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## Journalism in Second Life

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## **Abstract:**

Our research seeks to understand the emerging journalism practiced in Second Life – a computer-generated alternative reality. Framed by postmodernism, this study uses an ideological analysis to evaluate the three Second Life newspapers: the Alphaville Herald, the Metaverse Messenger and the Second Life Newspaper. We suggest that journalism in Second Life focuses on community building and education, considers the influence of the on-line world to resident members' off-line lives and raises important questions about freedom of expression.

**Keywords:** avatar, hyperreality, newspaper journalism, postmodernism, Second Life.

As facts, truth, and reality continue to lose relevance in our postmodern world, media watchers are left to wonder if their absence signals the demise of traditional journalism. Our research suggests that important work is still being done in journalism, particularly using a variety of new media within distinct communities, which helps people to understand key issues and information about the political, economic, and cultural aspects of their lives.

This paper seeks to understand the emerging journalism practiced in Second Life (SL) – a computer-generated alternative reality. Its creator Linden Lab defines SL as a “free online virtual world imagined and created by its Residents” (SL 2009a). Its users come from all over the world to construct virtual representations of themselves known as avatars that reside in SL and navigate and create the virtual environment as they participate in social, economic, recreational and educational activities with other avatars (Diehl & Prins, 2008, pp. 101-2). Residents use voice and text chat to communicate with each other (SL, 2009b), in this massive multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG), and create new identities for their avatars. SL’s open source coding allows residents the freedom to create objects and structures which are significant not only economically (residents may sell items to each other), but also socially as items may function as cultural signifiers.

SL distinguishes itself from other MMORPGs by granting its residents creativity, the ability to do or make whatever they want, and the right to own and control what they create (SL, 2009b). Ludlow and Wallace (2007), note that SL’s Terms of Service “specifically grants residents ownership of the intellectual property rights in their creations.” (p. 76). According to York (2009), unlike most MMORPGs, SL does not have player goals, because there are “no points... no monsters to defeat, no ‘levels’ of gaming mastery to achieve and conclusions or ‘endgame scenario’ that ultimately finishes the ‘game’” (p. 4). Instead, SL is an open-ended environment where “players can tackle ‘quests,’ take on ‘jobs,’ form lasting relationships with other players and continue to develop their online characters for as long as they care to. There is no way to win or lose the game itself...because the game itself never ends” (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007, p. 9).

SL’s popularity spiked in 2006, with a growing resident population and as reportage of the virtual environment grew from digital newspapers and blogs to coverage in more mainstream, traditional media publications (Totilo, 2007). According to Guest (2007), when SL was launched in 2003, it had approximately 500 participants, which swelled to over 5.6 million users in 2007. This statistic refers to the number of individuals who have signed up throughout SL’s history. Linden Lab (2009) reports significant usage growth during 2008 with “residents spending more than 400 million

hours in Second Life" (p. 14) up from 246 million hours in 2007, an increase of more than 60 percent. More recently, as of June 13, 2009, 1,396,914 residents had logged in during the last 60 days; 557,224 had logged in during the last seven days (SL, 2009c).

Due to growing curiosity regarding SL, news powerhouses such as Reuters and CNN started SL bureaus, with Reuters establishing full time in-world avatar-reporters. Mainstream journalists reported on the many ways SL began to mimic real life (Totilo, 2007), often focusing on the novelty factor, which inevitably included themes of sex, violence or financial gain (Boellstorff, 2008; York, 2009).

This study explores print journalism as practiced by residents/reporters who actively participate in SL. Reporters in SL work in a three-dimensional web environment, where truth and artifice are often blurred. Reporting on the activities and innovations of residents and the diverse cultures and subcultures in the virtual world, reporters reject mainstream journalism's obsession with reality and opt instead for in-world verification, rather than traditional fact checking.

In addition to magazines, blogs, news bureaus, podcasts and television stations, three newspapers, the *Alphaville Herald*, the *Metaverse Messenger* and the *Second Life Newspaper* are currently thriving in this virtual reality. All three newspapers are free and are available both in SL and through the Internet. Thus far there has been limited scholarly literature devoted specifically to journalism in SL (see Ludlow & Wallace, 2007; Totilo, 2008; York, 2009). The existing research primarily focuses on comparisons of coverage and content between traditional and in-world journalism. In contrast, this research seeks to understand the implications of practicing journalism in a virtual environment, where conventional reporting is redefined by the technological features of SL, and how the back and forth relationship between real life and SL inevitably influence and shape news content. Through an assessment of three SL newspapers, this research will address implications for the future practice of journalism.

