

# Shifting Boundaries, Second Lives and Virtual Selves

The world of virtual relationships

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# What am I doing here.....?

- ▶ Virtual encounters ,realities and relationships are becoming increasingly common in our IT driven world
- ▶ Many of us in room are ‘technological immigrants’ and Increasingly our clients will be ‘technological natives.’
- ▶ ‘Any consumer facing business absolutely must be experimenting with VW’s if it wants to get the attention of the under-30’s ie ‘the video game generation’ (Mc Kinsey Consulting Report : Times online April 2008)
- ▶ As therapists (and employees?) we need to work out our relationship to these worlds and their implications for our thinking and practice – at both individual and collective levels

# Theoretical considerations

- ▶ Are more traditional concepts regarding identity and attachment now outdated?
- ▶ A desire to revisit theories and assumptions in relation to the emerging generation
- ▶ Shifting norms of what constitutes psychological health
- ▶ Differing generational norms about the 'self' the 'family' and relatedness
- ▶ How do we work effectively across this new cross-cultural divide

# Where are we going today...?

- ▶ Overview of types of IT relationship forums
- ▶ The impact of new technologies and the internet
- ▶ How do we begin to think about and understand virtual relationships?
- ▶ Identity formation and the next generation
- ▶ Second Life ; the new kid on the block

# Overview of technological relationship types

- ▶ **E-mail** : ubiquitous, familiar
- ▶ **On-line chat** : with/without webcam , can be text or speech based (includes SKYPE, MSN etc)
- ▶ **Social networking sites** eg Facebook, Bebo, MySpace
- ▶ **Interactive on-line games** using Xbox live, PS3 eg Halo, usually task focussed and mission/goal based
- ▶ **Virtual worlds** and communities eg Second Life – less overt aims, more experientially and relationally biased

# What is Second Life?

- ▶ A free downloadable internet – based VW launched in 2003 by a company called Linden Labs
- ▶ Players (residents) interact with and through ‘avatars’
- ▶ One can socialise, meet other residents, build things , buy , sell , offer services and create

# A Wot-avar....?

- ▶ A virtual representation of yourself
- ▶ Accurate or representative
- ▶ Male/female/neither
- ▶ Can incorporate animalistic/mythological elements eg horns, wings, special powers
- ▶ Limited surnames / tribes

# Who's there?

- ▶ March 2008, 13 million registered accounts
- ▶ In Jan 2008 residents spent 28,274,505 hours there
- ▶ The following HE institutions have their own virtual campuses:

## Anglia

Ruskin, Bedfordshire, Bournemouth, Coventry, Derby, Edinburgh, Heriot-Wat, Herts, Huddersfield, Lancaster, Leeds Met, Leeds College, Leicester, Liverpool Hope, Open, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Sussex, Warwick, Ulster

# Getting around

- ▶ Walking (in either first or third person)
- ▶ Flying
- ▶ Teleporting
- ▶ Vehicles – free and to buy

# Money

- ▶ SL has its own economy and currency (L\$)
- ▶ Recognised on world market with own exchange rate
- ▶ *Anything* can be bought and sold in SL
- ▶ Some products and services have RL cross-over
- ▶ Under scrutiny regarding taxation

# Art, Music, Culture

- ▶ Over 2050 museums, numerous galleries – many interactive eg Starry Night
- ▶ Allows exploration and creation of art forms that might not be possible in RL due to financial or technical constraints
- ▶ Many live music events and venues across all genres – RL concerts can be streamed into SL
- ▶ The Shakespeare Co. are performing Hamlet (end2008) ; Shakespeares Globe Theatre have permanent presence
- ▶ Numerous poetry/performance sites and venues

# Religion and politics

- ▶ Fair amount of new - age spirituality
- ▶ Virtual worship venues and forums
- ▶ Debate around authority and authenticity
- ▶ Buddhist groups are well represented
- ▶ UH Chaplain has a virtual key Centre and about to start conducting virtual groups and discussions

