Virtual Social Identity and Consumer Behavior

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Introduction: Virtual Social Identity

Welcome to the Metaverse

Michael R. Solomon and Natalie T. Wood

In his 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash,* the author Neal Stephenson first developed the construct of the Metaverse. This seminal book depicts a future where individuals inhabit two parallel realities; their everyday physical existence and their avatar existence in a 3D computer-mediated environment. The complicated marriage of everyday mundane life with a fantasy world in which an inhabitant assumes other identities opened the door to thoughts of digital social experimentation—and presented a pathway to self-aggrandizement for those whose "real world" lives are less than ideal: the book's protagonist is a humble pizza delivery boy in the real world, but a sword-wielding warrior in the Metaverse.

Since the release of *Snow Crash* almost twenty years ago, technology now allows Stephenson's vision to become a reality. Over the last few years a flood of virtual worlds have come online. From *Second Life* to *The World of Warcraft,* There.com to MTV's *Virtual Pimp My Ride,* millions of consumers live a parallel life in a digital reality. A *virtual world* is an online representation of real-world people, products, and brands in a computer-mediated environment (CME). To many mainstream consumers and advertisers, this is largely an unknown or underground phenomenon—but it has real marketing consequences (Wood and Solomon, forthcoming). We are pleased to present selected papers in this volume from the first academic conference to specifically address these issues: the 2008 Advertising and Consumer Psychology Conference sponsored by the Society for Consumer Psychology (www.sju.edu/academics/centers/ccr/vsocialidentity.html) in Philadelphia.

Why the focus on this topic? In mid-2007, Charles River Ventures proclaimed that the virtual goods market was worth approximately $1.5 billion and growing rapidly. With more than 150 of these immersive 3D environments now live or

currently in development, the number of consumers who come into contact with virtual goods as they navigate these worlds is projected to rise rapidly ("150+ Youth-Oriented" 2008). Indeed, according to one estimate, by the year 2012, 53 percent of kids and 80 percent of active Internet users will be members of at least one virtual world ("Kids" 2007; "Virtual Greats Enters" 2008).

Clearly, virtual environments will fuel new consumer trends over the next decade. McKinsey predicts that "Virtual worlds such as *Second Life* will become an indispensable business tool and vital to the strategy of any company intent on reaching out to the video-game generation" (Richards 2008). The *Harvard Business Review* predicts that within the next five years virtual environments are likely to emerge as *the* dominant Internet interface. In addition to corporate websites, companies will operate virtual stores where customers can browse and interact with assistants (Sarvary 2008). To date, numerous companies including IBM, GE, and Toyota have created CMEs for internal and external applications. Eventually, these CME forums may rival traditional marketer-sponsored e-commerce sites in terms of their influence on consumer decision making and product adoption.

However, due to the newness of the medium, advertisers still struggle to figure out the best way to talk to consumers in these environments—or to decide if they should enter them at all. Ironically, this challenge is compounded by the unparalleled latitude both advertisers and consumers possess in these environments to assume virtually (pun intended) any physical form they wish. How will our understanding of source effects apply to advertising contexts where a company spokesperson's *avatar* (or digital representation) is a fiery dragon, a sultry siren, or both at once? How does that company relate to a consumer whose avatar resembles George Bush, a furry creature, or a superhero? Welcome to the wild and woolly world of advertising in virtual worlds.

The last few years have been a bit of a Gold Rush for the brand-new virtual worlds industry as marketers eagerly competed to be "the first" in to stake a claim in a CME. Unfortunately many of these efforts failed to live up to expectations and we have been subjected to a slew of negative press. Virtual worlds are a fad, many naysayers claim. Gartner estimates that upward of 90 percent of virtual worlds that businesses launch will fail; most within the first 18 months. Yet, the same analysts also predict that 70 percent of organizations will establish their own private virtual worlds by 2012 (Cavall 2008). Despite such prominent failures as American Apparel and Starwood Hotels, there are many examples of success, including campaigns by Cosmo Girl and Toyota Scion in There.com and Nike in *Second Life.*

When executed properly, we firmly believe that virtual environments offer a higher level of immersion, interactivity, and engagement than many other web-based technologies. The promise is real, but it's no longer sufficient just to plant a virtual stick in the ground. Advertisers need to think carefully about how to calibrate their strategic objectives with the unique characteristics of these environments.