We draw on postmodernism to frame our study of newspaper journalism in SL. Responding to the rise of a capitalist culture of consumption rather than production during the twentieth century,

postmodernism is in Hardt's (1998) words "the passionate voice of disillusionment" (p. 75) of contemporary citizens who continually compromise, concede and challenge the social and economic structures of commodity culture.

Strinati (2004) finds that theorists focus primarily on five fundamental societal changes inherent in the development of postmodernism: 1) the power of mass media to create our sense of reality and to construct all other social relations; 2) an emphasis on surface and style that dominates content, substance and meaning and celebrates its arbitrariness and constructedness; 3) the breakdown of distinctions between art and popular culture through the mixing of styles, forms and genres, which emphasize irony, parody, pastiche and playfulness and ignore relevant context or history; 4) the instability of time and space and the dismissal of linear narratives; and 5) the rejection of truth or absolute knowledge or any overarching theories or meta-narratives in favor of culturally diverse, ambiguous, and/or previously marginalized voices. These voices are thought to construct mini-narratives that are fragmented, temporary, contingent and situational and make "no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability" (Klages 2006, p. 169). Traditional frames of reference such as class or community are thought to disappear and a de-centered and fragmented individual subjectivity becomes the only authentic reality.

We find Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperrealism particularly relevant to the study of the virtual reality in SL. Arguing that postmodernism is a culture of the simulacrum in which the distinction between an original and a copy no longer exists, Baudrillard maintains that simulacra, as signifiers without signifieds, construct an inescapable and unavoidable sense of reality continually disseminated by media industries. Media-provided simulacra create models or codes, often lacking any connection to reality, which instruct consumers about what to believe, desire, buy, or even how to think. As simulacra become more "real" than any authentic experience, and as surface interests dominate authentic meaning, Baudrillard insists that we enter the realm of hyperreality. Within hyperreality differentiation between authentic experience and simulation implodes and distinctions between reality and fiction become less important as the real and the imaginary operate "along a roller-coaster continuum" (Storey 2001, p. 152). Ultimately, within postmodern culture, there is no difference between

"reality" and its representations and therefore virtual reality may be considered as real as any actual experience.

Cormack (1995) suggests that an analysis of cultural products is a useful way to study ideologically imbued representations because the culture of each society is made manifest through its material culture. From this perspective, the newspapers produced in SL exist as elements of material culture, which express a distinct view of reality that its readers are asked to share. While each ideological analysis should be framed within its specific historical context, Cormack includes five distinct categories of analysis important to consider: content, structure, absence, style and mode of address. Content includes assertions, opinions, judgments, descriptive language and the actions taken while the structure assesses the order of delivery, the use of binary oppositions, and the relationship between opening and closing elements. Finding absence crucial to a cultural product's ideological structure, Cormack explains that emphasizing elements that should be included but are missing as well as probing the literary style and the mode of address are also important considerations.

Specifically, this research project uses an ideological analysis to evaluate all images, graphics and text published in the February through May 2009 issues of the three newspapers in an attempt to understand the type of journalism practiced in SL. It also considers how the ideological position of postmodernism is made manifest in the newspapers.

As befitting its motto, "A real newspaper for a virtual world," the *Metaverse Messenger (MM)* is the most traditional of the three newspapers in SL. First published on August 9, 2005, the newspaper is formatted as a tabloid complete with banner headlines, bylines, striking images, classified and display advertising, and copy that jumps to inside pages. The newspaper includes articles from a variety of departments including: news, sports, fashion, comics, community events, editorial perspectives and a children's section. The *MM* embraces the ideology of journalism, striving for balance and neutrality particularly in its use of traditional journalistic sourcing. News stories regularly quote residents, software creators, Linden Lab spokespersons and website sources. The ability to actually reference events in SL makes it possible for both reporters and residents to

verify information mentioned in news stories, resulting in articles that are accurate and highly relevant to SL residents. Retractions and corrections are published when the newspaper makes an error. The writing style used in news stories often combines inverted pyramid reporting with promotional rhetoric and/or an educational focus. Reporters on the *MM* hold themselves to traditional journalistic standards such as fact checking, accuracy, neutrality and detachment (Richard, 2009b, p. 21).

