkle, it is not just an idealized or a better self that is
created online; but it is that the technology allows for the creation of multiple online identities which she contends is a more accurate reflection of the fluid self.

There are two key concepts in the idea above, one is the definition of identity as fluid, and second is the role of technology as an enabler of our expression. These two ideas share a common foundation and that is the assumption that each and every player starts out on a level field – both in their understanding of technology and their definition of who they are. In this view, cultural expression of identity is just one of the many ways in which one can express one’s identity and the beauty of technology is that you can change that expression as often as you want. The simulated world frees the player from the constraints placed on them by their physical body and cultural expectations.

Lisa Nakamura however argues that there is no such clear distinction between real and simulated worlds in *Cybertypes*. Nakamura makes the case that “supposedly ‘fluid’ selves are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct and regulating cultural norms than are ‘solid’ selves. (4)” She further argues that while identities are constructed in simulated spaces, there is an external limit placed on the expression of that identity. She sees the design of these spaces restricted to a privileged expression of the self. For Nakamura, chat rooms and online games are

…theatrical and discursive spaces where identity is performed, swapped, bought and sold in both textual and graphic media. When users create characters to deploy in these spaces, they are electing to perform versions of themselves as raced and gendered beings. When
users’ characters, or avatars, are differently raced from the user the opportunity for online recreational passing or “identity tourism” arise; that is to say, users perform stereotyped versions of the ‘Oriental’ that perpetuates old mythologies about racial difference.

The last view I will present here is one in which the question is not who you are, but rather who you want to present. This view holds that what we engage in everyday is the creation of a rhetorical self. In her book *Identities Strategy: Rhetorical Selves in Conversation*, Dana Anderson sets up a framework that sees “the expression of identity, one’s sense of self-understanding, is a powerful means of persuasion” (5). The reason this last position is helpful in our discussion is because it uses the concept of rhetoric which in light of the earlier discussion leads to an interesting interaction between the player and the environment. Using these ideas as a jumping board, I can also introduce the idea that play spaces, or rather rhetorical spaces, such as *Second Life* become spaces of persuasion through identities constructed within them.

2.5.2 Role of technology

What is the role of technology and its code in this discussion? They represents a set of rules, a network that connects players, a skill that privileges those familiar with it (techno-elite) and an agent that influences interaction. The issue of technology determinism is not about whether technology is good or evil, but about whether technology is an actor onto itself and whether it helps or hinders social progress vis-à-vis established institutions. With every new innovation and application, such as *Second Life*, there are those who hail the innovation as the one which will bring salvation and act as the great equalizer in our global village. This is not a new phenomenon and can be
seen not just in the emergence of spaces like Second Life or YouTube. This idea has persisted since the beginning of the industrial age, as people look to technology to take power away from the producers in the capitalist system, redistributing it to the masses. *Technology as the savior* is not the only way in which people think about technology today. Some see new technologies as a conduit for distribution and redistribution of signs and symbols in a post-industrial society. It is important to note that by conduit, I don’t mean a neutral conduit in that many would agree that the nature of technology impacts the message along the way. Two advocates of this point are Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan, building on the work of Innis, suggested that “new media have deep consequences in structuring subjectivity not just at the level of cultural content but of perceptual process” (Kline: 35). McLuhan saw the technology as having a profound impact on the content of the message as a result of technology’s pace and reach.

Scholars such as Langdon Winner pick up the thread of the discussion regarding the non-neutrality of technology and argue that the decisions we make about technology are not engineering decisions per se but rather political decisions that impact every aspect of our lives. In his book *The Whale and the Reactor*, Winner refers to people who have a utopian view of technology as the computer romantics. He defines them as those whose ideas show reliance on some key assumptions such as :”(1) people are bereft of information; (2) information is knowledge; (3) knowledge is power; and (4) increasing access to information enhances democracy and equalizes social power” (108).
Winner questions the naïveté of this view and argues that in the end, it is those who have the reigns of society that are positioned to take the most advantage of any new technology developed. Therefore, what is being built or rather codified, are the norms of the elite of a particular society which due to today’s global networks is exported to other societies. The idea of global exportation of ideology is not limited to technology, as scholars have made similar arguments with the film industry. However, this exportation is differentiated because the process of encoding and decoding of the message is formalized and to an extent, ossified, by the code.

The concept of encoding and decoding the message comes from the area of cultural studies. Similar to the debate regarding textual analysis of games, some would question its use in this analysis. To make the case for this approach I turn to Digital Play, in which Stephen Kline et al. argue for the validity of the use of cultural studies in analyzing video games by offering Stuart Hall’s famous article “Encoding/Decoding” in which Hall suggests that

….While the producer of text might ‘encode’ certain meanings, there was no guarantee that the same meanings would emerge from the ‘decoding’ (interpretation) performed by the audience. Although the producer might clearly encode preferred readings, decodings could deviate to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, a film might encode a dominant meaning that applauded the exploits of the heterosexual male action-hero. Audiences might accept this meaning. But they might also come up with ‘negotiated’ readings, accepting the general framework but making
qualifications (by, for example, emphasizing the homoerotic elements in the hero’s relation with his sidekick), or even ‘oppositional’ readings that completely rejected the encoded meanings (by taking sides, with say the vixen-villainess or the evil terrorists or some other “bad” character). The audience, by no means passive, was an ‘active’ creator of meaning and a contender in the struggle to define ‘common sense’ (43-44)

There are two key issues addressed in the passage above, one is the degree to which the audience is “active” in the meaning making process, and the second is the freedom afforded to the audience by the medium of film, to draw their own conclusions. When the technology utopians, as Kline calls them, or computer romantics as Winner calls them, extol the virtues of the emerging virtual worlds, they point to the high level of interactivity and “freedom” presented to the player as an evidence of how this evolving landscape presents something entirely new. This point of view rests on the assumption that technology is a tool that is controlled by the player, there to facilitate their need for entertainment, for salvation, or for expression. In reality, players in virtual spaces are as active as mice in a maze. Every action is directed through the code. Every action is imbued with rhetoric. Every action meant to persuade them to fight or consume. What is different about this medium is its ability to make the maze itself become invisible, the “sine qua non of game designers” (Kline: 19).

The invisibility of the maze does not equate with its disappearance. The player can not open a door if that is not allowed by the code. The player can not go left, if they are meant to go right. Reminiscent of Winner, Ian Bogost calls the ability of the code itself
to persuade, *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost: 28). Bogost highlights the role of software in game play. He argues that it is through analysis of the game at the application level that one can study the procedural rhetoric mounted by the game. In his book *Persuasive Games* Bogost differentiates his use of rhetoric with that of Sutton-Smith, observing that the latter’s view is too broad to be applicable. While that is true, I find their work to be complementary. By using Bogost’s suggested framework, I can bring together the classic game definitions as put forth by Caillois and Huizinga with Sutton-Smith’s larger point about the presence of rhetoric within each game category.

Returning to Bogost’s emphasis on the application analysis, I would like to also introduce the importance of technology’s roles a network. While network also has many definitions, I use it here both in its traditional sense of network and telecommunication infrastructure associated with the internet, and in the sense of a social network. In the first form, technology acts as a constraining factor by creating a dependency on several levels. For one, access to and quality of game play for newer internet based games is entirely dependent on both the network access available locally and the technology hardware in possession of the player. Another reason for the dependency is that games distributed via networks are far more susceptible to censorship of local governments.

In its second form, technology as a social network is an enabler and a powerful agent. While giving individuals the ability to create virtual communities, the technology also acts as a gatekeeper to membership. Virtual communities are a central feature of *Second
Life and their study will provide much insight into technology’s roles in restricting or enabling community building.

I mentioned the role of technology hardware in the paragraph above and that is the next area in which technology impacts game play. Game developers continually develop games that take advantage of the latest available technology platforms (Smith: 11). This approach has evolved partly due to the electronic consumption model prevalent in the U.S. and Japan. These two are examples of societies where consumers upgrade personal computers more frequently, where there is a fascination with techno gadgets and the need to have the latest technology on the market. With the high number of gamers in both countries and other places such as Korea; the development cycle is optimized to deliver new innovations in game play on short cycles as new patches and games are introduced every 6 to 12 months.

The consequence of these short development cycles is that game players from regions without access to fast networks or those without the latest hardware, are disadvantaged from the onset because of network delay or hardware compatibility issues – i.e. technology mediates the player experience independently of the game narrative or rhetoric. This is another example of technology agency and procedural rhetoric.

According to research conducted by Comscore in May of 2007 there were over 771,000 unique visitors to some of the top gaming sites on the internet such as Yahoo! and MSN.
Of that number, only 53,000 were from Latin America and only 35,000 were from the Middle East and Africa combined. So while some games sites like to tout their global community, the community is very heavily weighted towards Asia Pacific, Europe and North America. It is not too far of a leap to assume that lack of representation in the global magic circle, can impact both the narrative and the structure of many games.

If we accept that there is a discourse embodied in the narrative, that there is both a visual, and what Bogost refers to as a *procedural* rhetoric present in games; then we should look at how ideologies inform the narrative and impact the player. An outcome of such action would also be to question the entertainment/non-entertainment game categorization that exists today. A game like *America’s Army* occupies both spaces of entertainment and purpose, and is imbued with rhetoric. While an overt example, it does show that at some level all games perform a persuasive function – be it explicit or implicit. This is in part the argument of the *serious games initiative* which was launched by Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars back in 2002. This genre, not only includes games such as *America’s Army* but also include educational games used to battle childhood diseases such as diabetes to UN sponsored games focusing on world famine.

Perhaps the distinction we see today arises out of whether we use an author-centric reading (structuralist) or reader-centric reading (post-structuralist) of the text. It is precisely this approach that is challenged by Juul and others for they would argue that the emergent nature of games makes the point mute. On the other hand, how emergent
can a game be within the confines of its engine and software? There is an interesting convergence between the two points of view – in that for both it is hard to tell where the author ends and the reader begins – either because of the emergent nature of the game narrative or because as I will argue, our culture is so steeped in the narrative that both the author and the reader are confined by its rules. In the next section, I will discuss the cultural framework that is used in my analysis of Second Life.

2.6 Cultural context of Play

As stated earlier, Sutton-Smith contends that rhetorics are the persuasive intent of those who develop the game which brings forth the importance of the rhetoric embodied within video games due the global nature of the industry. Using this line of thinking, one can align games representative of the modern rhetorics of play with exportation of persuasive discourse of their particular culture. However, the global popularity of chess, football or backgammon begs the question of whether play is the universal factor that makes us all human as it where.

For Caillois while all cultures may share a similar paidia as characterized by a sense of “turbulence and surplus energy” the channeling of ludus is culturally distinct, as evidenced by the semantic roots of the word play across different language and by the way the concept is categorized within cultures. He points to purposive innovation as a distinctly western expression of paidia, while ludus in Chinese culture is transformed into activities that are detached, mindless and idle even if complex (33). Similarly,
Sutton-Smith’s use of rhetoric allows for discussion of rhetorics that are more culturally dominant than others, in play. He points to the work of scholars that have shown that games are “systematically related to culture in various statistically quantifiable ways and are not merely happenstance expressions” (82). Therefore, while the world engages in play, their rules and rhetoric are culturally dependent.

In his book *Tents and Pyramids*, Fuad Khuri argues for a direct link between ideology and games. In discussing backgammon as representative of the Arabic ideology he writes:

In backgammon, the non-pyramidal image is expressed in having no kings, no queens, castles or bishops, horses or soldiers. Backgammon is a game built upon the belief that ‘There dwells an imam in every soul.’ Each stone has the same inherent value as another. As the game proceeds, stones acquire different values depending on the position they occupy vis-à-vis other stones – this constitutes strategy. A stone standing alone is vulnerable and could therefore be caught or captured. The safest position is to be part of a group (*khanat*), which can be made with a minimum of two stones. If a third stone is added to the *khanat*, it can then move freely from one position to another without endangering the safety of the other stones (the group). This is why the third stone in a *Khanat* is called imam or taiyar, i.e. the one who flies freely, meaning as free as a bird. (In Arab lore, birds are the freest of all creatures.) (18)

For Khuri, backgammon represents the Arab ideology of always be on the top of the group. He sees in the Arab culture a need to belong to a larger group that masks a strong
drive toward individualization. Hence all are equal, as are the stones on the backgammon and safer in a *khanat*, while striving to become the *taiyar* at all times.

