

**Consumers in virtual worlds:
identity building and consuming experience in Second Life**

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INTRODUCTION

By 2018 there could be up to one billion individuals using virtual worlds (Renaud and Kane, 2008). In 2009 there are already more than 90 million avatars in Habbo Hotel, 20 million in Cyworld and 13 million in Second Life: multinationals such as Adidas, BMW and Vodafone are already developing commercial activities inside them.

These virtual worlds are ongoing 3D-simulated environments where the user moves and interacts with both the world and other users using an avatar which represents the individual in the virtual world. Residents of these worlds develop a variety of social relationships and participate in communities. They create their avatar and environment and collaborate in leisure and/or business activities, thus forming a community of new consumers. The relationship between enterprise and customer in a virtual world challenges consumer identification in terms of consumer target/profile, since this relationship is established via an avatar, the resident's virtual identity. This identity may be far removed from their identity in the physical world, and the virtual world therefore becomes a place where the individual experiments with new identities (Turkle, 1996). In addition, communities established in virtual environments are also places where individuals build and position their individual identities in relation to a wider collective identity (Schau and Muniz, 2002) and experiment with their identity through contact with the community (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan and McCabe, 2005).

When moving in the virtual world, the individual has to build an identity using specially provided tools. The aim of this article is to examine this transition and its result in terms of identity positioning in order to better understand the impact of these new environments on identity building.

Having explained the theoretical context, based on the literature dealing with identity and identity building, we will present the methodology of our qualitative study, the survey area and data collected. We will then present and discuss the results, before concluding with the contributions and limitations of the results of this research.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

From Socrates' "know thyself" to more modern thinking on the plurality of identity, identity is a part of those tenuous and sometimes controversial notions which are wide spread in different subject areas with varying points of view. It is therefore important to take stock of the theory on the

dominant approaches to the notion, presented in the first part of our literature review, essentially focusing on the areas of anthropology, psychology and sociology. The second part is dedicated to identity building in marketing and the last part describes the use of virtual worlds as a tool for identity building.

Identity and identity building

Identity is a polysemous term, widely used in both ordinary and specialised discussions, and its use is as convenient as its meaning is elusive, as Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out in one of his seminars on the notion of identity (Lévi-Strauss, 1979, p. 332): "Identity is a kind of virtual home which we must refer back to in order to explain a certain number of things, but which has never existed in reality."

We will begin with this paradoxical statement: a person can feel similar (the feeling of belonging to a group) and different (the desire to be noticed) at the same time. Identity thus seems to be the result of a combination of personal and social characteristics which form a specific configuration for each individual. This idea leads to a distinction between social identity and individual identity: all individuals are characterised both by traits which show they belong to one or several social groups (social identity) and by more personal idiosyncratic attributes which establish their difference (personal identity) (James, 1950; Mead, 1963). There are strong links between individual identity and social identity in that they become permanent through interaction. Indeed, some models attempt to describe the nature of this link. Some consider that social identity and individual identity evolve dependently (e.g. Tajfel and Turner, 1986), others that they are actually independent from one another (Deschamps, 1979). Questioning the link between individual and social identity leads naturally to a discussion on identity building. If common sense undoubtedly leads us to accept the notion (identity as a combination of stable characteristics), current theorists suggest that the identity process is dynamic rather than stable and permanent: the notion of identity building.

In fact, identity initially appears to be an internal psychological mechanism leading to a more or less stable form (Erikson, 1966, 1972). Mead is the first to define it as a process (Mead 1963). He describes the socialisation of a child as a process of self-building based on relationships with others. Goffman (1975) explains this dynamic and open process by introducing the notion of role. He uses the metaphor of a stage play to illustrate that, in social situations, individuals are representations of themselves, playing roles with socially defined attributes and behaviours. Whilst interacting, individuals identify these roles and the way others play them. Stryker (1980) attributes an even more dynamic character to the roles by exploring the idea that each individual can take on a

socially determined role identity. The individual is thus faced with permanent choices in placing himself or herself in different roles, each of these role identities having different meanings for him or her and for others. This mechanism is seen as a process of closure in which the individual himself or herself builds contexts based on the psychological comfort they provide, comfort which is linked to recognition of his or her identity choices by others, which will limit his or her freedom to choose which roles can be adopted.