Debuting in June 2004, the *Alphaville Herald (AH)* was started by philosophy professor Peter Ludlow to understand the legal, economic and social considerations of the virtual world. Known for its acerbic and often sarcastic tone, *AH* articles read more like a blog entries than newspaper stories. The newspaper makes no specific claims about balanced journalism -- in fact their slogan is "always fairly unbalanced". This style, nevertheless, stays true to the newspaper's other mission as stated on its website: "to take a good, close, often snarky look at the online worlds that are becoming a more and more important part of everyone's offline lives."

Despite its tone, the newspaper provides readers with coverage on a wide range of issues, from users' rights and freedoms in SL and other MMORPGs, to the role playing culture. The newspaper is written for highly involved and active residents and includes SL and MMORPG specific parlance, images and stylizing that makes it inherently more accessible to knowledgeable residents. For example, it covers news on "noobs" (new residents; *newbies*) and "griefers" (players that harass other players; causing *grief*). The *AH* often uses spelling and emphasis similar to blogging -- it is not unusual to read a headline like "Oh noooooooooes! News delivery in video games", see emoticons peppered in articles, read terms like "lulz" (a variation of lol -- laughing out loud) and observe words struck out as a tool of sarcasm.

The *AH's* tone and stylizing is best illustrated by the newspaper's coverage of the Virtual Journalism Summit (McLuhan, 2009). While the article introduces journalists and their contributions to virtual journalism, the coverage and image slyly pokes fun of Helen Thomas, Bob Schieffer, and even the creator of SL, "whose reporting is so penetrating we can't even see it". The article also mocks Hamlet Au, the first journalist appointed by Linden Lab to cover news in SL:

“Last but not least there is the crack journalism of uber-reporter Hamlet Au (nee Hamlet Linden) who was paid by Linden Lab to hype report on Second Life and retains an unspecified relationship with the Lab.”

Founded in 2005 by SL resident, James T. Juno, the *Second Life Newspaper (SLN)* provides residents with an easy way to understand the SL grid. Unlike the *AH's* critical coverage and *MM's* aim to standardize journalism in SL, the *SLN* lacks a specific mission apart from reporting on happenings in SL in a blog format. Part of its content is reader submitted and the newspaper includes many interviews with residents and unconventional sections not found in other newspapers. Extra-Extra, for example, is a section for fictional stories, columns, and announcements and Red Light is a special section for sexual content.

Many of the *SLN's* articles also function as press releases. The coverage is upbeat and complements artists, products and services it showcases, and it often includes contact information. Like the other SL newspapers, there is significant coverage on the activities of Linden Lab and considerable resident opinion. The newspaper's style, like the *AH*, is closer to blog entries than traditional newspaper articles. Like the *AH*, the writing style is not standardized, employing SL specific and Internet parlance.

The creation and maintenance of community is a fundamental concern of the journalism practiced in SL. All three newspapers include frequent extended discussion of legal and technical issues and community concerns as well as provide detailed information to help residents navigate through SL. Residents are reminded to learn and follow Linden Lab's Terms of Service, which are considered the laws of the land, and to make informed decisions regarding their actions in SL. News stories provide background context considered necessary to fully understand larger issues associated with the news. For example, the lead article in the May 19, 2009 *MM* focuses on a new adult policy for SL content. While the article reports statements made by Ken Linden during a press conference on PR Island, it also informs readers that because Linden Lab is a privately owned company, that it can suppress objectionable or unacceptable content. Although this information is not addressed in the press conference, its inclusion in the news article

provides necessary context that residents need in order to make informed decisions about SL.

Maintaining that traditional media are unaware of fundamental issues associated with SL as well as being uninformed regarding technical aspects of the grid, the *AH* regularly emphasizes community by critiquing traditional media coverage of SL. For example, an article on the closing of Sky News, by Leonminster (2009) comments that SL critics, or "virtual world Cassandras", will interpret the departure of the news bureau as evidence of SL's decline, rather than recognizing that "the economics of news reporting and delivery in Second Life is very different from real life, and spending lots of money to have virtual world analogs of real life newsrooms doesn't necessarily make any financial sense."

Similarly, Schumann's (2009) *SLN* article "Second Life's media prejudice" discusses the sensationalist coverage of SL stories in traditional media while rarely covering the "actual productive uses of virtual worlds". Schumann emphasizes community sentiment asserting that SL is a place for residents to express themselves artistically, raise money for good causes, meet people they otherwise would not meet in real life, and a refuge for people who "break their social isolation with virtual life".