This book focuses exclusively on one key aspect of CMEs: the unprecedented ability they offer to visitors to craft one or many social identities at will. We ad-

dress some of the fascinating consequences and ramifications of *virtual social identity.* A sampling of the intriguing issues that await resolution includes the following items.

WHO IS "THERE" IN A VIRTUAL WORLD?

In the real world, an advertiser can usually identify the recipient of a persuasive communication.[1] But in virtual worlds individuals are free to experiment with different identities; and it is not at all uncommon for veteran residents to have more than one avatar. For example, some people have one avatar that they use for work-related activities and another they inhabit to cruise nightclubs. They can alter their appearance, age, gender, or even choose to take on a nonhuman form. They may experiment with personas that are far from their real self, so it can be problematic to infer the true identity of an avatar using traditional visual cues. We may think that we are speaking to a 35-year-old male engineer from Manchester, UK, when in reality we are conversing with a 52-year-old female hair stylist from Manitoba. Advertisers are often left to ponder a Zen-like question: "To whom do we market—the avatar or the 'real' person?"

As in the real world, the answer most likely depends in part upon each resident's level of involvement with the virtual environment. Individuals who fully immerse themselves in CMEs experience a greater sense of *social presence* than do individuals who visit as casual tourists (Blascovich et al. 2002; Schroeder 2002; Slater et al. 2000; Short, Williams, and Christie 1976). Clearly, as more people take these experiences seriously the experiential dynamics will evolve as increasing numbers of us experience a *flow state* that transforms the online experience from passive browsing to agentic, first-person immersion (Csikszentmihalyi 1991).

WHAT ARE THE PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR VIRTUALITY?

Like it or not, our society is morphing into a digital platform. More than 16 million people worldwide belong to the virtual world of *Second Life,* more than 10 million play the online game *World of Warcraft,* and 44 percent of Koreans belong to *CyWorld.* Add to that the millions more who play *The Sims Online* or who visit other computer-mediated environments such as There.com, *Entropia Universe,* MTV's *Virtual Laguna Beach,* and so on and you're looking at a lot of serious role playing.

The evolution of virtual society is even more telling when we look at the proliferation of youth-oriented sites such as *Webkinz, Whyville,* and *Habbo Hotel* (Wood, Chaplin, and Solomon 2008). Researchers estimate that the audience of teens in virtual worlds will more than double, to 20 million members, within the next three years (Olsen 2007).

Identity exploration is an essential developmental task for adolescents (Erikson 1963; Harter 1999; Marcia 1993). Traditionally, it was family and friends who served as a reference for identity exploration. Today, the Internet affords adolescents many new and exciting opportunities to experiment with their identities (Katz and Rice 2002; Rheingold 1993; Smith and Kollock 1999; Stern 2004; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield 2006; Turkle 1995). Virtual worlds are poised to become the next great laboratory for identity exploration.

But, this is a sword that cuts both ways; the expanded potential to experiment with a range of identities (e.g., gender) coupled with the inevitable presence of predators who prey on vulnerable targets creates a huge set of issues and concerns. We understand very little about how the identities we choose in CMEs relate to our real life (RL) identities. Already we know that when people take on avatar forms, they tend to interact with other avatars much as their RL selves interact with other RL people. For example, just as in RL, males in *Second Life* leave more space between themselves and other males than they do with versus females, and they are less likely to maintain eye contact than are females. And when avatars get very close to one another, they tend to look away from each other—the norms of RL do creep into the virtual world (Svensson 2007). We've only scratched the surface to understand how socialization processes will change as a result.

An April 2008 study of kid-oriented virtual worlds reported that the average visitor logged 78 minutes per month, while many users literally spend hours per day in these environments (A. Bryant, personal communication, June 5, 2008). This level of interaction is bound to influence identity formation; just as in the early days of TV, we know nothing about the impact this will have—but we can be sure it will be significant.