Sutton-Smith in discussing the rhetoric of identity, addresses the differences between fantasy play of the West and other cultures, as he writes that the different relationship between adults and children outside of the West “leads to tighter cultural patterning of fantasy in support of the social status and mythic systems that prevail the in the culture” and that “more obedience oriented cultural systems have clearer patterns of collective play and narrative or mythic forms with less of the anarchic variability” of the imagination (105).

The dominance of U.S., followed by Japan in the video game industry would suggest that global games spaces developed by the two will exhibit some distinct approaches to narrative and structure; one that is not necessarily shared or understood by those coming from the outside. Local game industries sidestep the issue of how the rhetoric of power and identity are played out within their space since the assumed homogenous audience comes from the same collective group. Global games, can not sidestep the issue so easily; as they are play spaces constructed upon a set cultural pattern.

**2.6.1 Culture and Identity**

At this point in the discussion, we can bring together the earlier questions about identity with that of culture. The focus of this paper is cultural identity, specifically as it pertains to religion, language, and ethnic expressions. This approach includes both the cultural
expression of identity and impacts of enculturation. Reminiscent of the earlier
discussion of identity, my analysis straddles the line between the different approaches.
In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Holland et al. propose a framework that
incorporates both the culturalist and the social constructivist approach to the question of
how identity and culture interact. They categorize the culturalist as those who believe
that every behavior of the self is dictated by the culture one is born into; seeing culture
as a “force inside directing every behavior” (10). The constructivists are categorized as
those whose position “emphasizes the social positioning that goes on whenever people
interact” (11), similar to the rhetorical self argument presented earlier. Holland et al.’s
approach shows that one can acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in studying culture,
as well as the formational impact of the culture one is born into; while still believing in
the validity of the socially constructed self (26).

This slant explains why individuals search to find their cultural communities online, as
well as their desire, or rather reality, to have their identities online be culturally
informed. In context of virtual worlds, technology then fully acts as an agent and
participant in the creation of the social self. If the code is shaped by cultural rhetorics,
then what type of conflicts can arise due to the participation of a global player
community intent on performing a culturally specific self? I will address this question
next as I review another theoretical framework that will provide additional dimension to
my discussion of culture and is relevant to my discussion of game players from the
Middle East.
Edward Said, in his seminal book *Orientalism* introduced a framework that attempted to articulate ways in which one culture chooses to define another, in its effort to define itself. This definition would end up as an inverted image of itself. In the introduction to his book he calls Orientalism “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience.” Orientalism is included in the conversation because it is an approach that is inclusive of, and heavily reliant on, the visual rhetoric that drives video games and virtual worlds. It is also an approach that supports the critics of video games who contend that it is both a medium and a technology that reinforces race and gender stereotypes in society. In this framework, the Oriental is defined and positioned continuously by the Occidental. When given the chance to position his/herself, the Oriental self-image is so rooted in the dialectical relationship in place that the identity performs the positioning dictated. In other words, the Oriental only sees him or herself through the eyes of the Occidental. An example of this would be a Korean playing a game about the Korean War developed in the U.S.; or me playing *Prince of Persia*.

Left out of this paper is the analysis of the nascent local game development studios, such as Afkar media in Syria. These up-and-coming producers introduce the possibility of the local discourse being injected into the game play experience. The game *Under Siege*, whose English version is currently in testing, depicts the Israeli Palestinian conflict of the second Intifada through the viewpoint of the Palestinians. The Arabic version of the game was first released in 2006 and is a first person shooter game in which the player...
battles against the Israeli forces. Afkar media also released another game Quraish, which according their website is “the first Arabic 3D real time strategy game.” The description of the game is as follows:

QURAISH game tracks the origin of Islam in the desert Arabia 590 B.C. through its evolution and growth until it builds a state (caliphate), which defeats the greatest empires of that day and age, Persians and Romans. Was it "AL JIHAD" the holy war that made them conquer? Was it the tolerance of this spiritual religion? Or is it the wiliness of their gifted leaders? Well…you will have the chance to choose it by your self!8

Similarly, in summer of 2007, an Iranian student organization released a video game titled Rescue the Nuke Scientist, as a response to Kuma War’s 2005 release of a video game targeting nuclear facilities in Iran. According to MSNBC, the leader of the group Mohammad Taqi Fakhrian was quoted as saying, “This is our defense against the enemy's cultural onslaught.” These games were not included because I was not able to access them in time for my analysis. It remains to be seen whether these games will actually take hold locally or struggle against the better produced American and Japanese games. However, the movement further strengthens Bogost arguments that all games are persuasive in their nature.

Having provided an overview of main theoretical themes used in my analysis, I will next provide a brief history of games and virtual worlds in order to help tie the evolution and

8 http://www.afkarmedia.com/index.php?PageTitle=Quraish&Type=games&Status=Details&ID=1, 03/15/08
legacy of Second Life together. This history serves to show the cultural heritage of spaces such as Second Life and further explain how in an evolutionary context, Second Life will inherit some of the biases of the games that came before it.
3. A brief history of video games

While some may look at video games as a new medium, the first games were developed decades ago. In 1958, Willy Higinbotham created an interactive tennis game while working at the Brookhaven National Laboratory. However, it is Steven Russell that is credited with creating the first, called Spacewar while he was a student at MIT in 1961 (Kent: 18). These early attempts were representative of innovators driven by the thrill of developing the code for the sake of the code. The second half of 1960’s saw a spate of developments such as the release of Sega’s arcade game Periscope and the development of the first television game by Ralph Baer of Sanders Associates, a defense contractor (Kent: 21).

But if we consider what these games represent today, then we must admit that the story goes back even further than 1961. Today video games are virtual worlds that humans interact with. Games today are divided into multiple subgenres that cluster them not only based on their technology platform but also based on their content and intent. They are judged by the degree by which they can persuade and absorb the player’s attention and as the technology evolves by the degree to which they allow players to create not only their own character but also their own world map. Hence the story of video games goes back to the story of man and machine – of who controls whom and touches on some profound philosophical and literary themes. It is important to note that for the purpose of keeping scope, the focus of my analysis is primarily on the U.S. industry with only a brief reference to the Japanese industry as it relates to one particular game.
Including these players would exponentially increase the number of games, developers and companies that merit mention in any review of gaming industry.

In the next section, I will focus on the history of virtual worlds and briefly discuss the literary genre most closely associated with video games, that of cyberpunk.

### 3.1 Introduction of the Matrix

In his essay *Computers in Fiction*, H. Bruce Franklin of Rutgers University calls E.M. Forster’s 1909 short story *When the Machine Stops*, the “first masterpiece” in the genre of “evolution of automation.” One of the first dystopian works to focus on technology, the story is

> “…about a future Earth where all decisions are made by the global central machine that caters to every physical human need (except sex) through its automated appendages. Living in hexagonal cells within the underground mechanical environment, people rarely come into contact with each other because they communicate as individuals and chat groups through the machine's audio and visual internet. The machine even administers automated health care. When the machine breaks down, civilization ends, but a few survivors are left to begin again in the natural world on the planet's surface.”

Man started pondering his complex relationship with the machine long before the era of ubiquitous computing kicked-off. Starting in the early 1900s, there emerged a number of influential works that have tackled this issue such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* published in 1932, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight Four* in 1949, Philip Dick’s *Do
Androids Dream of Electric Sheep in 1968, and Vernor Vinge’s 1981 True Names. These books alternatively depict technology as either intentionally malicious or unintentionally harmful, embodying the ambiguity that exists even today when discussing the role of technology in human life. The early 1980s saw the introduction of a new literary genre, the cyberpunk. Encyclopedia Britannica defines cyberpunk as⁹:

A science-fiction subgenre characterized by countercultural antiheroes trapped in a dehumanized, high-tech future.

The word cyberpunk was coined by writer Bruce Bethke, who wrote a story with that title in 1982. He derived the term from the words cybernetics, the science of replacing human functions with computerized ones, and punk, the cacophonous music and nihilistic sensibility that developed in the youth culture during the 1970s and ’80s. Science-fiction editor Gardner Dozois is generally credited with having popularized the term.

While there were a number of important works in the early 1980’s, most credit the book Neuromancer with officially launching the cyberpunk movement. William Gibson’s 1984 book introduced the world to the Matrix. A story about a computer hacker named Henry Case, the plot revolves around the hero’s search for a cure and an AI (artificial intelligence) entity’s search for its identity. Case steals from his employer, which retaliates by damaging “his central nervous system with a Russian military mycotoxin, leaving him unable to use the direct brain-computer interfaces required for high-speed access to the cyberspace representations of the global computer network.”¹⁰ The AI is named Wintermute and in order for it to become a super “AI-entity” must integrate with

⁹ http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9118413/cyberpunk
¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuromancer
its AI twin, Neuromancer. The book garnered much accolade and won several awards upon its publication; and it also provided a rich language for exploration by many enthusiasts. Gibson’s book also served as the blueprint for many computer scientists who had finally found an articulation of their passion.

The mid 80’s was also a time of great innovation in the Video Game Industry. By 1985, the industry was shaping up for a battle around console dominance as Atari saw a number of Japanese companies such as Nintendo and Sega launch very successful consoles and the world had not been the same since the launch of *Ms. Pacman* in 1984.

Young computer scientists were lured away from research jobs and put to work on developing video games as industry veterans focused on building market share. Concurrently, film producers looked to the new industry as a way to extend their film franchises, and one of the earliest attempts was Atari’s *E.T.* LucasFilms¹¹, at the time riding high on the success of its *Star Wars* titles, was one of the companies interested in gaining foothold in the emerging industry. In 1986 they put one of their young engineers in their game division, Chip Morningstar, in charge of a new game project. Morningstar together with another developer named Randy Farmer began working on the early versions of what was to become one of the first virtual worlds, named *Habitat.*¹²

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¹¹ Alternatively referred to as LucasArts or LucasFilms Games
¹² Important to qualify as the research was conducted in English and hence may present bias towards games developed in Asia.
3.2 The First Virtual World

Even though there were many individuals involved along the way, Habitat was very much shaped by the personal history of both Morningstar and Farmer. While both Farmer and Morningstar credit Neuromancer as groundbreaking, they name True Names, the 1981 story of early adopters of “fully-immersive virtual world,” as the true inspiration behind Habitat.\(^{13}\) However, literature is not the only place of inspiration for the two. For Farmer, Mike Mayfield’s 1972 Star Trek game, STTR1 provided the impetus to pursue work in the field of game design. Morningstar’s beginnings were in academia and at University of Michigan were he experimented with building games using AI at the age of 17. He joined LucasFilms Games after several stints at other software companies and was eventually tasked with getting Habitat built.

Habitat served as an experiment for LucasFilms Games. The decision was made early on to create something very different than what was in the marketplace and to leverage the infrastructure of the up and coming internet; but the company needed a partner to make its vision come true.

Concurrently, Commodore International wanted to create an online service for its

\(^{13}\) The lessons of LucasFilm’s Habitat
Commodore 64. Commodore was already working with PlayNET out of New York on several projects. PlayNET had created an online system which featured many community features and games but for scalability and financial reasons was not willing to fully take on the Commodore’s challenge. In 1985, some of the founders of Control Video Company heard of the Commodore opportunity and decided to license the technology from PlayNET and convinced Commodore to work with them instead. They launched Q-Link and re-branded themselves Quantum Link. The founders were Jim Kimsey and Steve Case and the company is better known today as AOL.

