

SECOND LIFE® THROUGH THE EYES OF LOLLI SAPPHIRE:  
CREATIVE AND EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES OF VIRTUAL REALITY

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE  
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ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS  
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SECOND LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF LOLLI SAPPHIRE: THE CREATIVE AND  
EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES OF VIRTUAL REALITY

By

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Chair: Elizabeth Delacruz

Member: Dennis Roland

Major: Art Education

I am an avid user of the computer-based virtual world known as Second Life<sup>®</sup> (SL<sup>™</sup>). My capstone project provides insider knowledge of SL<sup>™</sup> people, places, activities, and events. With five years of experience in SL<sup>™</sup>, my research utilizes an auto-ethnographic methodology wherein I assume the multi-faceted role of as participant observer, researcher, and creative inhabitant and user of Second Life<sup>®</sup>. Utilizing an online self-publishing e-magazine site called ISSUU<sup>™</sup> I will explain Second Life<sup>®</sup> through the persona of my SL<sup>™</sup> avatar, lolli<sup>1</sup> Sapphire (<http://issuu.com/christie314/docs/eyeslolli>). Through my own and lolli Sapphire's images and explanations, various aspects of SL will be shared in this capstone paper and in an ISSUU

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<sup>1</sup> My avatar name appears here the same as in Second Life, lolli Sapphire. The "l" in lolli is not capped because five years ago when I created her I felt that she was not a real person and her name should not be capped like a real person's name.

publication. As a SL<sup>™</sup> inhabitant and artist, I have also created videos and artworks about my experiences in SL<sup>™</sup>. These videos and artworks are shared on my website (<http://www.mydigitalhandprint.com/index.html>) along with my research field notes that appear in the form of a blog (<http://314christie.tumblr.com/>). Readers may find my videos about Second Life<sup>®</sup> on YouTube<sup>™</sup> (<http://www.youtube.com/user/LolliSapphire?feature=mhee>).

My capstone paper accompanying my project describes my research process, a literature review pertaining to Second Life<sup>®</sup>, and a brief summary of the history, purpose, attributes, capabilities, limitation, and problems of SL<sup>™</sup>. Finally, I share my insights about Second Life<sup>®</sup> as a creative space along with SL<sup>™</sup> tips for art educators interested in knowing more about Second Life<sup>®2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> From this point forward it should be understood that Linden Lab and Second Life are trademarks. They have no affiliation with my capstone project.

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When I first logged on and rezzed<sup>3</sup> in Second Life I stood in place. I had to wait for my laptop to render the virtual world through its processor and limited graphic capabilities. The laptop's fan spun feverishly, then calmed as my black computer screen revealed grey objects that slowly became full of life and color. My arrival was unceremonious as I stood within a circle created of virtual rope and fence posts. The residents did not greet me, but continued their virtual lives, which at the time, I assumed consisted of sitting on fence posts and commenting with random text that appeared in a chat box. In the chat box I wrote, "What do I do now?" The following text appeared after my question, "Read the sign." The sign only had three lines of text followed by a faded blue arrow. It welcomed me to Orientation Island and then directly underneath, in the same font the words "This way out" (see Figure 1). The arrow was pointing down a path, and like thousands before me, I exited the circle and I began my life as lolli Sapphire. Over the past five years, I still return to Orientation Island and can be found sitting on the fence post still contemplating that sign.

My Second Life experience provides me with insider knowledge of the creative and educational opportunities in virtual reality. This paper discusses Second Life as an aspect of our shifting culture made possible through virtual reality, our blurring of identities, and the cultivation of new environments in which to interact, be creative, and exchange knowledge.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As Second Life enters its tenth year as an online (virtual) creative and educational global environment it still remains largely unnoticed by most art educators. I believe this to be due to the lack of relevant information available to the art educator about Second Life. Although,

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<sup>3</sup> To rezz is to create or make an object appear in Second Life.



there is a small but active community of art educators using the web to convey their virtual experiences, I have found this group to be mostly folks in higher education, and their activities at times not relevant to my needs. There have been interesting scholarly papers written about new media landscapes in art education publications, but they often lack intimate knowledge of Second Life though firsthand, sustained insider experience.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

I think it is important for art educators to have knowledge of Second Life as so many people (tens of thousands at any given moment) are tapping into their creativity through their experiences in this virtual world. My research provides insights about Second Life, as I also highlight it as a resource for personal and professional creative expression and development. I also provide tips for the art educator wanting to explore Second Life.

My capstone project utilizes an online self-publishing e-magazine site called ISSUU<sup>TM</sup> to explain Second Life through my own and Lolli Sapphire's persona, words, images and machinima<sup>4</sup> (<http://issuu.com/christie314/docs/eyeslolli>). In addition, as a SL resident and artist I have also artworks about my experiences in SL and share them on my website (<http://www.mydigitalhandprint.com/>) along with my research field notes that appear in the form of a blog (<http://314christie.tumblr.com/>). Finally, as I feel it is important to try to reach as many art educators as possible, I have also created a YouTube channel to house my SL machinima and videos (<http://www.youtube.com/user/LolliSapphire>).

My study of Second Life is important as it provides relevant information to art educators interested in understanding how Second Life is being used as a creative and educational space. It

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<sup>4</sup> Machinima is a digital video produced in real time using 3D virtual and gaming environments

also provides a general overview of culture in Second Life and tips for the art educator interested in becoming a creative inhabitant in this virtual world. My research provides knowledge that is only obtainable through in-world experience (Laio, 2010). The information I provide describes people, environments, and events in SL as they relate to the creative and educational opportunities of virtual reality, and as seen through the eyes of lolli Sapphire. In summary, this capstone research project brings together scholarly research with virtual experiences as a means of informing art educators of the possibilities they have today, tomorrow and in the future in preparing young people for the next level of technological advancements.