HOW SHOULD ADVERTISERS EMPLOY AVATARS AS SPOKESPERSONS?

Researchers agree that interacting with avatars may deliver positive benefits to online shoppers (Wood, Solomon, and Englis 2005, 2008; Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Neumann 2006; Keeling et al. 2004; Keeling, McGoldrick, and Beatty 2006); that the "right" avatar can help to build trust in the e-tailer (McGoldrick, Keeling, and Beatty 2008); and this in turn leads to greater levels of satisfaction, confidence, and intention to purchase as well as a more positive evaluation of the site's information and entertainment value (Wood, Solomon, and Englis, 2008; Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Neumann 2006). But this facilitation is selective; just as is the case with spokespeople in other advertising contexts, an inappropriate avatar can alienate customers (Keeling et al. 2004; McBreen et al. 2000).

The selection of an appropriate source is central to the marketing communication process, but the choice is a complex one. Advertisers face the challenge to select a source that is not only credible and attractive, but also someone with whom the target audience can identify. Ironically, marketers easily spend huge sums of

money and time to carefully select spokespeople for their real-life campaigns, but there's no evidence that they think much about this crucial issue when they create an avatar to represent them in a virtual world. Some specific choices include:

- Should the avatar appear realistic or more like an animated cartoon character?
- Should the avatar resemble a human form or something else?
- Should the avatar mirror the user's own appearance, should it depict another real/typical person, or should it take the form of an idealized image or a fantasy figure?
- Should the avatar resemble a stereotypical male or female image or be more androgynous?

SHOULD THE SAME AVATAR REPRESENT THE BRAND UNIFORMLY TO ALL IN-WORLD VIEWERS?

Ads transmitted on broadcast media present the same image to an entire audience. In contrast, an online advertiser can modify direct or interactive messages for different purchasing contexts or even individual users. Virtual worlds have the potential to take message customization even farther because (at least in theory) they actually allow the *recipient* to design the source. Wood, Solomon, and Englis (2005, p. 148) pose the question, "Is it possible to have a match-up between source and the *consumer* that will yield similar or even better results than a match-up between the source and the product?" Their research revealed that in online shopping scenarios people do not always respond in a similar fashion to the same avatar. So, what if we instead match the communication source to each user's preferences?

As with other types of consumer-generated media, one of the downsides of handing the asylum over to the inmates (i.e., giving consumers control over a brand's imagery) is that the sources consumers choose may not be consistent with the brand personality a sponsor hopes to communicate. What if the user decides that a message source for (say) a financial services ad should take the form of a fire-breathing gremlin wielding a bayonet? What if the female avatar who urges you to try a new fragrance looks like a cross between Carmen Electra and Paris Hilton? How do these images impact consumers' perceptions of the brand's personality that companies spend millions of dollars to create?

HOW DOES VIRTUAL SOCIAL IDENTITY INFLUENCE GROUP DYNAMICS—AND VICE VERSA?

Many virtual world relationships and interactions mimic those we find in the physical world. Avatars form friendships with other avatars, they discuss real-

life problems, they argue, they go on virtual dates; some even get married (and divorced), purchase virtual real estate, and mourn the deaths of other players without ever meeting in the flesh. These parallels make it reasonable to assume that not unlike what we experience in the real world, the dynamics of social influence that are so well documented in physical contexts—especially those related to conformity and social contagion—transfer to virtual group relationships as well.

Furthermore, just as in the real world, the ability to interact with others may lead to an increase in risk-taking behavior in virtual worlds. Individuals may feel more confident to try out new experiences, engage with different products, and experiment more freely when they are in others' company. These effects may also extend to in-world purchasing. For instance, the retailer Lands' End introduced a "Shop with a Friend" feature that enables people in different geographic locations to shop together online (Leavitt 2004). This innovative (but woefully understudied) application highlights the potential of immersive technology to impact both the type and volume of purchases.