However, this first mechanism may be viewed in a wider context extending beyond the individual level. For Kaufmann (2004), identity production is embedded in a historical process by which the individual is led to detach themselves progressively from the rigid social contexts of holistic societies and adopt a mode of regulation based on identity building. Indeed, if in the past all individuals had a designated place in the social world (social community) characterised by structural stability and with a determined identity, today it is up to the individual, considered to be an independent subject in terms of his or her status in the community, to build their own identity. In "hypermodern" societies indicators of identity are plural, heterogeneous and mobile, "the hypermodern individual is multi-belonging" (Gaulejac, 2008, pg. 179). He or she occupies different statuses and develops plural identities using roles appropriate to the context. The individual is therefore forced to develop ways to adapt to new environments and confronted with rapid changes, the multi-contact phenomenon and the growing complexity of society.

This historical process has led to the emergence of multiple roles played by each individual and opportunities to implement them (Kaufmann, 2004). The individual activates a mechanism for identity opening using possible selves. « *Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves that we could become and are afraid of becoming* » (Markus and Nurius, 1986, pg. 954). They "represent a kind of selection of virtual identities which are manifestly achievable in a given situation" (Kaufmann, 2004, pg. 77).

It appears therefore that identity is built or rebuilt using a dual psychological process: (1) a process of emotional closure, a result of others' reactions to mobilised role identities, leading to available role identities being fixed; (2) a process of imaginative opening up, creation of possible selves, fed by the individual's experiences and imagination, leading to the creation of new role identities when interacting with others.

It is therefore in the light of these different identity-building dimensions that it is now useful to question the modalities of this building in virtual worlds during consumption experiences: what in fact does the use of avatars in these virtual worlds reveal about the consumer-subject and his or her identity positioning?

Identity building and the consumption experience

In marketing, research into consumer behaviour has shown strong evidence of the role of consumption in identity building by consumers (Arnould and Wilk, 1984). Material possessions appear as an extension of the self and displaying them affirms their owner's identity (Belk, 1988, 1989). This phenomenon is in keeping with a recent change in the act of consumption which has seen the hedonistic and emotional component overtake the utilitarian and rational component. We are seeing a move away from satisfaction of basic needs-based modern consumption, to experience-based postmodern consumption (Carù and Cova, 2008). The consumption experience is thus defined as a « *A primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of subjective meanings, hedonic responses and aesthetic criteria* » (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, pg. 132). It appears therefore as a real-life, emotionally-charged experience, based on interaction with stimuli represented by products or services (Cova, 2003). The consumer becomes the main producer of his or her consumption experience (Filser, 2002). This experience leads to an investigation of feelings, and style and product pools from which the consumer is able to draw in order to "produce" his or her perceived self. Consumption becomes a way of finding meaning in life and creating one's own identity (Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesch, 1995) at a time when the "great narratives" (religion, mythology) have gradually ceased to be sources of identity building. The postmodern individual thus builds his or her identity according to their life journey, which they create for themselves and others. Ladwein (2005) emphasises the importance of self-creation in identity building during atypical consumption experiences (e.g. trekking), which Ricœur (1990) calls narrative identity. The "incarnation" of a new self brought to life by an avatar in a virtual world is an example of this narrative identity.

This relationship between consumption and identity is particularly emphasised in the context of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). This theory deals with the « *sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption* » (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, pg. 868) and focuses its research on consumption as a resource mobilised by the consumer in their quest for identity. For example, designer labels (Heilbrunn, 2003) or teenagers' obsession with fashion (Marion, 2003) are implicated in consumers' identity strategies. The act of consumption is no longer a simple search for utility or pleasure but the consumer's desire to experience an alter ego in order to build their identity.

Therefore, through his or her consumption experiences, the modern individual builds their own identity and attempts to assure its coherence. Virtual universes offer both types of access process to the experience of an alter ego: total or partial identification with an avatar and immersion into a new universe. The introspective setting permitted by this virtual experience is one way for the individual to position themselves and to ponder over and build their identity.