In his article, Wallis describes the early version of Habitat as

…a 2D animated display, allowing players to use avatars to interact with one another, as well as interact with the environment itself. Habitat’s world was comprised of around 20,000 “regions” – screens that connected to up to 4 other regions through doors or passages…Players could take part in various activities, like treasure hunting, writing, listening to lectures or even law drafting, but the emphasis was always on the social aspects of the world.”

It was actually not until 9 months after the launch of Q-Link that Habitat became officially available to members of the service, and then only as a pilot. In a model similar to that of Second Life, members were asked to create an avatar and were assigned an “apartment.” They were also given token allowances; which gave birth to the first virtual economy. Habitat users gained tokens very time they logged-on, but they could also win them through contests. This dual model not only encouraged players to
log-in to the world often, but it also provided a reason – i.e. contests – for them to spend time in-world. Players could not buy real estate but they could use their tokens to further customize their avatars, or they could use their tokens to purchase other items from in-world vending machines or auctions. Here we see an early example of the linkage of wealth between the worlds. Remember that at this time, logging in and spending time online was a costly endeavor in itself. In *Habitat*, behavior and means outside of the game bestows in-world status to the wealthier players.

In an essay titled *Habitat Anecdotes*, Farmer talks of this economy as he ruminates over lessons learned. He writes

> The *Habitat* Beta Test was actually a paying pilot-test. The testers would be paying $0.08 per minute to play and in this way we could see if *Habitat* was financially feasible... We wanted to see if *Habitat* was fun enough for paying customers… *Habitat* (for some) was addictive. Because of this, there was a call for "Bulk Discounts" and various schemes were proposed by the users. None of them were implementable, and all of them would have resulted in significant losses… Yet another [user] spent over $1000 in one month in *Habitat*. At around $300 and $600 dollars, he was mailed a message suggesting him "check out his usage in the billing section". If we could get 20 more of this type of "rich" user, we would be profitable!

This passage reflects one of the main challenges faced by *Habitat* and other virtual worlds built since then. Once the blush of innovation wears off, the companies behind these worlds face a stark reality – it takes a lot of capital to keep servers running and to continue technological innovation. At this early stage in their development, virtual worlds were competing against the graphic rich arcade and console games. Not only did
Q-Link have to pay to license the game but it also had to pay third parties to host the servers and the bandwidth used by members playing the games. Hence, user time online equated to financial loss unless it could be monetized in someway. Since there was no e-commerce at the time, there was no other way of recouping the money spent on bandwidth other than the subscription fees, and the cost of bandwidth usage far outstripped what was being brought in through the hourly membership fees.

Eventually, financial pressures forced Q-Link to choose investment in social interaction tools such as text based chat and email, which had much lower bandwidth requirements over those of a 2D graphical interface driven game. The game was downscaled using a less bandwidth intensive beach motif, and was rename Club Caribe but eventually, the Q-Link decision spelled the end for the game. In 1988, LucasFilms Games licensed the underlying technology to Fujitsu of Japan which re-launched the games as Fujitsu *Habitat* in 1990. According to DSGames,

LucasFilms sold the software to Fujitsu Cultural Technologies, who then ported *Habitat* to a Japanese PC platform, and played on a network called Niftyserve….In the mid 90's, Fujitsu ported the game back over to the US as "Worlds Away", accessible via CompuServe keyword: GO AWAY. Fujitsu eventually sold the right to the software to a company called Stratagem, which now operates Dreamscape and two other “worlds.”

Farmer and Morningstar continued their work with *Habitat* and its various incarnations, including the 1994 launch of Worlds Away. However, this new world was very different
from *Habitat*. Where as *Habitat* was based on an in-world economy, free narrative and pure social interaction; *World Away* was narrative based, heavily borrowing from Western Mythology. It was no longer the world of *True Names* as it became to resemble the console games already available in the market.

In this early period, dependency on service providers was not limited to virtual worlds. Any game built upon the premise of social interaction had the same dependencies. While Netscape and others were popular entry points into the web, they did not provide the captive audience that the online services like AOL and CompuServe. That is one of the reasons why these services were called *walled gardens*. In an effort to attract more members, these services competed on not just connectivity but also on providing the best proprietary content available. Online service providers were willing to pay for this content but as their membership grew, they began yielding an enormous influence of what content was being developed. By the mid 1990’s, major companies desperate to get in front of consumers were willing to pay high prices to just have their brands and content featured. Game publishers were no exception as games were often licensed and used as value added service for these providers. The contracts were exclusive and the revenue flat, regardless of the popularity of the game. This model also affected the content published. Publishers interested in providing online games focused on creating interactive versions of popular card and board games that would appeal to a majority of these services membership base. This dependency on infrastructure was not limited only to the game developers but also extended to the players. Game adoption became a
complete matter of infrastructure penetration and the narrative and style of the games came to be dominated by either the non-linear style of the U.S. or the narrative driven approach of Japan.

Three developments in the late 1990’s changed the gaming model. One was the commoditization of internet access due partly to the entry of telephone and cable companies into the consumer market. The second was the improvements in the graphic quality of online media as more bandwidth became available through DSL and cable. The third was the maturation of the market. Earlier in the decade, online service providers such as AOL had a distinct advantage as non-technical users began using the internet. AOL’s job was to go out to the *crazy* internet and grab the most interesting content and bring it back for its users. The company provided a safe haven for the newbie with all the basic tools needed. As users became more sophisticated, they ventured out onto the great World Wide Web on their own and needed these portals less and less. For the first time publishers of online games were in charge of their destiny, just like the console game publishers had been for quite a while.

The late 1990’s to mid-2000’s saw the market launch of some of the most popular games in the industry. Some of the ways in which these were games differentiated was technical merits such as the graphic quality, their approach to narrative and the business models adopted. Some of the games provided rich immersive game play experience,
while others allowed users to manipulate and control their environments and build a social network. In a span of ten years, the industry had come a long way.

### 3.3 God-Like Games

In 1989, Maxis released SimCity. SimCity was the brainchild of Will Wright, who had created a game named Micropolis a few years earlier. In their book, *SmartBomb*, Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby referred to SimsCity as “the ‘smart persons’ game” (133). In the August of that year, Businessweek ran the following brief story:

> Whoever designed this cloverleaf was nuts," you curse, inching your way through rush-hour traffic. "What this city really needs is more trains, not highways!" If you've long suspected that you're a better urban planner than the pros, now's your chance to prove it: A $ 49.95 program called SimCity lets anyone with an Apple Computer Inc. Macintosh design an entire metropolis.

First you position roads, houses, parks, shops, and other urban features on one of a variety of artificial landscapes. A popular one is called Dullsville. Then the program challenges you to solve such typical urban problems as crime waves and pollution and to deal with such disasters as tornadoes, airplane crashes, and nuclear meltdowns. You can bulldoze neighborhoods, reroute highways, and call for fire engines. But think carefully: You're constrained by a limited city budget.

SimCity was designed as a game, but it's so realistic that several colleges and universities are considering using it to teach urban planning. Says James Segedy, a professor at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.: "It's a very sophisticated model -- and very close to reality." The
Wil Wright’s inspiration for SimCity came while he developed game-play maps for his first game, the innovative overhead-perspective action-strategy game, Raid on Bungeling Bay (published by Broderbund in 1984). Wright had so much fun creating the maps for the game, “that he thought it would make a fun game by itself!” SimCity was the first game to give players not only control over the design of the avatar, but the design of the gaming environment as well. This was accomplished through the terrain editor, which was the first of its kind and allowed players to create towns, cities and neighborhoods as they wanted to. Eventually what the players had was a complex civilization completely under their control – hence the reference to god. Every action on the part of the player has a reaction in game: overbuilding can lead to environmental damage; over populating the world creates disease, etc.

While lacking the social aspects found in later games, SimCity gave control of virtual worlds to people who did not know how to write code. This represents a significant innovation in the evolutionary path and launched a number of other immensely popular

titles that dominated the console game market for a while. In talking of his inspiration for Civilization, another best selling game in this genre, Sid Meier references the influence of SimCity. He says that Sim was the first time he saw that “a computer game didn't have to be about chaos and destruction.” Especially important was that “Wright's masterpiece provided a vivid illustration that a game could be a ‘software toy’ that let a player experiment with and manipulate a virtual world without a specific objective.”15 Along with Populus and Civilization, SimCity launched a new approach to the users’ interaction with the software and redefined what actions qualified as playing a game.

### 3.4 Serious Games

God-like games were not the only games around for serious people. Computer scientists and entertainment moguls were not the only ones interested in the possibility opened up by the new technology. In 1980, Atari released Battlezone, a tank warfare game created in 3D with the aim of shooting at upcoming objects. Soon after its introduction, Atari developed a much more realistic version of the game called Military Battlezone on behest on the military for the purposes of soldier training (Kent: 154). Many look at Military Battlezone as the first serious game created.

Over the years many sub-genres have developed such as persuasive games, advergaming, edutainment, etc. The focus of these games is to use the gaming technology for either advertising purposes as seen in www.postopia.com, a site by Kraft

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foods featuring their many products like Fruity Pebbles cereal; or by teaching on subjects or tasks such as learning about better eating habits through http://www.thegoodfoodfight.com/ or bringing the issue of Darfur forefront as *Darfur is Dying*, an effort of MTVU, a division of MTV networks.

Advergaming has a clear purpose of providing brand extension for companies (Bogost: 159). It is debatable whether edutainment and persuasive games manage to reach the lofty goals they set for themselves. The debate around *Darfur is Dying* is a good example of how no matter how noble the intent, these games are accused of simplifying complex situations into cliché observations (Boyd). From an audience perspective, chances are high that unless the game play itself is engaging, only those already invested in the social issue will play the game.

However, in an industry were more is spent today on a typical game than on some movies, it is highly unlikely that the game play can match those of the multi-player games dominating the market. These games combine great graphics and game play engine with social networking and overlay a narrative that helps create a magical space.
that allows one to become a powerful elf in search of gold. Most would likely choose the powerful elf over the helpless refugees in Darfur. Perhaps these games are best representative of the techno-utopian view that believes that the new technology will create a social change were other media could not.

3.5 Massive numbers of people, playing online

As previously noted, the period 1997 to 2004 witnessed the launch of some of the most successful online games in the industry. No longer dependent on service provider, the publishers instituted their own subscription models and this seven year span marked a period of rapid innovation as publishers raced to get their games to the market as fast as they could with the end goal of acquiring as many paid subscribers as one could. Origin System kicked things off with the launch of its *Ultima* series online. The original console game, *Ultima I*, had been launched in 1980 and grew over time to three series each having three trilogies: the *Age of Darkness* trilogy, *Age of Enlightenment* trilogy and *The Age of Armageddon* (The
Guardian Saga.\textsuperscript{16} EverQuest (released in March 1999), Dark Age of Camelot (released in October 2001), SimsOnline (released in 2002) Star Wars Galaxies (released in June 2003) and World of Warcraft (released in November 2004) followed in quick succession.

These games were finally able to combine the visually rich experience of existing video games with the social aspects of monthly subscriptions of companies like AOL. They also had found a viable business model as the players were asked to pay a one time fee for the game software, as well as monthly fee for unlimited play time. This recurring revenue base greatly enhanced the appeal of these spaces to mega game publishers like Electronic Arts\textsuperscript{17}.

Another unique feature shared by games launched during this period is the degree to which the player could customize their online experience. Players were beginning to make significant investment of time not just in the immersive experience but also in creating characters, building reputations and collecting in-world wealth. While the characters and wealth could not move from platform to platform, the alliances built in these worlds spun off-line as guilds and on-line groups would move from game platform to game platform, with the goal of conquering each universe they entered (Chaplin and Ruby 179-183).

\textsuperscript{16} In 1998 NC Soft, a Korean game development company, launched Lineage which has remained one of the most popular online destinations.