TAKING IT FROM HERE

This volume does not purport to answer (or even address) all of the questions we pose above, but we do get off to a healthy start. We divide the dozen of papers in this book into four sections: The Virtual Experience, Consumer Behavior in Virtual Worlds, Youth Consumers, and Person Perceptions in Virtual Worlds:

1. In Part I—The Virtual Experience—Kozinets and Kedzior explore autonetnography as a research methodology for virtual worlds. El Kamel then presents an analysis of the metaverse from a postmodern experiential consumption perspective.
2. In Part II—Consumer Behavior in Virtual Worlds—Hinsch and Bloch discuss consumers' motivations to join virtual worlds and the implications for marketers and consumer behaviorists. Brown and Tuten examine in-world communication and product recommendations as they explore whether in-world product guidance is more impactful to consumers relative to other venues as well as whether residents trust the advice they receive. Next, Keeling, Keeling, de Angeli, and McGoldrick offer a theoretical model to explain how and why specific aspects of avatar interactions relate to behavioral intentions. Crete, St-Onge, Merle, Arsenault, and Nantel examine the influence of personalized avatars on perceptions, attitudes, and intentions. And through a netnographic inquiry on the Chinese online gaming community, Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy examine how CME activity takes on aspects of sacred consumption.
3. In the part on Avatar Creation and Appearance, Bryant and Akerman investigate the social-psychological development of kids and teens and how this impacts their interactions with and affinity for different types of avatars. Then,

Kim and Sundar examine the effects of avatar presence and customization on users' attitudes toward social networking sites and advertising.

4. In the final section—Person Perceptions in Virtual Worlds—Appiah and Elias report the findings of a study in which they paired intelligent animated agents with human voices that are either congruent or incongruent with the ethnicity of the agent. Lutchyn, Duff, Faber, Cho, and Huh take a similar approach when they examine the effect of interracial morphing on attitudes toward the spokesperson and the advertisement. Finally, Bublitz, Claybaugh, and Peracchio discuss the formation of thin-slice judgments of avatars and their impact on online marketing.

According to Gartner, by 2015 more money will be spent on sales and marketing online than offline (Broitman and Tatar 2008). Given the predicted growth rates of virtual worlds it is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of future advertising expenditures will be directed to these environments. To ensure that these financial resources are invested wisely and yield positive results, advertisers need to understand and appreciate the characteristics of this brave new world. We are just beginning to comprehend its ramifications and we must remember that Rome wasn't built in a day, not even a virtual one.

NOTE

1. We add the caveat that there is always some uncertainty about a receiver's identity, even in direct marketing or online campaigns, when we make a leap of faith to assume that the person at the computer is actually the person the advertiser intends to target.

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PART I

THE VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

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CHAPTER 1

I, Avatar

Auto-Netnographic Research in Virtual Worlds

ROBERT V. KOZINETS AND RICHARD KEDZIOR

A recent article in that paragon of buttoned-down professional journals, the *Harvard Business Review,* contained the following description in its opening: "Birdsong and a gentle breeze enliven the scene at dawn, and as you walk by a house later in the day you may hear music emanating from an open window" (Hemp 2006, p. 1). Birdsong and emanating music? Hemp's poetic prose is put to good use describing the embodied experience of being in *Second Life,* a virtual world where, as he aptly puts it, "You're not you."

As Hemp's article, and a raft of cover stories in top business magazines like *BusinessWeek* attest, the growing popularity of virtual worlds has attracted tremendous media and marketing attention from industry, marketers, and marketing and consumer researchers lately. Hemp (2006) adroitly recognized that consumption and marketing turned, in the virtual world experience, to a large extent on how marketers would now relate to the consumers' avatar, or avatars.

The emphasis on the avatar, and the re-embodiment of the consumer into new and perhaps multiple online "bodies," is enough to make many marketers' and marketing researchers' heads spin. "Consumption" and even "marketing" changes in these contexts because of the re-embodied (rather than disembodied) nature of the virtual world experience.

Addressing the need for new and rigorous research methodologies suitable for virtual worlds, this chapter briefly overviews the cornerstones of the netnographic method before extending and developing them into this pervasive and important new context. Although netnography has many elements and facets (see, e.g., Kozinets 2002, 2006, 2007), this chapter will focus on and extend one element identified in Kozinets (2006). In that methodological chapter, Kozinets examined variations in the application of netnographic technique and speculated about the notion of "auto-netnographies," where individuals use in-depth field noting and observations to "reflect on their own online experiences and then use these field notes and observations to provide insights into online consumer practices and meanings" (p. 133).