### **Research Questions and Assumptions**

My research questions framing this study are simple and straightforward. I use these questions to guide my inquiry and explanations. Questions include: What is Second Life? How is Second Life being used as a creative and educational experience? And how are other technologies used in conjunction with Second Life?

There are few assumptions I make in regards to Second Life. In general, I do feel that SL residents are up-to-date in multiple areas of digital media/technologies with some degrees of expertise, although that expertise varies from person to person. I feel that many residents of SL also arrive in Second Life not knowing exactly what they are looking for, but knowing that they are looking for an interesting experience nevertheless.

### **Terms Informing my Study**

*Digital technology.* Digital technology uses equipment, programming, and mathematical principles to compress and encode information. It includes all forms of electronic technology with the ability to provide quick access to information. In this paper my use of this term will be mainly referring to cell phones, computers, and tablets (Schafer, 2003).

*New media:* New media refers to varying forms of information and productions created with and accessible through digital technologies. It also includes digital imaging, videos, audios, creative software programs, virtual worlds, and gaming environments. New media is said to be ubiquitous, ever present, and available 24 hours a day

(<http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/47936/new-media>).

*Resident:* A resident is Linden Lab's name for a user of Second Life. Linden Lab is the owner and developer of Second Life. I use the word resident interchangeably with creative inhabitant, and avatar (<http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Resident>).

### **Reflections on the Literature Informing my Inquiry**

Over the years I have been able to piece together research from various sources that make sense to my experiences in Second Life. I draw much of my understanding of the shifting cultural landscape exhibited in Second Life by reading the explanations of researchers that have spent a great deal of their lives examining how culture is influenced by digital technologies. Some of these explanations predate the Internet, but their cautionary words continuously echo in literature of those that seek current understandings about how our culture has increasingly been high-jacked by commercialism, politics, and video games. Some observe that it is becoming harder to tell what is reality, as we all have discovered our unique method to manipulate it (Glen, 2011), or what exactly to do with technology, once we have it.

Although, I am an advocate for digital technology, and thus new media, I am also aware of the power we hold within our hands to change the world for the better or worse. I believe art education's role is to guide young people in understanding their impact on our global culture through how they choose to use today's technology (Delacruz, 2010). Postman (1992) (referencing tool-using culture) stated, "Tools do not attack...the dignity and integrity of the

culture." He also points of the measure of honor and ritual one should take on when they hold the tools with the power to shape our culture. I follow with McLuhan's (2003) observation that we use technology as our "scapegoat" for our actions. I have to question if we are doing just that with digital technology, compromising our dignity and integrity and then claiming that the fault lies with the ease of use of technology. The anonymity of the Internet allows for rants and self-indulgence, as well as quiet forms of self-expression and developing of friendship that might not be possible without the hidden real life. There is a "ubiquitous connection between art, ideology and power" (Darts, 2004, p. 313) where once power came from the sword, now it comes from the ability in having the fastest processors and the skill to put them to use.

McLuhan and Postman agree that "the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to it tools for conversations" (cited in Duncum, 2001, p. 102). Attending to those tools of conversation is a means to foster critical analysis of developing ideologies within the culture while building creative resistance to the effects of media (Darts, 2004). I will try not to be subversive in my thinking, so I will not rally for art studios to become a sterile space where students are plugged into a digital world where nothing is real, solid or messy. But at the same time, virtual worlds depend on real life experiences, and the mind has the ability to translate the visual into emotional. In this line of thinking, art educators can use digital media inherited as part of our current "tool-using culture" (Postman, 1993, p. 23) both to bring new forms of awareness to young people and to help them develop empathy towards others, as we are all a part of a globalized world.

### **Too Late for Us, but Not for Them?**

McLuhan observes that "it has always been the artist who perceives that alterations in man are caused by a new medium, who recognizes that the future is present, and uses his artwork

to prepare ground for it” (cited in Tillander, 2010, p. 53). Young people's lives have changed dramatically not only because they are using the new media (new tools), but equally because we adults are as well. The evening ritual of watching the 6 o'clock news on a television set, where the family would have been exposed to the same information and then discussed the events of the day based on their values, that ritual is an independent ritual of quiet active participation within various new media environments. In these new media environments, each individual is shaping their own ideology and being shaped by varying ideologies based on what specific media they engage and whom they choose to follow in their virtual world where varying levels of anonymity is commonly accepted.

### **The Ideology of the Technocratic Culture**

I wish to clarify that it is not my intent to suggest that it is the place of the art educator to morally judge others, but it is the place of art education to investigate shifts in culture (Darts, 2004; Tillander, 2010) as digital technology has profoundly influenced thinking and action (Tavin & Hausman, 2004). Admittedly there is general lack of decorum in Second Life as noted by Inman, Wright & Hartman (2010) as being one of the reasons that the K-12 educational community has avoided SL. I personally see this avoidance both as futile and as a lack of understanding of the shifting of culture. As noted by Duncum with his stringing together of commentaries on visual culture, it begins with Baudrillard's 1988 observation that (1988) never before have images been so self-referential, arguably so seductive, and Postman's 1985 warning that the manipulation of people through imagery been so very important to authority (Duncum, p. 102). In other words, the K-12 educational community can continue to look for safer, closed off worlds, where they seemingly exercise more control over content and experience, but as to their misconception of SL as being a place to escape from reality and/or self (Gottschalk, 2010;

Rak, 2009), they have mistakenly assumed that there is more control within those closed off spaces of the culture in which our physical self resides.