\textsuperscript{17} In July 1997, the video game publisher Electronic Arts acquired Maxis studios.
While there are no standard audience metrics in the industry, there are some early winners in the industry that indicate that players are not continuously in search of new games and are willing to continue their investment in more than one place. According to MMOG.chart.com, as of January 2008 there were over 17 million subscribers to these worlds and World of Warcraft dominated the space with over 63% market share. Lineage and Lineage II followed with a combined 13% of the market, Rune Scope and Final Fantasy XI rounded out the top five, representing 83% or 14.11 million subscribers. These numbers represent what the website and insiders call active subscribers defined in most cases as paying customers. Some of the newer games launched recently peaked but lost subscribers quickly and some like Star War Galaxies never reached the heights the publishers had hoped for.

One of the newest entries into the industry is that of virtual spaces like Second Life. These spaces present a definitional problem in that they share traits with games and more specifically are in line with the concept of play as described by some of the early scholars in the field such as Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga but are not classified as such and themselves go out of their way to not be defined as such.

3.6 Age of Virtuality

While the majority of 3D developers were focused on the game world, there was one company that in 1995 focused on creating a 3D model of the internet. The name of the company is Active Worlds. This venture was also inspired by a seminal work of
cyberpunk literature, Neal Stephensen’s *SnowCrash*. However, after only two years in operation, the company ran into financial troubles and finally in 2006 the company focused its energies on advergaming through partnerships with toy manufacturers. The company now creates worlds built around popular brands which allow younger users to go online and pick one of the toy characters as their avatar.

In 2003 two of these companies based in Silicon Valley, garnered much attention as they rolled out their vision of what a virtual world could be. The companies were There Inc. and Linden Labs. Both There and Linden Labs were building virtual worlds, where users could create their own avatar, build and buy things; similar to what *Active Worlds* had tried to do before them. However, there were two key differences between the two. Where as *There, Inc.* focused on social interactions, Linden Labs’ initial focus was on building tools and simulation. Where as *There* put emphasis between its in-world currency and its ties to real-world economy; Linden Labs downplayed theirs. Ironically, in a January 2003 article in *Wall Street Journal*, Don Clark asked, “Will people pay real money to help virtual characters buy make-believe stuff?” Tom Melcher, CEO of *There, Inc.* believed that they would, while Philip Rosedale did not. The article states “Linden
Lab, a San Francisco start-up that is building an online community like There's, called Second Life, also shies away from selling virtual currency outright.” The article also quoted Philip Rosedale, the chief executive officer of Linden Labs saying, “The greater majority of people would lose interest, because then the experience would start seeming like a bad copy of real life.” In 2004, Second Life was being touted by Rosedale as both a simulation game[^18] and a technology platform for user generated content.[^19]

Combining these two concepts was a powerful idea. Simulation games had an existing pedigree and track record; user generated content was a buzzword from the time that was also applied to the Blogging phenomena and later on to video sites such as YouTube. Perhaps more than any other innovation in the early 2000’s, user generated content held the promise of individual agency; for now, anyone could publish their thoughts, opinions or even news without the presence of institutional gatekeepers or government censors. Capitalizing on the momentum, Second Life offered an intriguing possibility. What if you could not only create your own content, but also your own digital self and world?

### 3.7 Second Life – Brave, brave new world

Second Life is a magical parallel universe where people can build homes they could never afford, wear clothes that would never fit, date people out of their league; generally creating an idealized self – without paying a plastic surgeon.

Linden Research (Lab), the company behind the Second Life phenomena, opened the doors of the virtual world on June 20, 2003 after a year and half of testing. According to their website, Linden Labs was founded in 1999 “by Philip Rosedale to create a revolutionary new form of shared experience, where individuals jointly inhabit a 3D landscape and build the world around them.”\(^\text{20}\) However, according to Reuben Steiger of Millions of US, the original idea championed by Linden Labs was the “Rig.”\(^\text{21}\) The Rig was a haptics device that would “allow users to walk around a virtual environment and interact with it using not only their senses of sight and sound, but also their sense of touch.” However, once the device was created, the founders realized that not only was there no viable commercial application; but that there was no virtual world for the users to interact with in the first place. Therefore, Second Life was developed as add-on software to demonstrate the power of the Rig. However, by the time everything was ready for launch, Philip Rosedale’s vision had changed.

The company appeared briefly in a 2002 technology wrap-up in Times Magazine. The authors of the article described what Rosedale was building as a “wired kingdom.” They wrote, “Ever want to build a cathedral? Underwater? Change your clothes, your face,

and your whole body? Fly? You can't do any of that stuff in real life, but you can do it all and more in Second Life, a startlingly lifelike 3-D virtual world now evolving on the Internet. Unlike other shared online adventures, Second Life isn't about slaying monsters or zapping aliens. It's about building things, meeting people and expressing yourself. Even if you already have a life, you may want to get a second one.” At this point in its evolution, the focus was still on the technology however; by 2004, Second Life was being described by its creators as a social place, an alternative place to party. In a video interview with Cnet’s James Hilliard, Philip Rosedale described Second Life as a “product” for people above 18, talking excitedly about the virtual clubs, internet radio streaming and riding virtual motorcycles. In this interview, he also introduces the viewer to Second Life’s in-world economy and its parallels to real-world economy. Accordingly to the interview, in 2004 an acre of land was worth about $100; the exchange rate between Linden dollars and U.S. dollars was 230:1; and “people who had business were making thousands of dollars a month.”

Today, Second Life is still evolving, trying to define what it is. While numerous companies have signed on to have virtual offices and stores within its spaces, Second Life is still searching for its core audience. On March 14th, 2008 Rosedale announced that he would be stepping down as the CEO of the company, serving as the chairman. In April of 2008, Second Life announced a key partnership with IBM. It remains to be seen how the company’s focus will shift in the next 12-24 months.
In the next chapter I will look at specific elements that drive user experience in *Second Life* such as identity creation, community creation and role of technology in impacting that experience. I will use two filters in the analysis, one of the novice user and that of a Muslim user from the Middle East; to show whether the experience is an empowering one for the end user of not.
4. Second Life, an analysis

In this chapter, I will discuss the construction of identity and meaning within Second Life as well as the role of technology within the play space. I will analyze the rhetorics present within the space and argue that Second Life is representational of the U.S. culture and that, while less restrictive than other games, its code limits the expression of self.

One of the interesting facts that emerge during this analysis is the way in which Linden Labs, the company behind Second Life, continues to evolve its own definition of what Second Life is. As previously mentioned, one of the key concepts the company uses to set itself apart from others is to reject the label of game.

However, I contend that Second Life is indeed a play and game space for the following reasons: 1) it creates a magic circle which has its own rules (cf. Huizinga) 2) within it we can see the presence of dual procedural rhetorics of representation and capitalism (cf. Bogost), 3) it is a space where players engage in mimicry (cf. Caillois) 4) we see at play the rhetorics of identity, imaginary, self and to some extent frivolity (cf. Sutton-Smith).

My analysis of Second Life took place over a two week period of time, from February 23rd to March 8th 2008. During this time, I logged into the account on a daily basis. Initial entries focused on the avatar creation tool and travel to areas that offer help for
novice users. The rest of the time was spent exploring the islands, relying mostly on the search function provided, with a focus on finding Muslim and Iranian communities, as well as their communal spaces, online.

Online communities can be defined in two ways: the in-world community, and the community that grows around the game but not in-world. The latter refers to message boards, websites, etc. that are created for the fans and players alike. Membership in each is not exclusive. For the purpose of my analysis, I use the term community only in the context of community in-world, within the game’s magic circle. This choice was made because the focus of this analysis is on the novice player, and I felt that real world gaming communities represent a more sophisticated set of players.

I will first discuss the identity creation process, follow with a discussion of finding communities and lastly tackle the role of technology within the space.

**4.1 Creation of Player Identity in Second Life**

Who is it that we choose to create once we go online and how much control do we have over that creation? The position I take in this paper is that our expression of self is limited by the politics of code. In order to tackle the question, I will first review the online manifestation of *self* and how virtual self is created within the world of *Second Life*. The answer to this question is dependent on the type of play space.
While earlier virtual worlds allowed users the choice of selecting a guest avatar to entice the curious but not yet committed, *Second Life* asks for a full commitment up front.

Creating an avatar in *Second Life* is the obligatory first step in entering the world; you need to define who you want to be from the get-go.

The avatar creation process is similar to those used within other worlds such as *Wow*, but on a much larger scale. The player has many choices to make, from early selection of avatar type to making decisions regarding every detail of the body (hip size, length of legs, shape of head, etc.), to hair (color, length, texture), to clothes (combination of items, material, etc.). The degree of freedom accorded to the player over the visual depiction of their identity is unusually high. Within spaces such as *Wow*, players are able to choose between a set number of races and then are given a few choices in terms of the appearance. However, as figure 1 illustrates, avatars within a given race, are easily identifiable as part of that group. It is important to note that race within *Wow* serves multiple functions. Each race has a number of given attributes, strengths, weaknesses and professions that they can select from. Race selection also provides both the background narrative for the player, as well as the starting point for

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22 Players can also choose gender of the avatar, which has implications outside the scope of this study. Published 2006, THQ, Pandemic Studios.
their quests. It is only after a character has gained considerable experience (i.e. time spent playing and collecting “experience points”) that travel outside of his/her own continent becomes possible.

While Second Life also provides avatar templates, there are no strings attached. This initial selection by the resident does not impact any of the game dynamics. While the degree of freedom given in modification of avatar appearance is unique, this latitude does privilege some over others, as the lack of structure in game play may prove to be confounding and complex for novice users.

The specific issue of complexity of tools within Second Life will be address later on, but from an identity construction/creation stand point; Second Life is distinguished from other game spaces in two key ways. To distinguish between the word “creating” versus “constructing” – I use the former to refer to creating the avatar while the latter to refer to identity as the avatar engages with the world and within different communities.

One of the way in which Second Life is distinguished is in the upfront investment made in avatar creation. While characters in games such as WoW are less unique, they also come with a lower switching cost between characters because of lower character investment upfront. The personal investment in the identity created takes place over time, as more time is spent playing one character, the more skill, wealth and reputation are accumulated by that character. This fact becomes a key in sustaining player interest
and desire to spend time as the character itself within the game space. Within *Second Life*, the investment starts from day one but does not necessarily increase over time as the avatars skill, wealth and reputation are entirely dependent on the player themselves.

The second difference is in narrative and technological mediation within the games. Avatars within *Wow* type worlds come with pre-set histories and race characteristics that mediate between the player identity outside of the game and their character’s identity in-game. For example, if a race’s strength is healing others; the avatar will be viewed as more compassionate – be it a reflection of the player’s actual intentions or the boundaries the code itself places on what the character can be successful doing. This is another example of how the code can persuade and impact game play. In *Second Life*, there are no pre-set histories or identities; therefore one can assume that there is less mediation by the narrative.

The *Second Life* world is comprised of a series of islands and there are multiple options for traveling around such as flying, riding a flying object or by teleporting to a desired location.

Once you download the client, you are asked to create a free account and

![Performance art group in Second Life](./performance_art_group.png)

*Figure 7* Performance art group in *Second Life*
decide on the name of your avatar. You have a choice of first names, but your last name
is randomly assigned from a pre-selected list, which are culturally neutral for the most
part. It is not clear what function the last name serves since it creates no apparent
connection with other avatars bearing the same last name.

You enter the world through Orientation Island, a small area surrounded by water. You
have a generic shape at this point and the vista is littered with billboards and other signs
advertising the many available tutorials intended to help you create your avatar and
navigate the world. These signs are another instance of procedural rhetoric by enforcing
what is important in this space - how you look, where you go and what you are able to
do. You are also encouraged to save the information you are being taught for later use
since orientation Island is only used as an entry point and can not be revisited unless the
player reenters using an alt (alternate character) for the first time.

The avatar creation took about 20 minutes, cut short because in the end due to a loss of
interest resulting from the length of time. As I found later, the specifics of the avatar can
be modified at any point along the way, even though I was not able to find a way to
change the initial avatar type selected.