We extend this line of speculation by further advocating for and developing auto-netnography as a technique ideally suited to some of the contingencies of netnography conducted within virtual worlds. By adopting an auto-netnographic approach, we present various sites of avatars' identity work in a virtual world. The presentation follows a trajectory of our virtual social enculturation, from creating a vivid existence and embodying ourselves in avatars, to fully participating in a social life of a virtual world.

Our chapter proceeds by first providing an overview and examination of some of the most important elements of cultural research in virtual worlds. It then introduces and explains auto-ethnography, outlining some of the strengths and limitations of the method, and then adapting these elements to the conduct of netnography. Along the way, the chapter explores some of the issues specific to virtual worlds. These issues include such unprecedented elements as the exploration of and situation within an entirely new sense of world, the researcher's embodiment (i.e., recreating a body and establishing a sense of social presence), and the researcher and residents' more general plural existence (i.e., possibility of being represented by more than one avatar). We provide a number of examples drawn from our own research and that of others. The result is an outline of auto-netnography for avatar-driven inquiries in three-dimensional virtual environments. In the chapter's conclusion, we describe and briefly demonstrate some of the burgeoning opportunities for auto-netnographic research in online virtual worlds.

VIRTUAL WORLDS AND CULTURAL INQUIRY

Virtual worlds, the topic of this volume, are persistent, three-dimensional, networked computer represented spaces consisting of digital code and represented to people through a human-computer interface, most usually a keyboard for human input and a screen for computer output. In virtual worlds, people appear to have different bodies and to experience their lives through animated representations called avatars. The worlds are persistent, meaning that, unlike standalone or console-driven video games, the worlds continue on even after the player has exited them. In virtual worlds such as *Second Life, Entropia Universe, The World of Warcraft, Lineage, The Sims Online,* or *Star Wars Galaxies,* human-controlled avatars engage in a variety of social practices, some dictated by game-like rules, others purely explorational and relational. Oftentimes, avatars communicate in a chat-like manner, using voice or text-based instant messengers for private discussions. Aesthetically, virtual worlds can "feel" like an animated computer game. Indeed, all virtual worlds developed from "massively multiplayer online role-playing games" (abbreviated at MMORPG and pronounced "more pig"). However, some of the more heralded recent virtual worlds like *Second Life* and *Entropia Universe* differ from games because they lack rules, character maintenance requirements, and explicit goals.

We identify three key characteristics of virtual worlds, and relate these to the conduct of cultural research. The first unique characteristic of virtual worlds is the notion of *re-worlding* and the related idea of *plastic worldrules.* This element is ontological in a new sense. Whereas ontology refers more generally to the nature of reality, previously considered mainly from a philosophical point of view, this element refers to the experiential dimensions of virtual worlds in which (1) an apparently new world is experienced—which we term re-worlding, and (2) that this world has malleable rules—which we term plastic worldrules. So, as an example of the latter, people can fly in many virtual worlds, or experience places where gravity is radically altered.

The second key characteristic to consider is the notion of re-embodiment, in which the consumer or researcher (or consumer researcher) is both required and able to choose a new bodily form to represent him or herself in the virtual world. This element has been much considered and written about in popular and even many academic accounts of virtual world experiences (e.g., Taylor 2002; Cooper, Dibbell, and Spaight 2007). However, we consider that this crucial facet has been mentioned frequently but not accommodated or even acknowledged methodologically.

The third characteristic, related to the prior one but also quite distinct from it, is the notion of multiperspectivality, or multiple perspectives. In this contingency, consumers have the option of occupying not only one new world, but many. A consumer can, for instance, occupy virtual worlds in many of the same games simultaneously, having different avatars operating in open windows on *Second Life, Project Entropia,* and the *Habbo Hotel.* The consumer also has the option of occupying more than one body at a time, duplicating bodies, or programming autonomous bodies to acts as its virtual agents. Each of these elements lends a literally multiphrenic nature to the usually individualized point of view, a tangible sense of the multiple personalities explored by many postmodern writers, from Gergen (1991) to Firat and Venkatesh (1995).