### **Lingering Thoughts**

Speculations about effects of media on culture is a long running thread of claims, comments, and inquiries by those interested in looking toward the future as a means of predicting who we will become. My capstone is not to argue that Second Life is a perfect place for the k-12 student. Rather, I want to ease fear of the unknown and ignorance about this virtual world by explaining the experience of Second Life, and exposing the creative and educational possibilities in virtual worlds.

### **Methodology**

My research provides insider knowledge of Second Life through the experiences of my avatar, lolli Sapphire. lolli reveals in her words and images the creative and educational possibilities of this virtual world. I have examined some of the “tools” of that conversation, as I share findings by contrasting lolli's voice with mine in order to better understand how digital technologies and new media are blurring identity and reality. I chose the qualitative research methods of auto-ethnography and narrative research, as they allowed me to probe SL based on my personal understanding of this virtual culture and to use creative writing, art, and storytelling to present my findings.

### **Research Site and Subjects**

Second Life, in the most basic technological terms is a "massively multi-user virtual environment (MMUVE)" (Baldwin, 2010, p. 1). Second Life is in a constant flux as it reacts to the real life of the people, thus I cannot predict the demographics of the people in my study, nor can I explain the manner in which they will present themselves. I cannot even state with

reasonable certainty that the age range of the SL residents is 17 and upwards, as is required for membership in this virtual world.<sup>5</sup> I based much of the research for my capstone project on the mainland region of Orientation Island public (oip). This land was created and is maintained by Linden Lab, the owner and developer of Second Life. Oip is intended to be used to orientate new arrivals to Second Life in the basic skills to function in-world. I chose this place as it has been claimed as a "hang out" by long-term SL residents and tends to draw a diverse grouping of creative inhabitants. The reasons for this include the voice capabilities available in oip that may be disabled in other SL environments, the continuous influx of new people coming and going to and from oip, and the fact that this is a relatively unmonitored place and as a result there is considerable latitude for self expression. The terms of service of Second Life are generally not heavily enforced at Orientation Island, allowing behaviors to occur that would not be acceptable by landowners in other SL locations. I have expanded out from Orientation Island into other areas as part of the natural flow of being a SL resident. These locations include educational regions, historical places, art venues, towns and cities.

### **Research Methodology**

My research utilizes an auto-biographic and ethno-cultural methodology as participant, observer, researcher, and creative inhabitant and user of Second Life. In 1997, Stokrocki employed a participant observer strategy in her research with and of Navajo art teachers. Through what she called triangulation, she sought truthfulness in her findings through narrative, scholarly writing and artworks. My capstone project similarly utilizes a creative narrative

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<sup>5</sup> To insure the privacy of the Second Life residents' names have been changed. I do leave the option open to residents to include their Second Life or real life name as a means to promote their work such in the case of musicians, artists, builders etc. Their consent will be noted via the text option in Second Life. (No one thought to be under the legal adult age will have this option.)

approach in reporting my findings, as I am interested in weaving deeper understandings of a life lived rather than conveying experience in hard numbers and facts (Friesen, 2009). Through autobiographic and ethno-cultural methods, I have been able to combine my five years of knowledge of Second Life with my research and artworks to examine a day in the life of a creative inhabitant of Second Life.

Over the past two years, in an auto-topography approach (Allnutt, 2009), I recorded the movement of self (lolli) within her SL place of residence, and through the collecting of images, videos, artworks, music, and profiles of the Second Life inhabitants and their creations. lolli's private conversations have been copied into virtual notecards, and blogged as personal reflections in the "real world" on social media sites such as WordPress<sup>TM</sup>, Blogger<sup>TM</sup>, and Tumblr<sup>TM6</sup> and as a means to provide narrative of the phenomena of lolli's and my own shifting and blurring of identities. I captured the essence of Second Life in lolli's words, while also contrasting them against my own as I demonstrate the blurring of identities (mine and lolli's). I made sense out of my data through logical thinking and thematic analysis, looking for patterns and inconsistencies in what I experienced and documented (Maxwell, 2004). I examined my research process from within my own experiences and evaluated what I thought I have found against what others have told me. I used research on visual culture for possible reasons explaining why we have the ability to become virtual, to perform as if it is real, and to excel in our creativity. These research methods all share the ability for me to create a visual

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<sup>6</sup> It is odd characterizing these social media sites as part of the "real" world, but such a distinction clarifies the fact that these social media sites belong to me. This is in contrast to the experiences of lolli Sapphire that occur in the virtual reality of SL, and that in my mind, belong to her.



understanding of the virtual world by describing experience and sharing images of a phenomenon within the human experience.

### **Limitations**

Due to the time restraints, I was unable to address the cost of creating and maintain an avatar in Second Life. I would have liked to further examine the social structure and possible underlining social economic hierarchy or the forming of prejudice based on new media and digital technology advances and personal choice in the material used for avatar creations. Since my research is founded on my avatar lolli Sapphire's experiences in Second Life, I felt it to be important to attempt to stay as close to her life as possible, and not put her in places or in situations that would not naturally happen as part of her personality. As a result, the experiences, encounters, and events shared in this research project are limited to what I believe to be appropriate to lolli. I am not conducting a critical analysis of Second Life; I am using narrative to explore Second Life through experiences of lolli Sapphire.

### **Findings**

My research provides insider knowledge of selected people, environments, and events in Second Life. In my findings, lolli speaks for herself to provide contrast to my voice and as a demonstration of the blending and blurring of our identities that is part of the virtual experience. This shifting in reality allows for real world barriers to loosen and my creativity and learning to flow through this open space.