Any discussion of Second Life brings forth the debate about the essence of reality and as
a technology so centered on the idea of simulation, the analysis begs the question of
whether it even matters to distinguish between what is real or not? As Baudriallard
wrote, “The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same
order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the
real is no longer possible. It is the whole political problem of parody, of hypersimulation
or offensive simulation, that is posed here” (19). This line of questioning is valid but
was not fully pursued because for the purposes of this analysis I assume that reality, or
lack thereof, is immaterial to the intent of the players. Perhaps the search for a digital
self is a reaction to and a recreation of, the world of symbols that have lost their
meaning.

Returning to the discussion at hand, by pledging to provide free access to easy to use
tools that anyone could manipulate, it seemed that Linden Labs had brought the world to
the edge of something revolutionary. It is important to note that this was not simply a
promise of unfettered news reporting or unbounded space for the imagination to roam,
but also the promise of an alternate world that would allow for the full expression of self
in a way not accepted in the real world. Early avatars on Second Life were creatures
partly born out of existing game character genre and partly born out of hidden desires.
There was also a strong following in the gay and lesbian community (Jones). Mel
Ahrem of University of Chicago sees “performance of a gender as a technology of the
body” and relates the term cyborg. For many early adopters, avatar creation within this
world was very much an extension of using the technology to correctly depict not just
their performative self, but their actual self, transforming the concept of user generated
content to that of user generated selves.
However, Thomas Foster wrote that “virtual reality privileges vision as a mode of information processing, and visual perception remains inextricably linked to a history of racial stereotyping” (Nakamura : 34). Furthermore Nakamura uses Walter Benjamin to explain why she thinks cybertypes will continue to exist. She writes:

While Benjamin maintained that technology had radically changed the nature of art by making it possible to reproduce infinite copies of it – thus devaluing the “aura” of the original, with his own aura. When natives stop acting like natives – that is to say, when they deviate form the stereotypes that have been set up to signify their identities – their “aura” is lost: they are no longer “authentic.” Thus, a rationale for the existence of racial cybertypes becomes clear: in a virtual environment like the Internet where everything is a copy, so to speak, and nothing has an aura since all cyberimages exist as pure pixellated information, the desire to search for an original is thwarted from the very beginning. Hence the need for images of cybertypes “real natives” to assuage that desire. (6)

There are game genres for which this critique is valid. In their outstanding article Pixel Pashas, Digital Djinns, Philip Reichmuth and Stefan Werning make a similar argument, pointing to visual cues in games such as Prince of Persia that indicate whether a character is a threat or not.

Thus, oriental stereotypes are often part of the player dispositions, recursively shaped by interactive and other media consumption. For instance, adversaries in many Oriental games carry a scimitar. In films, this is a key feature identifying them as Orientals; in CVG’s, it also carries
the technical reading of marking the figure as an enemy. So that the player can discern between “dangerous” and “harmless” figures in a cluttered screen space. When, upon death, a figure loses the scimitar (such as in Arabian Magic, 1992), this is meant as a visual cue that this figure no longer poses a threat, not that it ceases to be Oriental.

This line of thinking is not new, as it has been leveled at other text for the past 20 years. In Western cultural productions, the good Eastern is always Westernized, the evil Eastern is a caricature and the few who cross the line to help the hero, are always an anomaly and in the end pay the price of their betrayal by dying. Reichmuth and Werning don’t limit their analysis to the narrative but also extend it to the game playing mechanic and Design properties and state that “…the badly implemented joystick controls which make the game frustrating at times, are communicated among players and thus, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce pre-existing ideas such as the association of the Orient with vertigo and hallucination.”

There are two issues here. One the lack of agency on the behalf of a certain groups to control their own player identity within a game such as an Afghani-American who chooses to play a game such as Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers$.^{23}$, In Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers$.^{24}$, a thinly veiled re-telling of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, players are American soldiers who along with Coalition allies have “been forced to continue the conflict in an effort to quell the incipient violence and stabilize the country.” The entirety of the game’s description and narrative is based on what Sura

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$^{24}$ Published 2006, THQ, Pandemic Studios
Rath refers to as “rescue fantasies and colonial desires.” The Afghani-American player has to play as an American soldier fighting Afghani rebel forces. He is positioned by the game vis-à-vis himself, given no choice as to his physical depiction or character selection. He can not choose to play the game as the rebel. Similar gendered or raced readings can be applied to a number of other games currently on the market.

Figure 8 From full Spectrum Warrior official website

The second issue is that the player in the example above has no control over the narrative of game in that the goal of the game is to quell, essentially, part of himself. In order for him to be able to participate and succeed in this environment he has to accept the image of himself as the Other.

The distinction between the two games was made because within the world of Second Life, the player does have control over their physical representation. So up front, it does seem as if the play environment is elevating the discourse. In the next few sections, we will examine if that degree of agency extends to the other aspect of the space as well.

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25 Sura Rath – Post/Past Orientalism
4.2 Construction of Community in Second Life

Once the task of avatar creation is finished, there is no story-line, quest, or signpost that indicates where the exploration should begin. Entering any virtual world is a bit disorienting, but upon entering Second Life for the first time is also a strangely lonely endeavor. After mastering the camera angles, learning how to fly without smashing into objects and stopping when intending to, it is not clear what else there is to do. I focus on community and group membership as one of the acts undertaken in the construction of identity. This choice was to further highlight culturally different approaches to play and speaks rhetoric of identity.

There are three meta-communities within Second Life. First, there are Lindens, who are official Linden Lab company employees that – reminiscent of Habitat - travel the universe to enforce the rules of the space, help novices when needed and generally run the place. The second community is made up of avatars that are there for fun and the third community is comprised of those who engage with Second Life for work. Second Life Grid is the technology platform that the company sells to businesses such as IBM and Dell, giving them access to their own private islands which are used for virtual meetings and collaborative development sessions; as well as tools for use in developing their official presence in Second Life. This overlap of real versus un-real brings into question whether Second Life is a representation of the real world or a simulation of it. It seems that for at least two of the three groups, the avatar represents a definitive identity,
the work self, that can not be thought of as fluid. Within the generic player community there is sub-distinction of paid or non-paid (free) members as represented by ownership rights within the space.

The focus of my analysis is mainly on the non-working player community that views Second Life as a play space. Play can take on different meanings, but one key thing that people do in Second Life, it is to engage in creation of digital goods ranging from homes to clothes to artwork. This rhetoric of progress is one that Huizinga calls a uniquely Western definition of play (33). Hence from the onset we see the cultural bias towards those who find the act of creation/innovation an act of play. While this does not preclude others from entering or using Second Life, it does change the meaning of the space for those who may think the acts of creation as more of a task than an act of play.

The basics of creation are taught through tutorials on the Orientation Island, and include ways to create 3D shapes and use pre-loaded graphic images to give them color and texture. Each avatar has a standard issue set of colors and textures; and can upload additional ones – if they are paying members and can pay the required fee (in Linden dollars). Those who are paid members can also buy property within which to build elaborate structures. Those who have free memberships are relegated to an observer role, in that while they can create things, they have no place to leave them that is their own. Put another way, those who have free membership are free to roam.
Avatars can travel the world of Second Life in many ways including walking, running, flying or using teleportation. Of all the means of travel, I found flying and teleportation to be the most useful. Walking while useful in short intervals is not an efficient way of exploring the space as a whole. This is partly due to the topography and partly due to a strange phenomenon of public versus private spaces that make up that topography which I will discuss shortly.

The question of where to go is a bit challenging. There is map that provides an overview of the world, but looking at it does not shed any light onto where one may want to go to. There are four routes one can take. One can either go to Help Island, which is a larger version of Orientation Island. This space is filled with both novice and advanced users that provide mentorship. The second choice is to select a destination based on Second Life’s list of interesting places; a starting point for most new members. The third is to use the keyword search function, with the categories of classifieds, events, popular places, land sale, places, people, group and a combined category of all. For the purposes of finding a community, the categories of events, places and groups were the most helpful. Lastly, you can directly teleport to a location assuming that you know someone who has given you the coordinates. These coordinates can also be found on blogs and websites outside of Second Life and can act as a point of rendezvous.

4.2.1 Searching for Iran, Persia and Persian
I started my search using the keyword search function using the search terms *Iranian, Persian* and *Persia*. The search results were stable during the two week time period: 76 results for Iran, 90 results for Persia and 610 results for Persian. The result set returned zero events, a number of places and groups and I found the listing of people to not be helpful as it included a random list of “hits.” Most of the places found were virtual businesses, kitschy cafés and Oriental rug outlets (both virtual and real-world merchants).

![Search results for keyword Iran](image)

*Figure 9* Search results for keyword Iran

*Persian* and *Persia*. The search results were stable during the two week time period: 76 results for Iran, 90 results for Persia and 610 results for Persian. The result set returned zero events, a number of places and groups and I found the listing of people to not be helpful as it included a random list of “hits.” Most of the places found were virtual businesses, kitschy cafés and Oriental rug outlets (both virtual and real-world merchants).

The search term Iran’s place category returned only 5 places of which only one turned out to be a non-commerce related space relating to Iran. Two out of the five results were cafés; one was an Oriental rug outlet, one a currency exchange place and one a memorial site. The memorial site, named *Aryamehr* (name associated with the Pahlavi
ruling family prior to the 1979 revolution in Iran) is a garden site dedicated to and fighting against execution of minors deemed to be gay in Iran. Of all the sites visited within Second Life, this is the only one that was created by an Iranian and linked to current events in that country. The architecture of the open space was modern, clean and simple.

Habibi-The Middle Eastern Oasis was representative of a number other cafés I found using the other search terms, a fantasy space located within the Mature content area of Second Life, borrowing symbols from different middle eastern cultures indiscriminately. The description for the place is a string of key-words such as Belly dancers, Morocco, Iran, Turkey, Middle East, etc.

The search term Persia also failed to return culturally relevant results or rather returned culturally relevant results if viewed through Said or Nakamura’s framework. The only place returned was a location at which you could obtain a “full male Prince of Persia avatar,” again located in the Mature area within Second Life. The search term Persian, returned 22 results for places, of which only one was relevant for my purposes. The majority of the results were for Oriental rugs and clothing. The one exception was a place called Golestan.
Golestan is, literally translated, a place of flowers; it also refers to a famous book of poems by the Persian poet Sa’adi, as well as a place near Gorgan province in northeastern Iran. The space called *Golestan* is the creation of a Japanese national who has traveled to Iran. It is comprised of a garden, a minaret, an art gallery displaying photography of famous landmarks in Iran and a teahouse (chaee-khooneh). The individual components of the space are faithful to their origin outside of two elements. One is that the architectural details are closer to the style found in the city of Isfahan than Shiraz, which is traditionally associated with Sa’adi. Second, the music used in the space is an original composition by the creator, oddly reminiscent of 17th century European music with its use of harp setting the expectation that a character from a Shakespearean play would enter the garden at any moment.

Using the names of famous landmarks such as Persepolis, locations such as Isfahan and *Farsi* yielded no results.
In my search for communities, I found only two that were not themed *mature*. I joined them both and during the time of this analysis, received two communications from one of the groups, the Iran Persian Group. The first email was an antiwar artwork created by one of the members; and the second was an invitation to a chess tournament. Interestingly, neither the artist sending the art, nor the founder of the Iran Persian group, is Iranian. The communications used the Roman alphabet, using phonetically spelled Farsi for a few of the words.

The last group that I joined was called *Thousand and One Nights*, a mature themed space that I entered through a simulated sandstorm. I was given the option of acting as an observer or participant, and I chose the former. The space is an arid desert with campsites fashioned out of tents, Persian rugs and hookahs. *One Thousand and One Nights* was interesting in that it was the least ambiguously play space, a magic circle created within the circle of *Second Life*. An example of the rhetoric of imaginary, this is a pure fantasy space, clearly demarcated as a space for play and experimentation, a space for role-play.
In the end, I found that with the exception of Aryamehr, the rest of the spaces went a long way in proving both Said and Nakamura’s prediction of the representation of Orient in the West. What I found was that the labeling of a space as Iranian or Persian had been appropriated; their virtual presence in Second Life not created by them but for them; depicting Iranians in the ways of the imagined oriental. In the next section, I used the same methodology to find Muslim communities online.