Identity building and virtual worlds

Changing identity in virtual worlds has been studied ever since they first appeared. In her first book, *The second self*, Turkle (1986) studies the relationships established by players with the machine, notably the way the game leads both to the implementation of complex strategies to win on one hand, and the surpassing of the self with the establishment of a true "second self" on the other. According to Turkle, the creation of characters in a MUD¹, an acronym used at the time for a multi-player online game, allows the expression of multiple aspects of the self. Indeed, the anonymity of MUDs gives players an opportunity to express unexplored aspects of themselves, to experiment with their identity and try out new identities (Turkle, 1996). MUDs thus become a laboratory for identity building where individuals experiment with identities different from those of the physical world (Turkle, 1995). Even if players identify with their character, they do not hesitate to create others, at times very different from their lives in the physical world. Players particularly experiment with changes in sex, romantic relationships, violent behaviour, in short a whole range of encounters which may be difficult or even impossible to experience in real life for physiological, psychological or social reasons. More recent studies on identity in MMORPGs² confirm this experimentation with identities. Players quite often change gender (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008); they generally create characters which are closer to their ideal selves than their real selves (Bessière, Seay and Kiesler, 2007). The gap between the players' real world and virtual world identities is even greater if they have low self esteem and suffer from depression.

Research into virtual worlds shows therefore that residents can play identity roles far removed from those of the physical world. Since they are artificial and separate from the physical world, these environments are likely to favour the external identity process and thus to lead to the building of new identities.

At the conclusion of this literature review, we should remember that identity is a dual process: an internal identity reinforcement process and an external identity process stemming from interaction with others which, at a given moment, is manifested in the choice of role identity. The process of identity building is especially visible in situations of environmental transition, when the individual has to opt to keep or change their role when interacting with someone they perceive as fundamentally different.

When moving in the virtual world, the individual must build an identity by partially or totally transferring (or not transferring) their real identity to their virtual identity. He or she must

1 Multi User Dungeons

2 MMORPG : Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game

"position" themselves. This introspective engagement of the individual contributes to their identity building. The aim of this article is to examine this transition and its result in terms of identity positioning to gain a better understanding of the impact of virtual worlds on consumers' identities.

METHODOLOGY

Field: the virtual world of Second Life

Second Life is one of the first virtual 3D worlds accessible to internet users all over the world. It was launched in 2003 when Linden Lab offered free access to their client program. The company then focused its economic model by charging for the occupation of virtual land, transactions on currency exchange and subscriptions to additional services. At the start of November 2007, Linden Lab announced 10 million accounts with an average of 40,000 simultaneous connections. Second Life was designed in part by its residents, in terms of content and activities. Unlike massive multiplayer games, there is no designated objective (e.g. killing a monster or reaching the next level) and residents are free to act more or less as they wish. They do and become whatever they wish in terms of the plans and relationships they create in this world. They engage with the virtual world and interact with other residents through their avatars. In Second Life, avatars are created with a name, a 3D representation of the resident and a profile which provides physical world information on the individual and the virtual groups to which he or she belongs. Users have access to more than 100 basic parameters to create their physical avatar. There are virtual stores where they can obtain ready to use clothes, hair and physical characteristics.

In addition, Second Life offers a vast space for simulation in which residents can develop complex simulations resembling the physical world. This virtual world also offers a large space for creation with creation tools available and preformatted content initially absent. All content (islands, virtual objects, activities) is created by the residents whether they have individual or organisational status. The richness of the creations, the availability of exchange tools and the management of property rights favour the development of a vast space for social and commercial exchange. Leading brands such as Adidas, IBM, BNP or Dior are therefore present in this world. Some residents are active; creators of content and social relationships, developing creative, business and role-playing activities. Others are more passive; consumers of content and social relationships, developing consumption experiences centred on shopping, leisure activities and meeting people.