### **Blurring Identity through Avatar Creation, Performance and Experiences**

Avatar creation is a continuous process, as Second Life residents update themselves based on visual culture's influences, digital technology, and social media. Creative inhabitants are learning to manipulate new media to achieve realism in textures and body movement, which

results in a performance that seems very real. Residents augment themselves as "character" and "self" through creative narratives and live performances of their talents. They present themselves as they are in real life, either visual, verbally or combination of the two. Popular social sites such as Facebook™, Flickr™, YouTube™, Tumblr™, WordPress™, and Blogger™ hold the identities of Second Life residents and at times give evidence of a connection between the SL creative inhabitant and the real life person. In addition, SL creative inhabitants take their virtual selves into real life through the use of smart phones and tablets. Equally as interesting, Second Life inhabitants are choosing to use programs such as Skype™ and Tinychat™ to reveal their real life self to other inhabitants while virtually standing beside them in the Second Life environment. This bidirectional flow of reality creates a blurring in identity, but no confusion for the SL resident who seamlessly embodies two personas (real and virtual) at the same time, as the following narratives given by lolli, then Christie (me) reveal.

*lolli:* I am a living art form; I add to other residents' narratives through my active participation while accepting the role they see me in. I allow them to create the story around our interactions. I know it sounds like I am very giving person, but I do enjoy the story they create while I am walking through their environment. I find it interesting, how I am able to adjust and affect perception through performance. I add to their "fun" and they add to my art.

*Christie:* I see lolli as art. I created her but this artistic process has influence over who I am. A few years ago I created an image of how I see lolli and my relationship (See Figure 2). There is some blurring of identity with my ability to move real life aside and allow lolli room to make decisions. The roles she plays and choices in her words and actions surprise me at times, but it has lead to insight to who I am. This allows me to decide to accept, deny or change this aspect of myself.

This kind of self-analysis is not uncommon for residents in Second Life. lolli recently chatted with a reformed *griever*.<sup>7</sup> He explained that the negative effect of his performance as it changed his real life behavior. He became aggressive to his real life family and friends verbally, and on social media sites like Facebook.

lolli has met new residents as they arrive in Second Life believing it to be a place for aggression behaviors, due to Second Life residents filming and posting videos on YouTube of the behaviors in world. But it needs to be said, the behavior and the appearance of avatars did not at times match their conversation, this seems to show up most often in the 17-25 year olds. An example of this can be seen in a short documentary video, *Finds A Way* (<http://tinyurl.com/d3qn4td>). lolli asked the male avatar if she could film him and his friend as they danced. They both agreed but within the conversation many interesting perceptions were revealed about avatar creation. The title for this short video comes from statement made in that conversation, "the spirit always finds a way." The conversation and video captures a feeling expressed by several SL residents that the avatar provides a creative and life affirming way to move beyond the limitations and problems of the everyday real world.

### **SL Environments and Places**

A Second Life day is four hours in duration, which does not sound like much time, but four hours is plenty of time to do and see a lot of things since going from place to place is just a matter of knowing what type of environments there are and what the coordinates are for those environments. To figure out where to go, residents use the search button on the SL viewer, the destination guide button and website (<http://secondlife.com/destinations>). Or they use landmarks

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<sup>7</sup> A griever is a person who uses words, and or actions as aggression to cause a reaction in another person

gathered by other residents (<http://tinyurl.com/bm8rqpo>). The most efficient method of travel in SL is teleport,<sup>8</sup> which is achieved through pushing a teleport button.

*loli:* I will give a tour to a newbie<sup>9</sup> if the conversation seems to flow easily. I never know why the avatar came to Second Life, so I ask a lot of questions. I start with, what kind of experience would you like to have? This question really never works out well, because newbies don't know what is here. So I ask a different way, do you like ...role play? Shopping? Poetry or storytelling? Do you want to learn about... new career? Outer space? Music? Art? Do you want to experience university life? Science? Or history? Would you like to do something you cannot do in real life? I can take you to a place you can have dinosaur ride, and I can help you fly higher than the virtual sky using an altitude feather.<sup>10</sup> We can visit Dr. Who's Tardis, but I bet you are already surprised how much bigger Second Life is on the inside.

*Christie:* Second Life is huge and they make it enormous by exploiting a couple of little secrets. They build in and on platforms in the sky [See Figure 3], above the virtual land and water. These Skyboxes and platforms are only found by teleport and sometimes you might bump into one while flying.

Creative inhabitants have built Second Life into a multilayered virtual world with a multitude of hidden environments and places on top of visible ones. Construction and destruction of environments is a constant in SL. In such a dynamic place, it is impossible to know just how many environments there are at any given moment. Builders utilize the capabilities of Second Life to create the illusion of larger than life spaces by understanding how to move the eye in an

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<sup>8</sup> This refers to the moving from one location to another through the use of scripts.

<sup>9</sup> A Newbie is a new Second Life resident

<sup>10</sup> An altitude feather is used to override the preset altitude an avatar can fly, takes the avatar higher than the programmed atmosphere. also known as flight feather and flight bands

environment and the person through an environment, similar to the way a theatrical stage is assembled, and just like a stage it can be changed quickly. The environments in Second Life are the stages the avatars perform on, and the ability to change a scene makes Second Life exciting, but also frustrating as places disappear and new ones replace them on a regular basis.

There are some historic places belonging to Second Life that remain constant. The original road built in Second Life still traverses the mainland, and the first primitive<sup>11</sup> (prim) sits in as corner stone in a welcome area (See Figure 4). These simple markers provide a sense of history and stability to the residents of Second Life. Yet some residents want real life reminders of our global history and they recreate real life-derived historical places in Second Life.