4.2.2 Islam in Second Life

The search for Islam yielded much more promising results both in the terms of number of places and the number of groups available for exploration. The group Islam.net had a large presence, having created a number of spaces for exploration. There were also a number of mosques that varied greatly in architectural detail and style. Most of the places that I visited were partly focused on education of the non-Muslim visitor but they each also contained texts that were not available to people who were not members of a group with privileged access. According to an online blog posting at the website www.readingIslam.com, at least one of these mosques claim to attract about 1500 visitors every month. However, I did not encounter anyone in any of the locations, despite accessing the site at different times, accommodating different time zones and making sure that I visited the sites on Friday during possible Friday Prayer services.

I will focus my analysis on the most elaborate of the spaces I visited – Islam online’s main site, featuring an auditorium, meeting rooms as well as a virtual Hajj. For those not familiar with this Muslim rite of passage, Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam and is the largest annual pilgrimage in the world. The event takes place over a few days, during which pilgrims surround and walk seven times around the Kabba - a black draped shrine surround the Black Stone. There are strict guidelines such as clothing; all wear white, unadorned cotton sheets to represent equality in the eyes of Allah. Another strict rule associated with Hajj, is that non-Muslims are not allowed to attend the event.

Islam online’s virtual Hajj has a virtual Kabba with arrows showing the path to those that may not be familiar with the rites. Outside of the entrance there are green duffle bags containing the *Ihram* - the required clothing for Hajj. These are provided free of charge and can be downloaded and “worn” easily. Of course this assumes that one notices the bags and decides to interact with them, at which point their purpose becomes clear. This finding directly conflicts with the idea that the tool itself will inhibit one from fully expressing their race or religion (Nakamura) but

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Figure 13 Green arrows indicate the direction in which the virtual Hajj should be conducted.
does not necessarily invalidate the question of whether the identity chosen online is the same as the offline one.

Another interesting irony is that this space is easily accessible to both Muslim and non-Muslim. This fact brings into question who the intended audience and what the purpose of this space is. Is the space created for the faithful Muslim who wants to engage in virtual pilgrimage or is it built for the curios non-Muslim?

A representation of institutional presence within Second Life, this is great example of the blurring of the lines between worlds in Second Life. The procedural rhetoric allows the discourse of the religion to impose itself upon the believer, obliging them to partake in the rituals of the religion, and it asks of the non-believer to act out – virtually – the fifth pillar of Islam in order to be able to interact with the space.

As mentioned earlier, I did not come across any other avatars during my time in the spaces described above. There can be a multitude of reasons such as lack of interest,
lack of non-institutional representation, or inability to navigate the environment due to technical difficulties. The lack of community is important to the central question of this paper because it can prove to be a disincentive to players if their understanding of play space is aligned with one of the ancient rhetorics categorized by Sutton-Smiths.

To elaborate further, this can be an example of how the rhetoric of space as designed/envisioned by the developers can be in conflict with different players’ definition of the concept of play. Going back to the discussion of cultural specificity, the rhetoric of progress will not appeal equally to all cultures whose expression of play is culturally defined. Huizinga used the Chinese definition of the word play as his example and we saw the example of how backgammon is tied back to the culture in which it was developed. So, for example, the Mosques created online can be thought of as play spaces embodying the rhetoric of identity, which is usually applied “to traditional and community celebrations and festivals” as a means of “…confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of the community of players” (Sutton-Smith 10).

However, the lack of concurrent users – or players of the same sub-community - undermines the intention and change the rhetoric of the space for individual players to that of the rhetoric of self.

Rhetoric of self offers individuals the opportunity to be experimental in their subject positions or, as Nakamura calls it, in the digital context, to become identity tourists. Nakamura defines tourism as “a metaphor for describing the activity of racial identity
appropriation in cyberspace” (40). I would like to broaden her definition to include ethnic and cultural identity as well. Hence, a non-Muslim who chooses to ‘pass’ as a Muslim is engaging in tourism, performing themselves as Muslims, acting out the part of what it would like to be. The *One Thousand and One Night* area within *Second Life* mentioned earlier is another example of this phenomenon.

I decided to traverse some spaces I had visited before wearing the *Ihram*. In general, I found myself ignored and avoided – i.e. responses kept to a minimum. I found this interesting since when I was exploring the space with regular clothes, I was approached a few times by other avatars in a number of different spaces. While, wearing the Ihram, I approached several individuals, but was unable to engage them in a conversation. This anecdote supports the last possibility I would like to introduce in this section about why there were so few concurrent users in the spaces designated as *Muslim*. I propose that the real world events and politics have a chilling effects on the virtual community.

In July of 2007, the *Economist* ran a story about jihadists (or Muslim fundamentalist bent on violence) coming online. The article discussed the ways in which Al-Qaeda is using the internet, quoting experts that “jihadists have also started to create ‘residents’ in the virtual world of *Second Life*.” This is just one example of how popular media has started to turn the spotlight on to Muslim activity – legitimate or not – on the internet and why online Muslim communities are expected to be under surveillance. There are two more examples that I will share. First, I would like to point to the case of Shannen
Rossmiller, a municipal court judge who was profiled in a 2004 issue of *People* magazine. The article states:

“Posing as an Islamic militant, she trawls the Internet, infiltrating online forums where jihadists exchange messages and trying to identify potential terrorists. No one pays her and she belongs to no official intelligence organization. But for Rossmiller, 34, cyber-sleuthing is more than a hobby: On Sept. 2 her testimony resulted in the conviction at Washington's Fort Lewis Army base of an Iraq-bound National Guard tank crewman, Spc. Ryan Anderson. Convicted of attempted treason for trying to aid alQaeda, he was sentenced to life in military prison.”

The second example is an article that appeared U.K.’s *Sunday Times*’ website in August of 2007. Chris Gourlay and Abul Taher write in the article titled “Virtual jihad hits *Second Life* website”:

Islamic militants are suspected of using *Second Life*, the internet virtual world, to hunt for recruits and mimic real-life terrorism.

Police and the intelligence services are concerned that it may have been infiltrated by extremists to proselytise, communicate and transfer money to one another. Radicals may also be responsible for “virtual” terrorist attacks in which buildings depicted on the website are blown up.

The concerns are shared by Europol, the pan-European police agency, which believes that *Second Life* provides a means to transfer money across borders in a way that is more difficult for the authorities to monitor. It has recruited security consultants to advise on the use of *Second Life* for fraud and terrorism.

Of particular concern is the anonymity of *Second Life* members who can use false names for their digital personas, known as avatars, to disguise their real identity and provide false contact details in the real world.

The article goes on to discuss opinion of experts on how interactions in this world should be monitored for possible suspicious activity. This is a clear case of the magic circle no longer holding out the real world. I contend that these attitudes translate onto
online behavior and have a direct impact of the vibrancy of the Muslim community online. Furthermore, this is a type of rhetoric that is coming from Western media regarding a play space created in the U.S., positioning activity of a minority community even before it has had a chance to flourish. Lastly, I believe that this environment leads to a distancing effect by non-radical Muslims who may choose to not perform their identity as a Muslim in fear of retribution, not spend time within spaces designated as Muslim for fear of surveillance, and not interact with others who appear Muslim for fear of being branded as a terrorist. Perhaps that is why exploring non-Muslim environments felt like play and exploring Muslim spaces felt forbidden.

In the next section, I will look at how consumption is a central theme within Second Life and how that is representative of a particular rhetoric at work.

4.3 Consumption in Second Life

There was a crescendo of publicity as Business Week’s cover story in May of 2006, My Virtual Life, featured Anshe Chung (a.k.a. Ailin Graef), a Second Life land baron with vast ownership interest in virtual real estate. In 2006 most of the coverage about Second Life was no longer about creating virtual identities that allowed you to be who you could not be in real life, but rather
about opportunities to create wealth in ways never imagined, in real life. Many people rushed to create their virtual identities so that they could own a parcel of virtual land before it was all gone. For many, the concept of blending a real and virtual life was novel, a concept that seemed revolutionary.

Linden Labs encouraged the perception of the space as an arena of commerce by creating websites dedicated to shopping and trading virtual goods such as http://www.slexchange.com/. It also shifted its search tool to allow for commerce driven search, introduced classifieds and began selling space to corporations. The company also began structuring its membership using profitability as its guideline.

Membership in Second Life is a hierarchical structure that favors large corporations and paying members through providing different levels of access and customer service to those that are deemed to the elite. Its governance structure is not transparent, even though there are rules that dictate behavior in the space. Repeat offenders get exiled

Figure 16 Screen shot of the cornfield, as posted on clickableculture.com

to simulated jail dubbed the “cornfield,” where there is nothing to do but ride on a tractor and watch a 1940’s movie. Most of the offenses tend to be focused on interrupting the game play of others by creating code that immobilizes other avatars or drops random objects from the sky. The code is used for both the disruption and for enforcement, with technology novice at a disadvantage on both fronts.

In the previous chapter, I touched on the emerging virtual economy within Second Life. Second Life’s virtual economy is not unique; games such as WoW and EverQuest also have thriving economies in which in-world items are bought and sold on websites such as e-Bay and www.wowecon.com, using in-world or real world currency. Also remember that this commodification goes back to the early days of Habitat.

Second Life takes this a step further by pegging its virtual currency, Linden Dollar, to the U.S. Dollar. The exchange rate between the two was 261:1 on April 4, 2008. Land ownership has similarly evolved in the world since its inception. Today, there is a land fee use which is charged on top of the membership fee. The fee amount is based on the amount of land owned ranging from $5 to $195 per month. There is value added tax applied to EU residents and Island owner are charged $250 a month in addition to the cost of the Island (starting at $1,650 USD). Premium members pay $6 to $9.95 a month and receive a weekly stipend of $1000 Linden dollars. Perhaps more importantly, they are given land ownership rights. Interestingly, if an existing member decides to create a

second identity or ‘alt’, they are also required to pay $9.95 a month but are not accorded the stipend or land ownership rights. Another point of differentiation is the level of support, basic versus premium.\(^{30}\)

Even though there is equal access to the space, the lack of ability to own land limits the amount of activity that a basic member can engage in online. While there are no geographical or national restrictions to membership as long as the member has a Paypal account or an international credit card, the fact is that the premium member is expected to be part of the international commerce network or have a previous membership that acts as a trusted source (i.e. Paypal). Furthermore, we see here an example of the creation of an elite in-world class based on who can afford the monthly fee. To put this into perspective below is a table listing the 2006 gross national income per capita (GNI) of a select group of countries according to the World Bank\(^ {31}\) and their presence on Second Life according to the company as active residents\(^ {32}\).