# Business

Many top businesses are represented:

- ▶ Sony, several car manufacturers, IBM etc
- ▶ Haulage companies using SL to teach driving skills
- ▶ Recent conflict training by US and British military
- ▶ Crisis simulation training
- ▶ Hilton Hotel chain training their receptionists

# Relationships and sex

- ▶ There is a lot out there!
- ▶ Possible to marry, but not reproduce/die
- ▶ Ethical and moral considerations and debate eg what constitutes infidelity
- ▶ Offers enormous potential to explore issues of sexuality and gender
- ▶ Opportunity to explore relational styles
- ▶ Approx ratio of RL male : female 4:1  
“ SL male : female 3:1

# Therapeutic uses

- ▶ Spanish GP's have started piloting SL for sexual health consultations
- ▶ The Samaritans
- ▶ Numerous Cancer Support groups
- ▶ Several Anxiety/Depression support groups
- ▶ Alcoholics Anonymous
- ▶ Numerous counselling and life coaching individuals and organisations
- ▶ Autism/Aspergers Support Groups increasing presence
- ▶ For disabled/housebound individuals

# Thinking about virtual worlds

3 prevailing mindsets (Turkle 1995 quoting New York Times):

- ▶ **1. Utilitarian** – practical, functional , opportunistic/capitalist  
(favoured by techies and possibly HE ‘corporations’)
- ▶ **2. Utopian** – VW’s as one big Coke advert, VW as ‘better.’  
Optimistic/nostalgic view – new worlds, communities, a breking down of traditional barriers for a new egalitarian future.(favoured by some cultural commentators)
- ▶ **3. Apocalyptic** – VW’s will lead to increasing social and personal fragmentation, reduced sociability and freedom (prevailing view amongst therapeutic community?)

# Shifting cultural contexts for norms of psychological health?

**20<sup>th</sup> Century model identified with:**

- ▶ Stability
- ▶ predictability, same familiar job/profession
- ▶ small no. of family/social relationships with tightly proscribed gender roles
- ▶ good likelihood of remaining in same town/region over lifetime

**21<sup>st</sup> Century model/context identified with:**

- ▶ the capacity to change and adapt
- ▶ flexibility, numerous 'types' of connections and relationships facilitated by cheap air travel/internet
- ▶ greater cultural diversity and exposure to difference
- ▶ increasing acceptance of fluid gender roles and behaviours

# Concepts of 'the self'

- ▶ The **unitary self** – arrived out of 20<sup>th</sup> C. context (familiar current model )
- ▶ The **fragmented self** – linked to the above
- ▶ The **'protean' self** (Robert Jay Lifton 1998) – 'one that is capable of multiple transformations, but that which retains an inner coherence and moral outlook'

# The emerging self

‘The rise of the internet has accelerated the move towards models of psychological health that admit multiplicity and flexibility and acknowledge the constructed nature of the self ,reality and other. We are moving to a greater sense of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralised, flexible and multiplicitous. We are increasingly a mixture of selves and identities.’

Turkle (1995)

# Psychological uses of VW's

- ▶ Research (Turkle 1980/90's) indicates that users feel VW's enhance rather than detract from their RL's
- ▶ Immersion often occurs at times of change and development – (self medication, catharsis, identity/role 'play' , stress management, belonging)
- ▶ As 'moratoria' ie means of clarifying and refining the RL personae ie who/how you are, wish to be/not be in a relatively consequence free environment
- ▶ As 'potential spaces' for serious 'play'

# VW's as psychosocial moratoria

**Erik Erikson** (Childhood and Society 1963)

Successfully negotiating the developmental tasks of adolescence involve a 'moratorium' ie

'a laying aside of certain preoccupations in favour of others, a time of great intensity of involvement with people ,ideas or things. Can involve passion, obsession, addiction, and experimentation with all sorts of new ideas, people and behaviours . There is a tacit understanding that at this time of life there is a freedom for trying things out, seeing what works (and what doesn't) at both the personal and social level with reduced consequences as compared to any other time of life.'