As part of this research, I spent some time looking for these real-life monuments. Although, I did not think I would enjoy these places, due to the ability to see them on Google images, I discovered the importance in having historic places in Second Life and the ability to move through them a sense of reverence for the nature, duration, and size of these places. I was honestly moved as I was sitting in the pew of SL's St. Paul's Cathedral (see Figure 5). I gained a clear understanding of the task of painting the Sistine Chapel, as lolli stood under it. Another must see in SL is the Terracotta Warrior Army (see Figure 6). It is a beautifully constructed installation that provides a close and personal understanding of this amazing archeological discovery. Other places that I have found interesting were the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the University of Delaware (UD) for very different reasons. UWA is extremely active in new media art forms and has wonderful art exhibits as well as guest lecturers. UD campus and gallery are easy to move through. They provide an interactive map able to teleport a

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<sup>11</sup> A prim is a single part of a virtual object. (<http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Primitive>)

resident to the desired location on campus. Their space is not over crowded allowing for new residents to navigate easily. They currently have a Warhol photo exhibit up as well as the university's art educators work displayed.

### **Doing Something in Second Life: Seeking Connections and Experiences**

The creative inhabitants of SL seek and desire connections that are engaging and meaningful and this includes maintaining forms of expression that blend well with virtual reality. The key is to find ways to allow for bidirectional communication and collaboration in SL. Although this sounds difficult, it can be as simple as linking a comment board to images, or establishing a place for residents to upload images related to the theme, thereby adding to an artistic encounter or a body of knowledge. Second Life can be a great place to display real life art of students and an art educator's personal work, if s/he utilizes the capabilities of Second Life as a multimedia environment. As a potentially educational site, is difficult to build a massive patronage of a place that is educational without including elements that represent both real and imaged reality in Second Life. The best practice is to collaborate with stakeholders in promoting what you want to do.

*loli:* I was sitting at the local diner (see Figure 7), when I received a group message from The Virtual Artist Alliance reminding me it was Monday and time for the photohunt.<sup>12</sup> I tell new residents all the time, the easiest method to find out what is happening is to be a groupie.

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<sup>12</sup> content requiring participants to photograph the same environment using only the viewer.

*Christie:* Second Life residents use in-world groups to send out information, share information, organize events, as well as linking friends together or community through group chat. The live musician groups are great for exploring venues, as musicians move from club, restaurant, pub and beach deck parties, sometimes in the same night. I do suggest looking for groups that match what you want to do. Because there is so much to do in Second Life I created a Wordle infographic (See Figure 8). There are far too many groups to list here, but I looked at lolli's list and picked out the ones she finds to be the most helpful and informative in the area of art and education. These groups are the Builder's Brewery, Virtual World Best Practices in Education, ISTE Educational Technology Association, Linden Lab Endowments for the Arts, Real Life Education in Second Life, University of Western Australia 3Dand Design Challenge, and The Virtual Artist Alliance. The members in these groups are up to date on technology, new media and where we are heading in the future of education.

*lolli:* If I attended and volunteered for everything I would never have time to dance. Today, I have already received group notices of a drum circle and poetry reading, a tour of Scottius Polke exhibit at Spit Screen and an extreme rock party. It is only 8:57AM PDT<sup>13</sup> I think I will take a pass on the extreme rock party and drum circle.

*Christie:* Although residents enjoy an active lifestyle with in-world games and challenges, Second Life is not a game. It is what the creative inhabitant makes of it and defines themselves to be within it, this view I share with White's understanding of the virtual world (as cited by Taylor, Ballengee-Morris, and Carpenter, 2010). It is just the nature of being in Second Life that creates this learning through play environment.

The Virtual Artist Alliance understands that residents are interested in developing their talents in Second Life, and sponsor two regularly schedule 60-minute skill based learning

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<sup>13</sup> PDT refers to Pacific Daylight Time, also known as SLT Second Life time. Linden Lab is a California based company.

experiences for them. One is the photohunt (see Figure 10) and the other is the Haiku<sup>14</sup> Speed build. Using a chosen Haiku residents have 60 minutes to go through their inventory as well as construct a representation of the poem (see Figure 11). lolli is not a builder, but she has participated in the Haiku speed build before, and received great support from the participants, meaning they did not laugh.

*lolli:* Like I said, there is a lot to do in Second Life. Anything you have imagined is probably here, or was here. Linden Lab does have community standards, although the rules are loosely enforced, leaving the landowners to create and enforce their own rules. Just a little hint, just because you can do anything, does not mean you should. I have been kicked out of a couple of places for my getting a little too crazy on a Saturday night. The key is to know the environments and the social norms for the communities in Second Life. Trust me, it's a really hard lesson to learn, and the fun ends pretty fast when you're shot out of a club into the ocean to cool your heels.

*Christie:* It's hard to stop lolli dancing so she just moves to another club (See Figure 12). I personally am not much of a dancer, because I am rarely graceful and dancing for me is like testing gravity. Lucky for lolli, she can control gravity in Second Life, making it a unique creative tool. lolli does get thrown out of venues as she calls it for research. Sometimes it has been for dancing on top of speakers or where the club employees stand, other times it's been for wearing the wrong clothes and refusing to change. I have often noticed intolerance to the performance of avatars based on real life values. This also shows up as discrimination based on lifestyle choices in the virtual world, by applying real life morals and expectations of society.

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<sup>14</sup> Haiku is an unrhymed verse form of Japanese origin having 3 lines unusually in a 5,7,5 syllable poem (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/haiku>)



**Bringing it all Together, as if that's Even Possible**

My capstone project endeavored to provide a glimpse of Second Life through the lens of an insider, and to share snapshots of some of the people, places, and activities within Second Life. In my professional and personal pursuit to understand the complexity of virtual reality, I considered research on visual culture and media culture. I discovered quickly there is a long-standing conversation on the influences of technology and media on our society. My thinking has been greatly influenced by McLuhan (2003) and Postman (1993).