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\(^{30}\) All data from Second Life website as of April 4, 2008
\(^{32}\) As of February 2008.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of hours spent in Second Life/mos</th>
<th>Second Life % of Avatar</th>
<th>Yearly GNI (US$)</th>
<th>Monthly GNI (US$)</th>
<th># of Avatars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>.13%</td>
<td>.14%</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>.07%</td>
<td>.08%</td>
<td>3030</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>.05%</td>
<td>.10%</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>.02%</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1570</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compare above to the statistics from the top five nations represented in Second Life:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of hours spent in Second Life/mos</th>
<th>Second Life % of Avatar</th>
<th>Yearly GNI (US$)</th>
<th>Monthly GNI (US$)</th>
<th># of Avatars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>36.97%</td>
<td>34.67%</td>
<td>44970</td>
<td>3748</td>
<td>182698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>10.01%</td>
<td>5.37%</td>
<td>34580</td>
<td>2882</td>
<td>28279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>7.22%</td>
<td>5.37%</td>
<td>38410</td>
<td>3201</td>
<td>28279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>7.22%</td>
<td>9.17%</td>
<td>40180</td>
<td>3348</td>
<td>48342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>5.67%</td>
<td>5.15%</td>
<td>36550</td>
<td>3046</td>
<td>27127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, the purpose of the space can be described as one of creativity and commerce:

You build, you buy, you sell, you exchange. Again, this not only means that in order to fully participate the player needs to be able to create - a point I tackle in the next section - but that also the “fun” of the space is around buying and selling your items. Recall that Caillois calls this the institutionalization of *agon*. 
As previously mentioned, here is a clear representation of not only the rhetoric of play as progress but also the rhetoric of capitalism that is reflective of the U.S. based culture responsible for creating *Second Life*. Kline et. al. call this the “commodification and play in the marketing circuit.” They tie this phenomenon to the success of the SIM’s games and write:

> The aim of this apparatus is to create game players who will also, simultaneously and of necessity, be game consumers. The television advertising, promotional stands, retails displays, synergistic tie-ins, brad envelopment, and viral marketing techniques that saturate digital play are already among the most potent vectors of commercialization in contemporary youth culture.

(283)

This infusion of economic reality is what Caillois calls the corruption of the games (43). It is the encroachment of the institution – in this case the capitalistic institutions - onto the game space that changes the nature of it and renders it no-longer pure. This rhetoric serves to create haves and have-nots within the space of *Second Life*, disadvantaging those who think of play as something other than progress, those who do not have the means to pay the membership fee and those who choose not to.

However, as we shall see in the next section, purpose and capital are not the only two factors that create an uneven playing field in *Second Life*. Technology also plays a large role in privileging one group over another.
4.4 Technology in Second Life

Lisa Nakamura writes “The Internet is certainly a postcolonial discursive practice, originating as it does from both scientific discourses of progress and the Western global capitalistic project” (6). The impact of technology has been woven throughout the discussion above, as a factor that mediates between the player and Second Life, be it through identity creation tools or the search engine which favors paid results. In this section, I tackle some of the specific elements which act as agents; therefore arguing against the discourse of technology liberation. I use the word technology as an umbrella term for the network, the code and the hardware.

Before delving into the analysis, I would like to point out that one possible counter argument is the existence of the hacker culture and game piracy on the internet as forms of resistance. I will not address this point, because I do not find it to conflict with the larger point made in this paper regarding the presence of politics in code – discussing means of resistance only furthers the argument.

One of the culturally and theoretically consistent aspects of games is the absolute abidance to the rules of the game. A game is essentially comprised of a series of rules that dictate player behavior. While that does not translate to a lack of agency within the game space, it does privilege the person or persons who developed the game – and by extension those who come from the culture which developed the game.
In his book, *The Language of New Media* Lev Manovich makes the case for a similar point, writing that interactive media perfectly fits this trend to externalize and objectify the mind’s operation….put differently, in what can be read as an updated version of French philosopher Louis Althusser’s concept of ‘interpellation,’ we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody’s [sic] else mind for our own…If the cinema viewer, male and female, lusted after and tried to emulate the body of the movie star, the computer user is asked to follow the mental trajectory of the new media designer. (61)

So who are these new media designers whose mental trajectory we are asked to follow? The game industry is notoriously male dominated and those that have tackled gender roles within video games have at length discussed the issue. U.S. and Japan dominate game production and the U.S. industry specially lacks in diversity when it comes to its developers. Below are some demographic statistics according to the Game Developer Demographics Report [http://www.igda.org/diversity/report.php](http://www.igda.org/diversity/report.php):

- Male = 88.5%, Female = 11.5%
- White = 83.3%, Black = 2.0%, Hispanic/Latino = 2.5%, Asian = 7.5%, Other = 4.7%
- Heterosexual = 92%, Lesbian/Gay = 2.7%, Bisexual = 2.7%
- Average age = 31 years
- Average years in the industry = 5.4 years
- Percentage of people with disabilities = 13% (e.g., cognitive, mobility, sight, etc)
- More than 80% have a university level education or greater
- More than 60% of studios claim that obtaining diverse applicants is challenging

Software and game design is about visuals esthetics, rule set, hierarchy. One would expect that game designers will develop games that have the esthetics, rules and
hierarchy of the societies that they come from. Therefore, the game space from the onset is biased for those from the outside.

Echoing Edward Said, Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu, in his reading of the video game *Shadow Warrior* (1997), points the depiction of the main character *Lo Wong* as an example in which the whiteness of America seeps through the code. He writes,

> Patently racialist, the game refuses any move to castigate it for the mere fact that Lo Wang is simulacra with no correspondence to anything actual, save the “anxiety” that white men may decide to participate in for the sake of re-evaluating, reifying, or reinforcing a white racial status.

(122)

In what ways can bias be found in *Second Life*, an environment which allows the player to create their own self beyond the economics already discussed?

The bias of *Second Life* is one that skews the enjoyment of the environment towards those with the best network connections, fastest computers, latest graphic chips, knowledge of design software and familiarity with the language.

### 4.4.1 Hardware and software requirements

In order for a game to be successful, it must create an immersive environment in which the player’s consciousness accepts it as real. Immersive environments are created through engaging game play, interesting narrative and visually arresting vistas.
Engaging game play and the visual setting are fully dependent on the interaction between the game software and the player’s hardware (console or computer), and in the case of *Second Life* the game uses a client-server architecture, in which some components of the game reside on the player’s computer and some reside on servers operated by Linden Labs.

In case of a game such as *WoW*, common elements that a player may encounter such as world topography or character details are stored on the client (player’s computer), while other components, such as quests, are downloaded from the server. Typically, the fewer items that need to be downloaded, the better the game play experience will be. While *Second Life* also uses client-server architecture, it relies much more on the server side for delivering data than the client side. This is due to the emergent nature of the environment, in which there are no constant states for the characters or items such as buildings. They are in a constant state of flux, changed on whim by their owners.

Another limitation is the operating system requirements which restrict non-Linux users to new operating systems that require newer machines, such as Vista for PC and Mac OS X 10.3.9 or better. Similarly, the processor speed is high and the graphic cards required are later models of NVIDIA Graphics cards, ATI Radeon or Intel 945 chipset. While sales of personal computers are growing fast across the world, a comparative study by the Dubai-based Madar Research Group in 2006 showed that penetration in the Middle East was far below industrialized nations.\(^{33}\) The report points to lagging sales in

\(^{33}\) [http://www.energyme.com/technews/pr_it/0500125.htm](http://www.energyme.com/technews/pr_it/0500125.htm)
the region as compared with the rest of the world, which can be caused by longer than
ter than average length of ownership, as well as use of internet cafés.

An example of this is the recommended versus minimum system requirement for the
graphic cards. The minimum requirement for one of the cards is NVIDIA GeForce 2000
or better. This card was released in 2000. However, the recommended card is NVIDIA
GeForce 6000 or better, which was released in November of 2005. The Second Life
world and most games are optimized for the recommended configuration, not the
minimum. What this means is that while you is able to function within the Second Life
world, your experience is hampered due to the earlier mentioned architecture of the site.
Since Second Life’s world is continuously changing, the world has to be always re-
rendered (image refreshed) with every move which also requires a monitor that have
better screen resolutions. In my analysis of this I compared a Mitsubishi Diamont Pro
2TTX CTR monitor against Dell Latitude D610 laptop display, which confirmed that
this architecture heavily favors the recommended configuration and newer hardware.

4.4.2 Internet Access
One of the key factors influencing experience online is the network structure that is
used to connect to it. This network structure translates into the speed of the connection,
the reliability of the connection, and reliability of the access. This is where which we
encounter the broadest limitation posed by Second Life. The world of Second Life is not
compatible with dial-up, satellite or wireless internet connections and can only be
accessed via cable or DSL. Ironically, the access methods excluded are the most popular
ways in which many non-industrialized nations connect to the internet. Lacking robust terrestrial telecommunications infrastructure, these countries’ path to industrialization has led to faster adoption of satellite and wireless technologies than in industrialized countries. Yet they are excluded from participating in the Second Life world.

Below is the latest data for the Middle East according to the website Internet World Stats which shows that the penetration of internet access has soared in the past few years.
However, digging deeper we find that the percentage of broadband access required for participation in online games is much lower. For example, in Bahrain, while there is 22.20% penetration, only a quarter of those individuals have broadband access. Saudi Arabia represents 14% of the Middle East internet traffic and has a 17% household penetration of which only 5% have broadband access. Furthermore, the broadband access figures quoted here include satellite and wireless connections which are not compatible with Second Life. Figures are similar for other countries across the Middle East.

Outside of the wireless and satellite connections, unreliability of the connection is another reason why we see the low representation of a country like Iran, which represents about half of the Middle Eastern internet users in Second Life.

According to several sources including The Guardian, in 2006 the government of Iran asked its service providers to drastically cut back on the speed provided to customers. The article states that “[i]n a blow to the country's estimated 5 million internet users, service providers have been told to restrict online speeds to 128 kilobits per second (kbps) and been forbidden from offering fast broadband packages.” On March 4th 2008, The New York Times reported that the government of Iran may cut internet access in Iran during the general elections on March 14th. On March 14, www.NewsScientist.com reported that the government only used their control over the firewalls to shut down access to opposition candidates’ websites. These are just example of one way in which
institutions can control technology to sanction or support individual behavior. *Second Life*’s access method (DSL or Cable) is one that is usually controlled by state monopolies in many nations; by not allowing access through wireless or satellite methods which are less controlled, the design and architecture inadvertently bestows power to the ruling elite.

Another way in which players are segregated in the world is through language use. In the next section I will briefly explain the linguistic restrictions.

### 4.4.3 Localization

In technology speak, when software is internationalized, the code is written in a way in which it can work on multiple operating systems around the world and display language characters. When software is localized, its environment is adapted by developers to fit within the culture of local players. Environmental factors that are typically changed during localization are the colors used, the icons and symbols and the display language.

However localization is not the only factor predicting success. *Second Life* launched the beta of its Japanese version in March of 2007 and launched its services in South Korea in October of 2007. Comparing usage between February 2007 and 2008 shows that in 2007 (before the launch of localized versions of the software in either country), Japan represented 1.29% of the residents of *Second Life* while in 2008, they represented 5.37% and over 7% of total hours spend online per month. In case of Japanese users, creating an environment more in-line with their local culture increased the appeal of the space.
In contrast, the number of users in Korea has not shifted much. What is interesting about Second Life’s launch in Korea is that according to CNET, the company created a partnership with “Korean online game company T-entertainment provide its services in Korea.” This close linkage with a service provider goes back to the points made in the section above about the important of access quality and reliability. Furthermore, according to the same article, the company had to change its strategy because early feedback from the beta launched in May of 2007 showed that the Korean population had much higher expectations of a virtual environment due to their experience with existing online environments. They also did not like an environment lacking narrative and quests – their definition of what constituted play space was culturally very different than the U.S. created world. Hence, Second Life had to begin using celebrities to draw the users in and has been struggling to attract large businesses to substitute for lack of average players in the space.
Another issue that sets apart users within this environment is technological knowledge. So far in the discussion of technology, I have addressed game developers and biases they code into an environment which results in uneven field in a global space. My argument can be countered by pointing to Second Life’s decision in 2007 to move to open source software. In January of 2007, the company announced the decision to release “the code of its Viewer application to the open source software development community.”34 It could be argued that this move wrests the control over environment away from developer/institutions and transfers agency to the players.

I maintain that this is not the case. First, the open source software access only applies to the client portion of the software, not the server side of the software. Second, the agency becomes realized only for those who are familiar with writing code. So while there is a significant overlap between producers and consumers within this space, there still exists classification that must be acknowledged. In the following section, I discuss ways in which a-priori technological knowledge benefits users within the Second Life world.