Considerable space is allocated to community events, SL activities, and people with illnesses and disabilities. Listings for a variety of support groups including gatherings for the anxious, the depressed, victims of violent crime, those who want to lose weight, and those battling chronic illnesses are featured in the SL newspapers. Each issue of the *MM* features a resident of the week, several of whom are connected with nonprofit organizations that provide education and support for at risk individuals. News stories go beyond reporting on the activities of charities to promoting fundraising strategies. For example, on June 1, 2009, SL residents were encouraged to wear purple clothing and decorate their residences and retail businesses purple to show support for the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life.

All of the newspapers showcase the concerns and needs of individuals with different abilities and residents are regularly informed about alternative cultures. For example, a front-page story in the

March 17, 2009 *MM* focuses on communicating with the hearing impaired in virtual environments as well as the real world. In addition to providing excellent context about the deaf culture, the article includes detailed quotes from the speaker as well as reactions from residents who attended the lecture.

Technical issues are also addressed in depth. For example, Trefusis' (2009) *SLN* article about bots defines them as avatars controlled by machines, which functions as a simplified communication channel for widespread or regular communication. He finds that some bots, such as the copybot, can "steal a design, change permissions, sell the design/product in huge quantities without the original creator benefiting from his or her work". The article not only educates residents, but also urges readers to be responsible, as destructive actions directly affect the freedom of all SL community members. Similarly, the April 28, 2009 issue of the *MM* considers the issue of bots in the teen grid. Combining news reportage with editorial opinion, the article maintains that the use of copybots is contributing to the decline of the teen grid and urges residents to do something about the problem.

The blurring of the line between real life and virtual reality is a dominant theme addressed in SL newspapers. The formation of relationships, both romantic and platonic, is arguably one of its draws, as well as a topic that has captivated traditional media. One relationship covered extensively in the traditional press, which supports residents concern that mainstream press coverage of SL focuses on the "seedier side" rather than represents what occurs in SL authentically, involves a British couple that divorced in 2008 after the wife caught her husband's avatar having sex in SL with a virtual prostitute. The couple first met in an Internet chat room and became lovers in both the virtual and the real worlds. After the divorce, the woman began a relationship with a man she met in the World of Warcraft, a popular MMORPG, while the man has become engaged to another woman he met in SL ("SL affair", 2008).

For nearly four years, each issue of the *MM* has published the column "The Line" which considers the realm between the real and virtual worlds. Norinn Richard created the column, and writes most of the articles, but others also contribute to the discussion. For, *MM*

publisher Katt Kongo, there is no line between real life and virtual reality: "Second Life is a huge part of my First Life and my First Life is a huge part of my Second Life" (Kongo, 2009, p. 6). Kongo, who augments her publishing duties by also attending college in SL, maintains that friendships she has formed in the virtual realm are as real as those established in real life.

In his column, Richard takes a balanced approach to interrogating the line: his language and tone acknowledges possible differences between virtual reality and real life and he sometimes struggles to make sense of his situation. Richard finds there are real life ramifications for problems encountered in SL. His columns incorporate a variety of meta-statements, and he often wonders why he cannot leave SL issues and frustrations behind when he crosses the line into the real world. As Richard (2009d) explains: "the problems are real to me. They may be about a virtual world, but they have real consequences" (p. 21). Richard discusses changing "comfort zone boundaries" along with changing cities, climates, and time zones during his recent job-related move. Detailing how friends from SL provided his family with accommodations and helped load and drive their moving truck, Richard (2009a), like Kongo decides that "a friend in a virtual world is still a Real friend, with all the benefits and duties granting that title involves" (p. 21). One particularly intriguing experience addressed in the column discusses how both negative and positive emotions cross the line from SL to the real world. A guest contributor, detailing her own experiences with a love affair that ended badly, insists that SL is more than a game because not only "happiness, love, and joy cross the line, [but] fear, shame and anger do as well. Negative emotions are bitter things no matter where they come from" (Richard, 2009c, p. 6).

*SLN* reporter Schumann (2009) chronicles the influences of virtual relationships on offline relationships, affirming Richard's sentiments that emotional affect caused by SL traverses the real life, cautioning that "we may only be avatars on computers, but the people that signed up are real". Philosophorum (2009) of the *AH*, on the other hand, tackles the issue of transgressions on self-identity when users become involved in relationships with avatars whose identities do not necessarily match who they are in real life: "There would be feelings of betrayal and hurt, but in the end, that person who you had cybersex

with is a real as anything else on the Internet. Just because they might not match your gender expectations doesn't change you or your identity."