Each of these three elements—re-worlding, re-embodiment, and multiperspectivality—entails perspective changes as well as alterations in learning. In many cases, these changes are personal transformations of the relationships between the individual and their own perceptions of reality, of body, of self, of world. They familiarize the consumer with elements of the new virtual world (such as its rules, representations, and persona) and defamiliarize elements of physical reality (partly by making explicit its previously naturalized rules and representations). Because of this, at least some of the important effects of virtual worlding (as a verb) take place on an interior dimension of perspectival change and experience. Thus we suggest here that these particular elements may not be as tractable to researchers employing traditional methods of data gathering.

Let us very briefly consider three different methods for gaining insight into virtual worlds—surveys, experiments, and observational techniques—and consider how they would handle these unique contingencies. First, consider the

survey. Although survey-bots are one answer to researching in virtual worlds, the notions of re-worlding and re-embodiment lead us to wonder about certain areas of this research enterprise. Do the rules about questionnaire answering in the "real world" of everyday life also translate to these new virtual world contexts, where motivations for answering might be different, and the idea of answering "in character" or out of character might become relevant? Indeed, the very notion of multiperpectivality draws us to wonder who or what exactly we may be surveying.

Experimental testing labs that bring in avatars as subjects and expose them to particular stimuli might conceivably tell us some interesting things about in-world consumption patterns and responses. However, we would need to ensure that the rules of the experiment were aligned with the rules of the virtual world. We would also need to ensure that the identity fluxes of multiperspectivality were attuned to the particular subjects we were hoping to test (i.e., that gender, age, and even human/bot differences were somehow either irrelevant or built into the test itself).

Observational recordings of avatar behavior are possible; in fact, they are practically built into the nature of these environments. Data recording and storage all but guarantee that the owners of virtual worlds are awash in data that portray avatar activity at aggregate levels. Massive modeling of this data can be extremely interesting, producing a cloud of avatar activity that can be mined for insights into traffic motion, popular locations, and popular activities in the same way that satellite telemetry and best-seller lists can. But like surveys and experiments, this aggregate level of analysis must of necessity leave open critical questions of meaning that matter on the level of language, culture, and basic human understanding. In fact, these key areas, where self and community interact with various types of material and nonmaterial "consumption," are largely impervious to the modes of study in our usual methodological toolkit. They need some other approach.

This intriguing naturalistic blind spot has been noted and explored more generally by many in the field of consumer research (e.g., Belk 1987; McCracken 1997; Sherry 1991; Sunderland and Denny 2007). The simple truth is that, even after over quarter of a century of lamentation, we still actually know very little about the best way to approach and talk to consumers while they are busy living their lives. This is true whether we are talking about consumers shopping in malls, cooking in their kitchens, or relating to one another in online environments. We have only recently begun to consider how online lives link to the actual real world or "RL" (Real Life) of consumers. We have but scratched the surface of considering how to test our given knowledge about communities, cultures, and selves among the e-tribes of virtual worlds, or to consider what lessons these explorations might hold for our greater understanding of all naturalistically situated consumption. In the next section, we begin to explore the relationship between an online offshoot of the naturalistic, anthropological approach of ethnographic research and our central topic of research in virtual worlds.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO NETNOGRAPHY TO AUTO-NETNOGRAPHY

There is little doubt that a role for almost every marketing and consumer research method exists to be played out in cyberspace generally and in virtual worlds more specifically. These roles would be driven by various research questions. A question about what percentage of avatars are female in appearance could be handled by observational or survey research. Questions about the opinions expressed by avatars could be settled by in-world questionnaires and surveys. Virtual world context studies of identity, community, culture, and consumption will require adaptations of anthropological methods. Anthropological methods have a history in marketing and consumer research that stretches back over half a century, to Sidney Levy's pioneering work (Levy 1959). Based on the notion of participant-observation of in situ consumption, marketing anthropologists have been conducting fieldwork in people's homes, retail stores, and other natural settings in order to grain insights into the actual everyday meanings, rituals, and acts of consumers (Sunderland and Denny 2007). In recent times, these anthropological techniques have been found useful in understanding consumers' online experiences and the ways that these occurrences play a part in their lives. In particular, netnography (see Kozinets 1998, 2002)—the rigorous and systematic adaptation of an anthropological approach specifically altered to the contingencies of online behavior and interaction—has an especially important role to play in this quest for understanding.