4.4.4 Technology elite
There are two types of technical knowledge that are useful for players within Second Life. One is the ability to write code, and other is the ability to design objects using software packages such as Photoshop. Both groups are given the ability to control the environment to a degree, the first through the code itself and the latter through creation of objects that can be sold in the virtual worlds. The point of this section is not to argue

34 http://lindenlab.com/pressroom/releases/01_08_07
that one ethnic group is more sufficient at this task than another, but that the world of
Second Life technology creates the haves and have-nots based on their ability to
manipulate the code. To make this point, I will focus on those who are familiar with
design software packages.

Second Life provides users with a basic set of tools that are a starting kit for creating 3D
objects such as buildings. Of course, making larger objects is mainly useful to those who
either own real estate in which they can place the item or have a distribution outlet
letting them sell the goods they create. Creating shapes, however, is only the first step as
shapes can have textures, colors, movement – all set by the creator. While there are a set
of pre-selected choices offered to the user (i.e. texture of chain mail), the real creativity
encountered in this world comes from user designed skins. Skins are digital images
created in software packages such as Photoshop; they are in popular formats (PSP, JPG,
GIF) and are uploaded to the system for use by the player. Beyond the creativity and
the ability required to create skins, the user needs to have Linden dollars in order to
upload the skins to their account.

Without the ability to create, a player cannot engage in the in-world economy as a
producer. Hence, class roles are assigned to players from the onset, impacting the
narrative that is created through their interactions. This reliance on technology for
creation and for engagement in the game is yet another example of procedural rhetoric
present in the play space.
In conclusion, the goal of my analysis was to show the role of technology and its impact on the expression of the identity. I chose avatar creation and group membership as the two variables to analyze and found that while the avatar creation process in itself was not directly limited by the technology; group membership was restricted. The code of the space reflected biases of not just the developers; but also a commerce driven ideology; promoting consumption at every turn. The code also limited access to the world which directly goes to the point of vibrancy of one group over another. Lastly, full participation in the space was restricted by the code in favor of those who paid for their membership and those who had the ability to create within the space using technology.
5. Conclusion

I began this analysis by proposing that politics inherent in the code restricts the player’s expression of cultural identity, even in spaces thought of as open such as Second Life.

For the enthusiasts, what distinguishes Second Life from other video games is the ability of its members to create their own identity and member community without a narrative superimposed from the top. It is this possibility of freedom that had encouraged enthusiasts early on, the possibility of a world where you could be a dog or a man or flying chair and build whatever structure you wanted.

What I found is that freedom in Second Life is in the eye of the player - conditional, at best. I call this freedom conditional because it does not apply equally to all and can only be achieved after certain technological hurdles have been passed. Indeed, it seems that while in the beginning there may have been rhetorics of self and identity dominating the space, “institutional forms integrated into social life” (Caillois: 53) soon took over transforming it from a space of identity exploration and experiment, to first an over-hyped arena for real estate speculation and, next, to a glorified world full of advertising.

Much has been written about the concept of digital divide and I would like to propose that the concept of the divide goes beyond those who do or do not have access to the internet. The digital divide also separates the technology expert from the novice. While some may argue that technology is a tool that levels the playing field, I argue that
technology affords the former superiority within the space. The digital divide separates those from industrialized societies from others, not because of the quaint arguments of development but through bias built into the code that supports the standards promoted by the former. Lastly, the digital divide separates those who have money from those who do not. This perhaps is the easiest case to make and not a new revelation. As I have referred to in my analysis, my argument against the discourse of technology liberation is meant to show that technology is both an agent in itself and an agent of those who build worlds.

In the attempt to answer my research question, I first addressed the issue of how a space with an emerging narrative co-constructed by the players, along with a thriving commerce, could qualify as both a space of play and as a game. I propose that Second Life is a space of play and a game by using the works of Huizinga, Caillois, Sutton-Smith and Bogost.

Second Life is a space of play and a game because it is a magic circle (Huizinga), with its own rules of engagement, a space that is entered and existed voluntarily. Second Life is also a space within which players engage in the mimicry form of play and within which we see the presence of institutional forms of alea (Caillois). While Sutton-Smith’s scholarship presents us with a singular view of the play space vis-à-vis the rhetoric represented, I argue that modern technology allows for the presence of multiple rhetorics of play; allowing for the modern and ancient rhetorics of identity and self to
co-mingle. This is driven by the global nature of the space which allows for culturally
defined concepts of play, as well as the open narrative which allows some degree of
freedom of expression to the player.

Lastly, I used Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric to complement rhetorics
presented by Sutton-Smith. Bogost’s framework provides a solid approach to
demonstrating ways in which technology – or procedural rhetoric – is used to drive the
experience within a video game, reinforcing the ideology of the builder.

In order to provide scope for my analysis of Second Life, I focused the analysis on two
technology processes within the space: identity creation and construction of community.
I further narrowed down the scope with a focus on two sub-groups: the novice and the
player from the Middle East. The avatar identity creation process was selected because it
represents one of the most criticized aspects of games by game scholars for promoting
gender and race stereotypes. Creation of community and group membership was chosen
as a unit of analysis in order to analyze whether the technology privileges one group
over another. This helps further explain the use of the novice and Middle Eastern filters
as good representations of groups who could be caught on the other side of the digital
divide.

The first question tackled in the analysis was that of identity creation. I found that in
terms of identity creation, Second Life does provide options that distance it from some of
the criticism leveled at video games in general regarding gender and race representation. While the creation of the avatar, and player identity, is still mediated through the technology, the options presented are sufficient in number and the tool flexible enough to accommodate the majority of would-be residents regardless of desired race, gender, ethnicity or culture within the space.

The ability to upload *skins* provides additional flexibility in the creation of the avatar, providing ample opportunity for customization. While the creation of identity is not hampered by the tool itself, its optimization does financial resources and technological know-how, a fact that creates a class system within the world from the get-go. However, before addressing these issues, I would like to point out another factor which lends the space an aura of neutrality. That factor is the lack of overt game narrative, which alleviates the encroachment of overt bias into the space.

In most video games, players encounter landscapes and buildings as imagined by video game designers as stand-ins for their real-world counterparts. At times, they are/seem to be more representational of a fictitious collage of cultures than any real spaces. This is one of the aspects of video games which motivated my initial interest in looking at representations of culture within them. Within *Second Life*, outside of the island based topography, we encounter the imagination of the players. This affords the players a higher degree of agency than allotted to them in other games.
The second question with which I dealt was the efficacy of identity construction. I looked at whether there are strength and vibrancy of Iranian and Muslim communities’ in-world. It was in researching this question that I first encountered the technology effect. In order to find others, one is reliant on a search tool. This tool is configured by the developers to promote advertisers first and foremost. In other words, it is a commerce biased search engine that mediates the ability to find and grow non-commerce based communities. This was only one example of the commodification of the space.

Searching for religious based groups/spaces proved to be more fruitful than my search for ethnic and nationality based groups and places. Regardless, my analysis overall showed a lack of vibrancy and participation by Muslim and Middle Eastern residents within the space. I attribute this to several factors, including the stigma attached to the group as possible terrorist factions that use Second Life for covert meetings. This fact is a limiting factor on the desire of individuals to perform the Muslim aspect of their identity. I also see the strong institutional presence of Islam in-world as an inhibiting factor, proposing that by encountering the faithful feels obligated to confine their expression to their Muslim self. Lastly, I see the limitations posed by the technology beyond the search tool, as those which create an uneven playing field for existing or would-be players accessing the world from outside of the industrialized universe.
Returning to the theoretical framework in use, it is clear that there were multiple layers of rhetoric at play with *Second Life*. As previously mentioned, the procedural rhetoric built in by the designers is meant to optimize commercial activity; while at the player level, cultural definition of play drive the rhetoric. By different rhetorics I mean that for some players the rhetoric of space is about play as progress, for others as identity and for others as self.

Here, I would like to expand on Sutton-Smith’s work by adding the rhetoric of capital as a driving force characterizing *Second Life*. Depending on the definition of capital used, this rhetoric could be placed alongside and as part of the rhetoric of power. Recall that Sutton-Smith’s stresses the persuasive role of rhetoric of play. Rhetoric of capital provides an umbrella and can guise itself under any of the modern or ancient rhetorics he names. Further, it can be combined and embedded within the procedural rhetoric of the space.

The fusion of the rhetoric of capital and procedure is important because while the former may provide the ideology, the latter is the main driver, as it performs a limiting/enabling function vis-à-vis the rhetorics of play at work. The procedural rhetoric draws the boundaries and provides the pallet to be applied by the individual. Looked at in this light, Bogost and Sutton-Smith’s works are complimentary in that they allow for a multi-dimensional analysis of play.
In the code of *Second Life*, we not only see the procedural rhetoric favoring commerce, but also one that favors modern, industrialized societies as demonstrated through system requirements for running the software and method of access required. This bias, though subtle, greatly impacts the ability of a global audience to participate in the world. I base this conclusion on the premise that, in many societies, play is a communal and social activity. A lack of cultural community discourages individuals from participation in the space. It is simply no fun if you cannot interact with others who speak the same language or approach fun in the same way. Furthermore, personal expression of identity is limited if the design of the software denies access, regardless of the degree of freedom an individual has in their expression once they get there.

Beyond access, the system privileges those who have paying accounts and those who are technically savvy. Therefore a class structure emerges within the world that is divided along these attributes. Technology not only acts as a gatekeeper but also is a judge of player agency. The technical elite with paying accounts are afforded much more agency than others. This system is further reinforced by rewarding the techno-elite by giving them a distribution avenue for their virtual products and the paid member by bestowing them with ability to own property.

What remains to be discussed at a later date is whether procedural rhetoric is anything but the rhetoric of power re-expressed in our technological age.
5.1 For Further Study

There are several other areas that should be explored to fully address this question that were not due to the scope of the project. One of those areas is identification of a more robust set of characteristics addressing personal expression within the space and an analysis of who it is that people choose to portray in a space like Second Life. I make the presumption in my analysis that a person from the Middle East or a Muslim resident, will choose to perform that aspect of their identity in this space. That may not be the case.

Another area that bears further analysis is a comparative study of technology factors such as average computer configuration or standards from country to country. Some of the questions to ask are about the average processor speed, memory size and graphic card present in most computers in a given country. Looking at the graphic card or memory size, or even the cost of memory cards, allows for two things. One, it highlights the differences amongst nations and shows a clear separation between countries in terms of hardware choices available. Second, it would provide solid data for use a quantitative model to draw conclusions correlating the penetration of various technologies and applications against what I will call the national computing capabilities. This comparison may also point us into the direction of priorities given by different nations to different applications and answer whether are all cultures equally driven by the visual and interactive modes of play that are currently dominating the market.
The average life of computers is another question that requires assessment and analysis. Computers are more often upgraded in an American household than households from around the world. A comparative international study would show whether the continuous urge to upgrade also drives how developers approach code, again privileging some over others.

In conducting this analysis there were also a number of theoretical frameworks that were enticing. One of the theoretical areas that I did not address here is the issue of simulation, going deeper into Baudriallard’s discussion of hyper-reality as compared to Debord’s concept of the spectacle. Also, while I briefly touch on the collective versus individual approach to play space by using Sutton-Smith’s work, this area could be expanded by using Bakhtin’s concept of *carnival* as a social institution and a collective. Another option would have been to expand on the Orientalism framework using Derrida’s deconstructionist approach.

Lastly, it would be fruitful to spend more time within the world of *Second Life* and further explore the connections between in-world and real world groups and institutions as these connections grow stronger as a means of providing sustainable revenue base for the company. It is also very likely that the only residents that pay are those who use the space for work, in which case the definition of it as a play space would change completely.
Yet, despite all of the possibilities that exist beyond what is presented here, I am confident that even this small slice will serve to answer the initial question: *Second Life* is a world that is built on a code representing cultural biases and interests. This code – this technology – acts as an agent privileging and accentuating the digital divide.

Despite the utopian vision some may harbor about *Second Life*, this magical world is not able to escape the narrative dictated by capital.

Viva the elite or power to the people? The elite seem to win yet again.
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