Second Life is a virtual environment, a canvas, a chat room, and a place for collaboration, innovation, commerce, and education. Second Life residents use computers and software to develop characters, places, and to perform as residents of this virtual environment. They seek connections (both virtual and sometimes real) with other inhabitants through new digital media, electronic social networks, and technology. They apply real-world values and standards to their SL world, but with some inconstancy. Avatars exist as the inhabitants of SL, where they create and express themselves, form associations with other SL avatars, and develop their abilities, all the while reflecting influences of their creators' personal values and the larger visual culture in which these creators live.

Second Life was developed to be and is used as a creative, virtual environment that fosters innovation by making possible collaboration with residents from around the (real) world. It is an open environment with no obvious social-economic or political hierarchy (other than the means of access, which arguably does represent some degree of economic security). All forms of knowledge are accepted and appreciated as valuable in SL but the ability to create sites, events,

and personas (avatars) in SL using digital technology and new media creatively and skillfully in SL does promote popularity there, and earns the respect of SL's other creative inhabitants.

As part of my capstone research project, I focused my attention on one particular grouping of creative inhabitants who normally could be found at Orientation Island public. This group provided a window to the ways digital technology and new media are being used in SL. As I sat on the eighth fence post in Orientation Island I was able to observe avatar creation and performance from another perspective that is not my own (see Figure 13).

Creating environments in SL is not particularly easy. During my research on Second Life I explored the possibility of my own gallery ownership. I quickly learned that I had not planned the process out well. My gallery was empty because I had not lined up artists or personal work. I did not plan a budget and spent \$200 (real money) within weeks, purchasing more space than I needed, buying items not necessary to achieve my goal and uploading images,<sup>15</sup> in addition to generally being unprepared as the region in which I built my gallery role-played an annual hurricane (see Figure 14). These expensive missteps are similar to real life experiences of ownership, and would make a great learning opportunity for art students. The benefit of doing something like this in Second Life is accessibility to knowledge, artists, real life profit possible, innovative thinking in museum studies with possible immediate action through experimentation. In addition, students can develop themes that make sense to them, and promote in-world juried shows and even solicit for artists who are not currently in Second Life.

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<sup>15</sup> In Second Life, one makes purchases with Linden Dollars, which are the form of currency in SL. One acquires Linden Dollars through a variety of means, including purchasing Lindens with a (real) credit card from Linden Lab. One can purchase Lindens right in the SL environment (see [http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/How\\_to\\_Earn\\_Linden\\_Dollars\\_in\\_Second\\_Life](http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/How_to_Earn_Linden_Dollars_in_Second_Life) ).

Second Life is meant to be fun for the art educator and the students, but I also know from personal experience McLuhan's warning to keep our "wits" about us when dealing with media's influence is good advice in Second Life. With that said here are a few of lolli's tips for the art educator.

- Art educators interested in avatar creation and performance should understand it is not merely a lighthearted adventure, but an emotional process that requires time and a well thought curricular plan. The process should include traditional media (pencils, paint, etc.) to allow students both to plan ideas and to give them a break from the input of the virtual environment.
- Spend a great deal of time studying with students how avatar performances within the different SL environments develops identity (Laio, 2010).
- Although, a large part of the creative aspect of Second Life is held within avatar creation and performance, avatar identity creation in an art lesson might be too large of a task to formally explore in a K-12 classroom. This does not mean that other forms of identity exploration or the creation of images representing alter egos or personas would not have value, particularly in the form of role-play with real world applications.
- Diversify the people you and your students seek to meet in Second Life. One of the best ways to do this is through groups. I suggest joining at least one live musician's group, as they move from venue to venue, and send out mass teleport offers. This provides an easy method of seeing different environments in Second Life, with the same group of people.
- Second Life is not a closed world where residents are living detached from reality, so bring your passions into Second Life.

- Teach students to educate residents through their profile, and to talk to other residents about what it is your avatar does or is interested in doing. I once read a tip that said don't ask SL residents about their real life while in SL. I have an amendment to that tip, just read the profiles of SL residents. These SL profiles may contain interesting information, and sometimes the profiles of SL residents will tell you if they don't want to talk about real life.
- Second Life depends on the knowledge you bring into this virtual world. If you are promoting it through curriculum, through research, or if you are sending students here, know this place intimately. Knowing Second Life does not mean spending ten hours a day here, it means taking note of some of the residents, environments, and events taking place in SL, and reason for them.
- Get to know the creations, the details, and most of all the people in SL. They help explain the environment. There are many informative conversations happening in Second Life at any given time.
- Guide students to develop awareness through critical analysis of influences that shape their identities and values, both in relation to digital media, and offline in the real world (Darts, 2004; Delacruz, 2009; Tillander, 2010).

### **Final Thoughts**

When I first became a Second Life resident there was some hiding behind my avatar, but that is not the case any longer. We all, including myself, want to be accepted for ourselves and our talents in both real life and virtual reality. Recently, I met a new resident and he was surprised how friendly Second Life inhabitants are. I told him residents want him there, so “be present”. I believe Second Life is art. I might not always agree with what it says and at times I

don't understand it, but then it is my responsibility to study, learn, and critically analyze it. I also have to experience and describe it so I am able to understand myself better. I do believe strongly and without a doubt that art educators need to assist students in navigating their roles and identities in the virtual future/frontier. As Hillis (1999) understood the exploration and transference of identity can be healthy, but can also be "dangerous if fragmentation is already a problematic feature of their real world" (cited in Taylor, Ballengee-Morris, Carpenter, 2010, p. 214).

*lolli:* Sometimes I feel as though I have been dropped from the tallest building, just so Christie can make sure she is real. Other times I can see her watching me, as if I have her answers. She watches my body move and stands at her desk attempting to mimic me. She sits silently watching my poor choices and allowing the story to play out around me. I wonder how far back our history goes, as she allows herself to be hurt at times by my actions and laughs at my inside jokes.