In this chapter we begin the development of an adaptation of netnography especially suited to the identity work in virtual worlds that involves the avatar experience. Our argument for this adaptation is that one of the three characteristics of the virtual world parallels the cultural difference and alterity already experienced by ethnographers. Just as ethnographers must adapt to a new cultural world and set of rules, so must a consumer of a virtual world adapt to an entirely new sense of a world and its rules. Re-embodiment is quite different from anything experienced by traditional anthropologists, although it is perhaps akin to learning about new garb, adornment, and modes of presentation of the self. The idea of having multiple perspectives and multiple bodies also seems quite unique. Each of these elements, however, requires a particular kind of learning in order to feel natural to the consumer. And because virtual worlds tend to be social worlds where people use the computer interface to interact with other living, breathing human beings (distanced in space, sometimes even in time), and not to interact with a computer system (as opposed to, say, a traditional free-standing videogame), there is an enculturation that occurs, a social learning and cultural induction into a particular community whose immersive nature is extremely familiar to the anthropologists and sociologists who deploy ethnography. This is because the experience and much of the appeal of virtual worlds lies in the way that they transform the relationship between individuals and their own perceptions of reality, of their own bodies, of the aspects of their identities, of the world itself. We

believe that these elements of virtual worlds are generative and worthwhile areas of investigation for scholars. Further, we hold that these elements are cloistered into areas of personal experience that can be very difficult if not impossible for other methodologies to reveal. It is for this reason—the intensely personal nature of the avatar experience—that we suggest considering and exploring the potential for an online application of auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography, at its core, is an element of all rigorous ethnography. To put it simply, it is the deliberate study and representation of cultural knowledge by one or more members of the culture under examination. Auto-ethnography has existed since modern anthropology emerged and has gained increasing attention over the last twenty years (Buzard 2003). David Hayano's (1979) work brought the term to the fore in contemporary anthropology, and he has used it in a manner than emphasizes the autobiographical, personal, reflective aspects of ethnographic writing. As Wall (2006) notes, auto-ethnography is grounded in anthropology's "crisis of representation" response to postmodern perspectives, and is linked to the growing debate about reflexivity and voice in social research. The intent of auto-ethnography is, therefore, to directly acknowledge the unbreakable link between the personal and the cultural—and even exploit it for the sake of research. Within this reflexive and deliberate acknowledgment is considerable room for experimentation, introspection, and nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression (for examples in our field, see Brown 2006; Gould 1991; Hirschman 1991; Holbrook 2005). Auto-ethnography since Hayano has therefore entailed a personalized writing style linked to autobiography where a reflexive drawing upon the author's direct experience is carefully utilized to extend wider understanding about a societal phenomenon.

We now develop ethnography into the practice of netnography in order to produce auto-netnography. Auto-netnography is an approach to netnography that highlights the role of the netnographer's own own online experiences. It captures and documents these experiences through the careful personal observation of online participation, autobiographical attention to the interrelation of various experienced "worlds"—both online and off/real—reflexive field noting, self- and first-person image and other data captures, and first-person narratives that make their way into the final representation carried in the netnographic text. The purpose of auto-netnography is to provide added personal participation to the study of online cultural and communal phenomena in order to comprehend their nuances from a necessarily and suitably engaged position, and to faithfully represent this engagement in order to provide enhanced understanding of the cultural nature of online experience.

Auto-netnography can certainly exist necessarily as a freestanding technique in which the author writes about his/her cultural experiences in online communities, paying particular attention to the interior impacts of the experience. However, we would recommend that it be incorporated as one important element of the ethnographic voice, as part of an overall multimodal netnographic (or even