Data collection

This study is the result of a qualitative methodology based on a field survey carried out over four months in the virtual world of Second Life. We used the exploratory procedure inspired by well-grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as described in *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Our survey took place in the virtual world itself, in Second Life chat mode (or instant messaging). Indeed, proposing instant physical world encounters to residents would only have attracted individuals who make little distinction between the two worlds. Nonetheless, adapting qualitative research to a virtual environment is not straightforward. The absence of paraverbal dimensions (intonation and accentuation) and nonverbal dimensions (gestures, facial expressions, distance between speakers) can work against the researcher during the interview in terms of message interpretation. He or she has only the basis of the conversation's rhythm, emoticons, style changes and text content on which to carry out the interview (Markham, 2005). In addition, the absence of a physical body can create feelings of mistrust towards the researcher, and even push the resident to behave deceitfully by making up a character.

Our interview guide stemmed from an analysis of specialised Second Life blogs³. These blogs are generally written by Second Life aficionados or new information technology specialists. This blog review allowed us to characterise the relationship between resident and avatar and to confirm the themes on this subject emerging from our literature review. The following themes were used: the resident's management of his or her avatar, the difference between the physical representation of the avatar and its owner, the avatar's speed of development, the distinction between virtual and physical worlds, the effects of actions in the virtual and physical worlds and their starting life stories in Second Life. In order to minimise the influence of role-play and declaratives, which are probably stronger in a virtual world, we created two interview situations: one semi-directive and one non-directive.

Nineteen semi-directive interviews were carried out face to face in a closed environment (a 3D office with a couch in the virtual world) in conjunction with Repères, a marketing agency which carries out studies in Second Life. Interviewees were selected from a panel of residents paid in Linden Dollars, the currency in Second Life (L\$300 per interview, i.e. less than US\$1). In this interview situation, we tried to recreate the conditions of a physical world survey in which an authentic response is expected from remunerated participants as closely as possible.

Fifteen non-directive interviews were carried out on life history (Chase, 2005). These were biographical interviews, "a narrative description of a fragment of real experience" (Bertaux, 1997,

3 The following blogs : <http://www.slobserver.com>, <http://ma-deuxieme-vie.blogspot.com>, <http://www.slbusinessreview.com>, http://freshtakes.typepad.com/sl_communicators, <http://blog.secondlife.com>, <http://www.secondstyle.com>

pg. 9), carried out as conversations, in the individual's own familiar virtual environment, during actual encounters in Second Life. If necessary, the researcher redirected the interview to obtain information on the interview guide themes if they were not naturally touched on by the resident. In this interview situation, we tried to create a relaxed environment in order to solicit an authentic response from the individual.

The sample was composed of residents aged between 18 and 45 years, of different nationalities with a residence history ranging from 1 month to 3 years. It was structured progressively throughout the research to obtain a case diversity in relation to the emerging theory (see Appendix A1 - interviewed residents' profiles).

Data processing and analysis

Our analysis was based on the theoretical coding method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Point and Voynnet-Fourboul, 2006).

In order to simplify the task of analysing the data collected, which constituted a volume of more than 160 pages of double-column text, coding was carried out using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis program. This works on the same principle as Nvivo. It is different from the latter due to its ability to build and arrange categories according to network relationships which are less rigid than a simple hierarchical structure, as well as its capacity to create a graphical representation of relationships. The reliability of the coding was assured by a precise follow-up, using notes, of the researcher's questions and the code development. The researcher also recoded the interviews at one week intervals to verify the reliability and coherence of the coding.

From the first open coding, following a repetitive process and using the saturation principle, the following categories emerged from the analysis: distinction between virtual and physical worlds, differences in activity, differences in behaviour and differences in morphology. A review of the theory revealed that these categories correspond to Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate's (2000) frame of analysis on the transition of role identities and allowed a determination of the identity positioning types assumed by the residents. We therefore focused the follow-up to our analysis on these categories with a more precise definition of their dimensions and properties. The distinction is considered to be strong when there is no link between the virtual and physical worlds: some residents give no information as to their avatar in the physical world and vice versa; their friends in the physical and virtual worlds are completely different. It is considered weak when numerous links exist between the two worlds: residents maintain continuity between the two worlds, their Second Life profile gives details of their physical appearance and their social position. They meet residents in the physical world and vice versa.

The categorisation of identity positioning was verified by a second researcher who had not participated in the interviews and who, having read the interviews, placed each individual into an identity positioning type. The reliability of the identity positioning coding for each resident was evaluated by the degree of inter-coder agreement obtained using Cohen's (1960) *kappa* coefficient of agreement. In our case this coefficient is equal to 84%, which represents an excellent level of agreement (Landis and Koch, 1977).