*Christie:* Sometimes I take lolli to the edge of Second Life, where there is not horizon and no artificial sky and I let her go, and watch her fall to the ground. Her animation causes her to push herself up from the virtual concrete and stand without scratch. She dusts herself off and looks around and in her mind, she repeats the words I said when I was a child, "see that trick". She is resilient. She is my creation, and has developed a life of her own, but also she effects my life. She speaks with knowledge and passion; I sit amazed by her. I am her number one fan, as she is accepting and strong; she is perfectly imperfect. I love her just as she is, but changes in digital technology and new media have made her outdated. Her skin, hair, and size are all becoming obsolete. Second Life content creators are standardizing with the gaming industry, so their work can cross virtual platforms. Overtime she will not be able to find clothes, fit in chairs, and function like other residents.

Five years ago, I created an avatar to be a character in a story in a made-up world. As I started to create and perform in this role, I realized I was incorporating my own personal experiences and insecurities into the creation and activities of my avatar. What I thought was a theatrical production developed into a shift in my thinking allowing both lolli and I space to explore ways to develop my own voice and understandings through this process. This is how the vast majority of residents I have spoken with also rediscover their creativity. The innovation, education, and creative aspects of Second Life are found in the real life people who have taken on these virtual personas. They share knowledge through self-creation and conversations within the places they have created and chosen to dwell within (if only part time). The opportunities for creative and educational exchanges in the virtual world develop out of the people within Second Life.

lolli started off as a Linden Lab standard avatar, and over the last five year she went from fictional character, to artist, to being a University of Florida graduate student defending Second Life as a place for creative and educational opportunities. I would have to say that is pretty good for an avatar.

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### **List of Figures with Figure Captions**

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Figure 2. I created her but she has influence over who I am.

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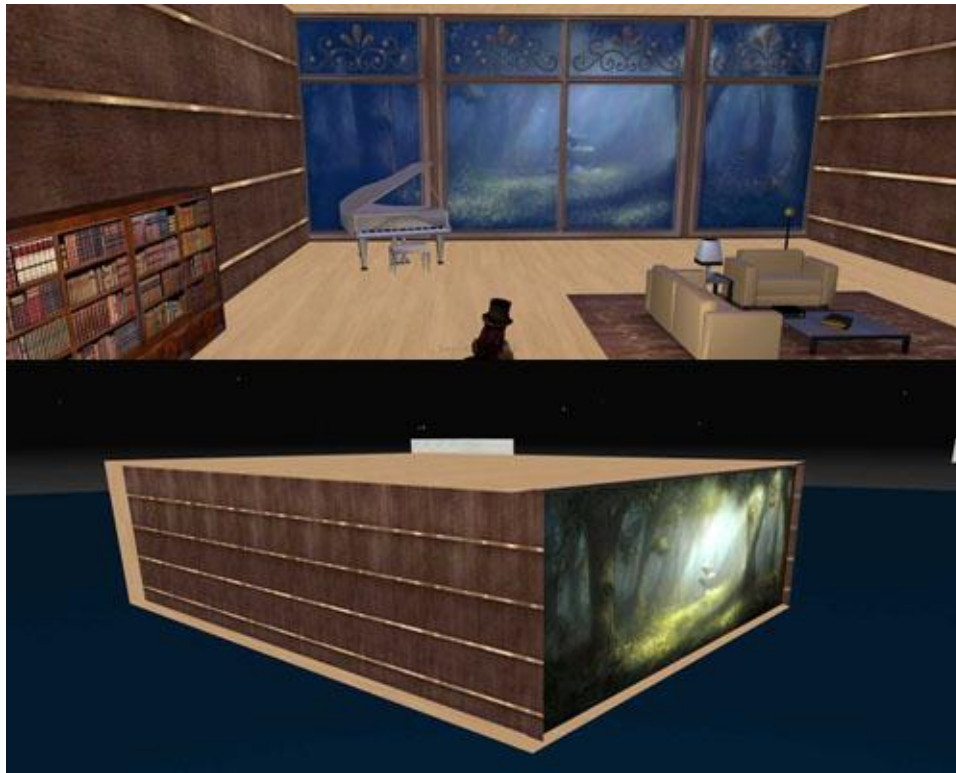