Because the construction of an avatar does not have to mirror a resident's actual age, ethnic background, physical features or sexual orientation in real life, the issue of gender bending has become an important topic addressed in all three SL newspapers. For example, the *MM*'s comic strip, *Plywood*, features a character, Gender Man, who is able to see the true gender of the players behind the avatars. The comic pokes fun at the commonness of gender bending in SL, as well as some residents' preoccupation regarding the relevance of real life identity. Interestingly, articles also convey that the ability to reinvent an avatar's gender is one of the fundamental freedoms of SL residents. One article in the *AH* reports that a resident complained about losing money after planning a wedding with another resident who misrepresented his gender. The article, however, mocks the resident's formal request that Linden Lab should implement a gender verification system, commenting: "What are they going to do, take off their pants and send a picture to Linden Lab? Have a crotch inspector?" (Vielle, 2009b). Other coverage equates gender bending with revealing hidden desires and repressed identities, rather than an act of grieving. Writer (2009) suggests in the *SLN* that when users make an alternate avatar of the opposite sex, it still retains the real identity of the user. She finds that these avatars are probably an unconscious construction, which can be revealing of "who the hell we are".

Charges of censorship have been reported in all three newspapers following Linden Lab's announcement that it was creating a filtered search engine to augment a new SL continent for adult-rated content. The April 21, 2009 issue of the *MM* reports that Linden Lab's plans to create an adult-content continent met with widespread resistance from SL residents. Concerned that the decision would result in a major shift in SL culture, residents question how the community will function with restrictions. Some residents wonder how child avatars might fit into the plans while others suggest that Linden Lab's decision is based on attempts to stymie the use of SL in public schools and libraries.

While the *MM*'s coverage balances resident commentary, information gathered from Linden Lab with relevant context regarding legal issues associated with SL, the coverage in the *AH* and the *SLN* is more critical of the plans. Both newspapers primarily feature strong resident opinion against creating an adult-only continent. Rearwind's *SLN* (2009) article addresses the arbitrariness of the designation of adult, sexually explicit content, commenting that filtering would "affect the basic principles of freedom of expression and freedom of speech in a virtual world founded on the principle of 'Give the people a platform and let them create a metaverse'". Shuftan's (2009) *SLN* interview notes that censorship plans would change the behavior of SL residents, and suggests that behavior in the virtual world should be organic, and "not some artificial thing that comes about as a result of what users can and cannot do".

The *AH* goes beyond concerns of SL reporting on censorship and issues of freedom in other massively multi player on-line games and even on social networking sites. For example, a May 13, 2009 article "Avatars and humans unite to fight Facebook," critiques Facebook's terms of service, which currently do not allow avatars to have Facebook pages. The newspaper is also critical of certain Linden Lab policies and plans, especially those involving financial gain. Vielle (2009a) addresses residents' attitude that "Linden Lab is losing its focus, and grabbing for money more than the grassroots participation of the residents" by neglecting residents' needs and increasing charges for commodities, while seeking to make deals for corporations to extend their presence and/or involvement in SL.

Considering issues covered in the three newspapers, there seems to be a quasi-adversarial relationship between traditional and SL journalism. While SL residents and journalists have embraced the concept of hyperreality, traditional media largely emphasizes virtual and real worlds as mutually exclusive, especially by characterizing SL as a game. Nevertheless, our analysis yields evidence that there are intricate ties that bind real life to SL, influencing sense-making practices and the content of SL journalism. However SL, by itself, stands as a different plane of existence, which cultivates a separate culture and world-view, and ultimately an alternative reality -- another feature equally apparent in our study.

The absence of critical commentary regarding the blurring of the line between virtual reality and real life can be seen as one way postmodernism is made manifest in the newspaper coverage. The virtual reality of SL belongs to Baudrillard's (1994) realm of hyperreality, in which the simulacra of the grid overwhelms any unmediated meaning becoming more real than any other reality and providing evidence that an authentic reality no longer exists. SL journalism rarely differentiates between fiction and reality, perhaps because distinctions between the two no longer seem relevant.

While the journalistic philosophies may differ, the three SL newspapers engage with their readers and are sensitive to audience members' backgrounds, interests, needs and desires. Each newspaper is interactive and uses a variety of journalistic strategies to educate and inform its readers. Occupying the border space between information and entertainment, journalism in SL raises important questions about freedom of expression in virtual worlds and focuses on community building and education as well as considering the influence of the on-line world to resident members' off-line lives. More than 100,000 regular readers have made the *MM* the most widely read newspaper in SL and in May 2009 *AH* staffers celebrated receiving the 50,000th reader comment. Clearly, journalism in SL is flourishing and traditional journalists might want to consider incorporating aspects of their user-friendly coverage.

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