RESULTS

In this section we will present the results leading to the identification of four identity positioning types, then their structuring around the respondents' identity process (open/closed) and finally their relationship with the world (creation/consumption). These results illustrate our objective in the form of a selection of verbatim accounts⁴ based on the corpus analysis.

Identity positioning in Second Life

During the first phase of analysis, the grouping of codes linked to the difference between the physical appearance of the individual and his or her avatar and the difference between the behaviours and activities involved in the two worlds allowed the characterisation of four identity positionings: duplication, improvement, transformation and metamorphosis.

Table 1

Duplication

This resident has an avatar which is physically close to his or her appearance in the physical world and, according to the resident, reflects his or her whole personality. They consider their avatar to be a true replica of themselves. The transfer is complete, the avatar is the individual, i.e. the closest behavioural and graphical copy of himself or herself. "In terms of personality, what have you discovered about yourself? What has changed about you, in your self-image? *That's difficult because I do the same here as I do in real life*" (ET). "Have you ever modified this appearance: *Yes lots of times. Why? Because I didn't want to appear as a newbie and I wanted to be similar to Real Life*" (SP). The resident duplicates him or herself to make the most of the possibilities offered by

⁴ Verbatim accounts are reproduced with spelling mistakes, expressions and abbreviations used by residents. Questions are printed in normal style and responses in italic.

the virtual world. The avatar is a means through which he or she can engage with a world to which he or she does not have direct access. His or her activities essentially involve business and creation. These users engage with the virtual world in the same way as they do with the physical world. The virtual world is a place in which to live life, just like the physical world. One is not better than the other, they offer different opportunities. There is thus no distinction between the two worlds. *"Actually lots of residents call me David here"* (ET) (David is his name in the physical world) *"And have you ever met anyone offline? I know about twenty players"* (ET). On the other hand, this respondent takes the same precautions in terms of relationships as in the physical world by establishing relationships progressively and requiring assurances of trust.

Improvement

This individual considers his or her avatar to be an extension of him or herself and only transfers part of themselves, generally the most positive aspects. He or she has an avatar physically different from their physical world appearance but with a personality that remains quite similar to their real personality. The avatar's behaviours will be in part the same as those of the individual in the physical world. *"Is she like you IRL? I have m... mmm she's more pretty and more sexy butta I think there's a resemblance"*(CXI). The resident uses the virtual world to be physically what he or she cannot or can no longer be in the physical world and to show the best of themselves. *"... in real life I am just a young 22 year-old man with a jeans-and-jacket look, but in the game I have several tattoos, cat's ears and a cat's tail... my avatar is actually my real me, the way I would like to be in real life"* (TB). The virtual world is a platform for the creation of a version of oneself which is difficult to achieve in the physical world. These users' activities are quite varied, and can cover business, creation, shopping, leisure and encounters with others. The virtual world is thus an extension of the physical world which allows the individual to experience new social relationships, new abilities, new ideas and new sources of income. These users are wary of the virtual world, but they do not necessarily create a barrier between the two worlds, they do however take greater precautions than those in the duplication positioning type.

Transformation

Transformation is more advanced than the previous positioning type and also involves personality. These individuals remove from the personality of the avatar anything they reject about their own personality or anything that is difficult to admit. A shy person is not shy in the virtual world. *"That means you are less shy? Yes exactly. SL it's a sort of world where you can express your fantasm? Yes that too but im not a roleplayer, I am me, but a bit less shy"* (CC). An impulsive

person will try to be more controlled. The virtual world allows users to push the boundaries of the behavioural and physical limits imposed by the real world. In this positioning type the virtual world is used as a platform for self-invention, self-rebuilding or deeper personality exploration. Avatars' activities are essentially leisure-based, ranging from simple conversations with other avatars to more intimate encounters. Nonetheless, the distinction between the virtual and physical worlds is still strong, the improvement obtained in the virtual world is difficult to transfer to the physical world.