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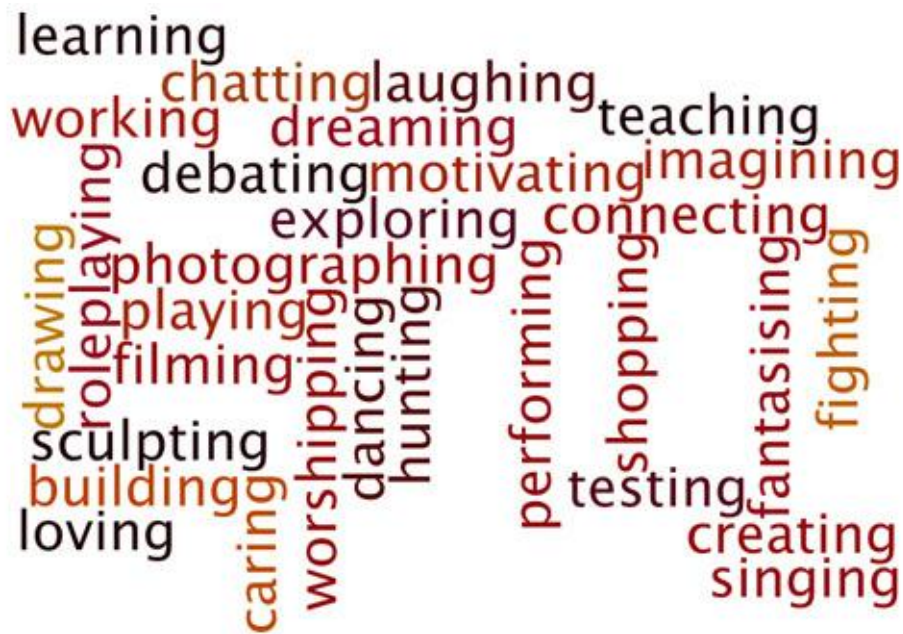
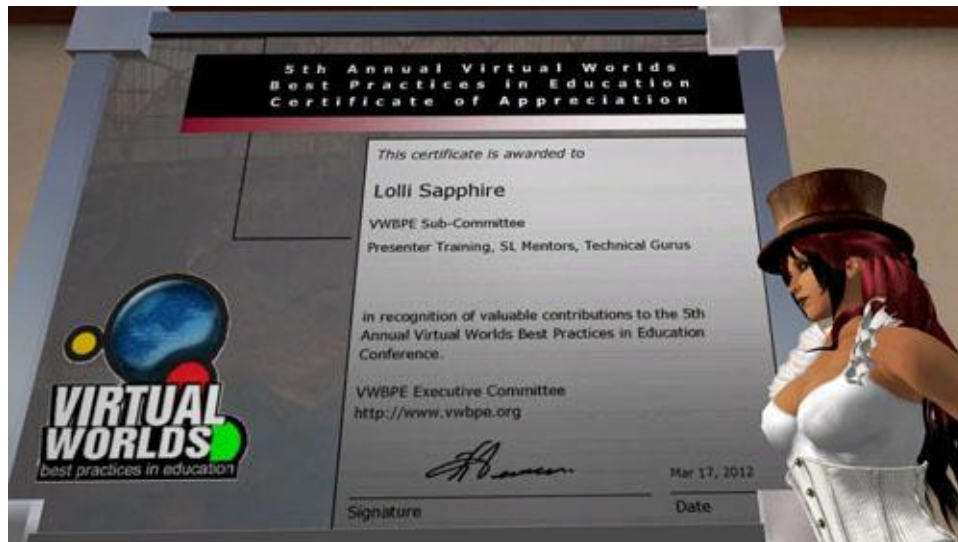


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## Second Life: creative and educational possibilities



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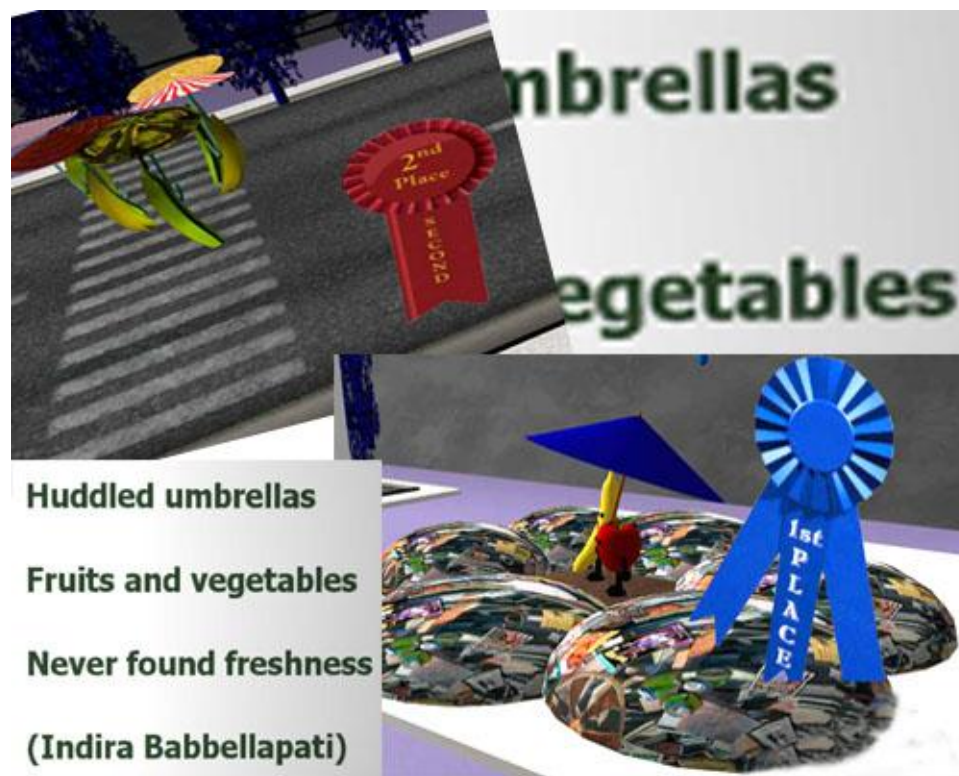
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### **Author Biography**

I am an augmented new media artist/educator. My research area is digital technology, new media and virtual reality, mainly Second Life. I explore avatar creation and performance as narrative while exploring my shifting realities (real and virtual) as part of the creative process.

In 2000, I received my Bachelors in Studio Art from The University of West Florida. Since then, I have put my talents to use working with before and after school programs, as well as resident and day camp programs. I have held positions with the Girl Scouts of America, Department of Defense's Moral, Welfare and Recreation Department, local government recreation department and private companies.

Currently, my family is in the process of moving from Virginia to Hawaii. We are excited to have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the Hawaiian culture over the next three years. I am curious to see how this change will influence my art and lolli's life.

To find out what is happening with lolli Sapphire, just stop into Second Life and say hello. If you are a little shy, you can also check out her profile at <https://my.secondlife.com/lolli.sapphire> , as she updates it with images of the places and people she meets along her journey.