(That *used* to be student life! !)

# VW's as 'potential' space

Winnicott (1971) :

‘a third area of human living that is neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality, a space of creative playing and cultural experience’

- ▶ Potential space is that in which an individual learns to differentiate between internal and external realities , develop capacity for empathy and concern and moral engagements.

# Psychological potentials and pitfalls of VW's

VW's have potential (like therapy ) for both:

**Acting Out** ie repeating and re-enacting old conflicts and behaviours with little room for change or insight

**Working Through** – a moratorium around actions in order to think about them with a view to change

Which way things go depends upon :

- a) A certain amount of ego strength
- b) Some degree of self curiosity/psychological mindedness

If not ( as in being able to navigate through life's transitions, opportunities vagaries and events) psychological difficulties are more likely to emerge or be encountered when engaging with virtual realities

# Possible uses of SL for counsellors

- ▶ Publicity – what we do and how and where we do it
- ▶ Access to materials that can be downloaded / accessed directly or through a web link
- ▶ Workshop provision with avatar attendance and facilitation
- ▶ Direct therapeutic consultations/groupwork ie cybertherapy
- ▶ Greater sector collaboration through issue based support and discussion groups at both national and international level

# Ethical and practice considerations

- ▶ Who am I in this space????
- ▶ What are the ethical considerations
- ▶ Who might I be regulated by and how could one tell?
- ▶ Confidentiality?
- ▶ Would one just replicate the AL therapy space and time?
- ▶ How might we interact/interpret according to the our own theoretical modalities?

# Brave new world(s).....!

Virtuality need not be a prison, it can be a Buddhist raft, a Wittgensteinian ladder, the psychoanalytic transitional space, the moratorium that are discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to see it as an alternative life either. We can use it as a space for growth. Having literally written our online presence into existence, we are in a position to become more aware of that which we project onto everyday life. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the virtual voyager can return to their world better equipped to understand (themselves and?) it's artifices.

Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (Sherry Turkle 1995)

# References

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- ▶ Erikson, E. (1963) *Childhood and Society*. *Norton*
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- ▶ Holmes, David (ed.) (1997) *Virtual Politics: identity and community in cyberspace*. *Sage*
- ▶ Turkle, S. (1995) *Identity in the Age of the Internet*. *Wiley*
- ▶ Turkle , S (1984) *The Second Self : Computers and the Human Spirit*
- ▶ Winnicott,D (1971) *Playing and Reality* *Tavistock*

# To visit Second Life

- ▶ Your PC will need a reasonable graphics card and Windows 2000/XP/Vista
- ▶ Go to <http://secondlife.com.community/downloads.php>
- ▶ You will be asked to register, and give your avatar a fictional name. You will be given a prototype avatar to choose from and that you can then 'customise.'
- ▶ There are several guides to Second Life on the market, but I would suggest not spending too long on orientation, and just stepping in and seeing what happens....!

*Bon voyage!!*

# Top Ten places to go while you're there...

1. **Socrates Café** – for conversation and debate
2. **Svarga** – a fully functioning eco-system
3. **Ancient Rome** – ride in Cleopatra's barge, be carried by litter, visit Caligula's Palace
4. **Mexico** – Fly over Aztec temples on a butterfly
5. **China** – shop til you drop for anything and everything
6. **Starry Night** – 'drop in' to this interactive Van Gogh Gallery where you can both view and enter paintings
7. **Oahu, Hawaii** – try the surfing simulator
8. **Eiffel Tower** – parachute off and take a stroll around Paris
9. **A virtual beach** – for a romantic date with your SL partner
10. **Virtual Hallucinations** – a site that mimics the experience of psychosis