Metamorphosis

This individual considers the avatar to be an alternative self. The behaviours of the avatar are the actions of an imaginary other. *"I didn't create my avatar as an extension of myself, but as an autonomous "thing", I really created it from different parts"* (LI). Therefore residents change their appearance so that it does not resemble them physically. In terms of personality, users play a composition role, a role which may be assumed when participating in a role play. In this case, the resident plays a character whose role is explained in their profile. This role may be positive (*"I am nice, good-looking and rich"*) or negative (*"I am dark and manipulative"*). In this positioning type there is a wide gap between the two worlds. *"Are there links between what you do in SL? Not at all. Do you want to meet them one day? No, that's a limit I place on my relationships in SL, taken from the experiences I have had in a community of players"* (LI). The virtual world is thus a platform for living a different life and escaping from the limitations of the physical world. The avatar is an intermediary for experimenting with other personalities and implementing creative and entrepreneurial activities which are difficult to realise in the physical world.

Components of Second Life experience

On a second occasion, the repetitive analysis process between the data and our theoretical context allowed us to demonstrate the components which make up the experiences encountered by residents in each identity positioning type. The various activities offered in Second Life (discovery of islands, meeting new people, creation, sex, shopping, education, politics...) underpin multiple social relationships which are made possible by the power of 3D simulation and tools for creation and exchange. Residents take advantage of these opportunities to organise their relationship with the virtual world (ease and freedom of engaging and consuming) and themselves (ease and freedom to be oneself or someone else).

Therefore the virtual world is based on two dynamic principles:

- (1) a process of identity building ranging from a process of identity closure (or reinforcement) to a process of identity opening-up;
- (2) a process of building a relationship with the world ranging from a process of world creation to a process of world consumption.

Identity reinforcement versus identity opening-up

The virtual world reduces the risk of self-exposure compared to the real world. The avatar is a mask between the individual and others. The absence of a physical body, the partial transfer of the self to the avatar, the mediation of relationships by the avatar all contribute to the reduction of the risk of exposure to others. In the transformation and metamorphosis types, the user is not totally him or herself "*I am me, but a bit less shy*" (BB). Interaction with others is in fact adjusted according to the identity chosen, the body is absent, the "real" person is in the background: "*You can learn a lot about people talking to them here, it's safe... without risking their lives*" (NR). Paradoxically, this risk limitation encourages individuals to be more daring and test their possible selves, not only in their imagination, but in the "field" of the virtual world. Identity exploration sometimes takes the form of experimentation with virtual sexual relations. The avatar thus becomes a means for developing the user's libido. Compared with the physical world, experimentation in the virtual world allows the possible complications of a romantic relationship to be minimised. For others, engaging with the virtual world is a kind of therapy for anxiety or even a means of exploring something unknown or impossible in real life because social pressure forbids it: "*But when I do things I'll never dare doing in my real life then it's a little of my bad side*" (NR). Indeed, the lowering of social barriers permits the realisation of plans which could have significant consequences for the self and the social image. For example, MC was able to realise the dream she had been held for some time "*I had always dreamed of being a singer*" (MC), without being able to achieve it in real life because of her shyness: "*I don't dare to sing in front of people, on SL it was a huge step and a real buzz. So SL is a way to overcome this shyness? Yes, seeing that people enjoy it, there's nothing more encouraging*" (MC).

By creating different avatars and playing different roles, the user experiments with virtual identities and allows him or herself the opportunity to test their viability in both individual and social contexts and these identities thus become possible selves.

Therefore, the identity experience in virtual worlds is a process of identity opening-up which contributes to enriching the catalogue of available role identities. However, in the duplication and improvement positioning types, residents are not trying to test a new identity. The avatar is a means

to access the virtual world and experience new things. In the virtual world, residents use role identities very similar to those of the physical world. At the level of identity building, they are located in an identity reinforcement process using the register of available role identities.

World creation versus world consumption

Second Life is a simulation platform which facilitates the development of personal plans. It permits the acquisition of new skills through realising plans. As a simulation tool, Second Life reduces the set-up costs of a plan. Something which in the real world is costly in time, energy and labour may be set up more quickly and at a low cost, through computerisation in a more controlled world. The virtual world provides an opportunity to break down all kinds of real-life walls and barriers (psychological, social, financial, administrative, etc.). *"Provide a way to expand your experiences at only the cost of your time"* (NR). For example, it is simpler for an artist to set up an exhibition gallery in Second Life than in real life. This gallery also allows him or her to experience what it would be like to exhibit his or her works in a physical place, both in terms of the appearance of the gallery and the relationships established with visitors: *"You can walk through my gallery... I have none in RL, was the first time I saw what it would be like to do so"* (LC). For AA, a high-school student, and seller of virtual clothing, party organiser and future nightclub manager, Second Life allows him to bypass his adolescent status and become a business owner: *"You can do the job you dream of whereas in RL you can definitely not do that. Like what? Business owner for example"* (AA).

However, not all residents are this active and creative. We have noted that in the metamorphosis and transformation types of positioning, activities are geared more towards consumption than creation. Simulation permits access to goods and services as well as to new relationships. In a digital world, goods and services are reproducible and transportable at minimal cost. For a resident, it is not expensive to buy superb clothing and acquire a palace, to imagine living a dream life. *My life in Second Life is a dream life! ... in the game I have a huge villa with everything I need right there, 2 children and a little baby, I have a big pool and all the trimmings and a beautiful wife* (DS). Also, the absence of a body and existing social norms means that individuals feel less inhibited and interact more easily with one another.

From these two dynamic principles, we have categorised identity positioning types in terms of a resident's relationship with the world and the process of identity building they use.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Contributions

Identity building remains a phenomenon which is difficult to define, even more so in virtual worlds: is their use as a tool for identity building by some residents a new phenomenon? Does it constitute a departure from the results of previous research into identity? For Kaufmann (2004), possible selves are a result of the crystallisation of virtual identities; identities imagined by the individual. They become possible selves when they can be actually materialised in a given situation after evaluating the possibilities offered by the social context and others' reactions. Virtual worlds illustrate this theoretical approach in that the avatar, the "virtual identity" of the virtual world, becomes the manifestation of possible identities from the individual's imagination.

However, we have seen that not all residents necessarily use the virtual world as a tool for identity building; only the transformation or metamorphosis positioning types use a process of identity opening-up, necessary for the identity to develop more or less extensively. In the duplication and improvement situations, the avatar's identity is very similar to that of the individual, unlike the results of Bessière, Seay and Kiesler's (2007) video games study, which showed that the characters adopted by World of Warcraft players are closer to their ideal selves than their real selves. This is probably due to the fact that World of Warcraft offers only a limited series of characters with few graphical modification possibilities. In a virtual world like Second Life, the numerous personalisation possibilities allow the implementation of identity positioning types ranging from duplication to metamorphosis. In this respect, our research supports the results of a study by Talamo and Ligorio (2001) on Euroland, a virtual world very similar to Second Life. These authors demonstrate that individuals use real identity positioning strategies in terms of context. In Second Life, identity positioning types are linked to an individual's relationships with the world. We consider that the identity positioning matrix could also be of use in other virtual Internet environments (forums and social networks). In fact, a virtual world is an extreme example of a tool for identity building. In virtual spaces such as the collaborative Web, we find the same opportunities for transforming our relationships both with the world and with ourselves.

Limitations

If the results presented in this article permit a better understanding of how individuals use virtual environments as tools for identity building, they demonstrate limitations in terms of internal validity on one hand and external validity on the other. The virtual environment instant messaging

interview method brings the internal validity of the results into question. What level of credibility can be accorded to individuals who play roles and develop a high level of identity flexibility? This problem may also exist in face to face interviews in the physical world. The researcher cannot be certain that what the interviewee is saying corresponds to his or her practical reality and current concerns: there is ambiguity in any interview created by a real or virtual individual playing changeable roles. Nonetheless, the interview in the virtual world gives the individual a greater opportunity to deceive the researcher.

The limited size of our sample limits the validity of the link between the identity positioning types and the activities engaged in by the residents. Extending this study to a wider sample is an area for future research. In addition, we have only examined part of the identity process and concentrated on self representation across choices of role identities without examining how it is perceived by others. A study focused more on interaction could allow us to refine our understanding of the identity building process in virtual worlds. Also, our study is centred on a particular virtual world, Second Life, which limits the scope of our conclusions. A repeat of this study in other virtual worlds could increase the external validity of this study.

CONCLUSION

This research allows a better understanding of how individuals use virtual worlds as tools for identity building. It demonstrates that virtual worlds are spaces for simulation where the individual experiments with his or her identity and experiences forms of creation and consumption. We have identified four positioning types in an individual's relationship with his or her avatar (duplication, improvement, transformation and metamorphosis) in which a resident carries on a relationship with the virtual world focused on consumption or creation and a relationship with him or herself focused on identity reinforcement or identity opening-up.

In a wider context, virtual worlds represent a challenge to our reality, our relationship with the world and with ourselves. Indeed, could the actions of this new virtual world consumer be destined to become a hyper-reality, as defined by Baudrillard (1976, 1981); a place in which a sign of existence becomes more real than existence itself? There must therefore be complementary research into this new entrepreneurial and commercial space to offer a more complete theoretical context for understanding the impact of these worlds on our reality. This research must also lead marketing specialists, researchers and practitioners to reflect upon the supply of these consumption practices. They must take into consideration the ethics involved in creating these new universes which offer infinite yet virtual tools in the quest for self.

Appendix A1: Interviewed Residents' Profiles

Code	Age	Sex (F/H)	Nationality	Time on SL ⁽¹⁾	Hours spent per week on SL ⁽¹⁾	Activities on SL ⁽²⁾
BB	18	F	English	-	21-40	B, C
LC	25	M	Dutch	5	20	C
CI	24	F	French	7	40	B, C, LS
SP	43	F	English	6	30	B, Me
ET	25	M	French	6	21-40	B, C
PE	30	M	Dutch	6	30	C
DS	32	M	French	30	50	B, C, Me
TR	20	M	French	-	30	B, C, Me
TL	27	M	German	6	21-40	B, LS, Me
CXI	27	F	Dutch	7	40	C, Me
TB	24	M	French	4	21-40	B, C,
SS	41	F	Dutch	7	40	B, LS, Me
AA	18	M	French	1	8-10	B, C, Me
CF	38	F	French	-	3-4	LS, Me
VT	22	F	French	-	20-25	LS, Me
HV	45	M	French	-	10	LS, Me
SH	32	F	French	-	Permanently	C, LS,
AV	32	M	French	-	10	B, LS, Me
MM	31	F	Belgian	5	50	LS
CC	24	M	Dutch	7	40	LS, Me
MC	24	F	French	6	20	LS, Me
AF	23	F	French	2	8-15	LS, Me
ES	33	F	French	3	-	B, C, LS, Me
HE	18	F	French	2	-	LS, Me
FB	25	M	German	5	40	C, LS, Me
DP	18	M	French	4	21-40	Ro, C
LI	30	F	French	7	21-40	Ro, C
SS2	24	F	English	8	40	Ro, B,
NR	30	M	German	3	40	C
AF2	35	M	French	-	10-12	Ro, B, C
MA	19	M	French	4	50	B, Me
GT	40	M	French	7	-	Ro, Me
SK	24	M	French	24	-	Ro, B, C
CS	24	M	French	-	10	Ro, Me

(1) (-) no reply

(2) Ro (Roleplay), B(Business), C (Creation), LS (Leisure and Shopping), Me (Meeting people)

Table 1 – Four types of identity positioning

1-Duplication	2-Improvement	3 - Transformation	4 -Metamorphosis
Identical appearance and behaviour	Evolving appearance Same behaviour	Evolving appearance Evolving behaviour	Change in appearance Change in behaviour
Slight boundary between real and virtual	Slight boundary between real and virtual	Strong boundary between real and virtual	Strong boundary between real and virtual
Activities: business, creation and meeting people	Wide range of activities, predominantly meeting people, shopping and leisure	Activities: meeting people, shopping and leisure	Activities: business, creation and role play

Table 2 - Identity positioning, identity process and relationship with the world

Relationship with the world	Creation	Consumption
Identity process		
Reinforcement	Duplication	Improvement
Opening-up	Metamorphosis	Transformation