



## ***A RAINING AFTERNOON: GROWING YOUNGER AND WISER***

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### **Abstract**

In this narrative inquiry, the lived experience comes from both a virtual space (*Second Life*) and real life. The avatar (Rain) and the maker (Christine) explore identity construction, aesthetics, and notions of aging and appearance. This research is expressed in an arts-based format, a play, so that the process of internal dialogue is revealed through two characters and serves as an example of valuing the multiple voices that are within each of us. This play investigates the nature of societal influence and its impact on one's identity, recognizing the facets and roles in all of us, and transformative power. This type of presentation and self-exploration serves as an example for epistemological and ontological positioning and curriculum possibilities.

### **Prelude: Text Play as an Arts-based Research**

Narrative inquiry is influenced by the Deweyan notion that life is education. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) were first to use the term, *narrative inquiry*, as a research methodology that through story construction of life experiences (textual and/or visual) can form “theoretical ideas about the nature of human life” (p. 3). Narrative inquiries require one to explore and relate personal practices and reflections to social theory and systems. I chose to tell a narrative within an arts-based methodology because I believe this approach encourages a more critical form of reflection and introspection of my experiences and emotions. Carol Ellis (2009), an educator and narrative inquiry theorist, recently stated that she chose a narrative, dialogic representation because it illustrated the debates that were happening in her mind about “the process and ethics of writing these stories” (p. 3). She further explains that a narrative inquiry that is introspective reveals “vulnerable, muddy, and ambivalent process of making ethical decisions in qualitative research” (p. 3). In her article, she explores her two inner voices through a conversation format with her ego and alter ego. It was her desire that through this methodological approach and writing process that her thoughts and positioning would be clearer for her and provide an opportunity for readers to view her thought process as she worked out issues. It is this type of narrative methodology that I utilize to explore my ego (Christine) and alter ego (Rain) in relationship to society's concepts of aging and the internalizations of those concepts that Christine and Rain act out in this arts-based drama.

Arts-based research theorists Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997) identify an arts-based approach to inquiry as having “the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or design elements that infuse the inquiry and its writing” (p. 73). Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) has the potential in its poetic, narrative, and/or visual presentation of research to engage its audience to revisit their positions and assumptions toward, in this case, embracing the psychological and physicality of aging. Barone (1995) contends that exploring ideas within “a novel outlook, perspective, paradigm, and ideology” provides opportunities to view one's thoughts differently (p. 173). Taking Barone's idea into consideration, a dialogue approach between my alter-ego avatar and myself reveals my virtual identity construction, as well as my assimilated social assump-

tions about aging and my preoccupation with looking backward to move forward syndrome. This type of narrative play format also provides readers an opportunity to experience from vicarious positions and stimulates self-exploration.

Stories, according to Daniel Pink (2005), are the methods by which we as human beings “are freer to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and our purpose” (p. 113). Transformation and dialogues that occur between self and self, and self and others, demand a dialogic presentation that arts-based methodology provides. In this text play, I explore my self as self, and self as an avatar, through personal reflections of creating and performing my avatar and as I work out several voices within the virtual space exploring concepts of aging in the real world. As a tool for self-reflection and alter ego, the avatar has its own voice, persona, and perspective, which I use to voice my perceptions of aging. Since the avatar is created by me, my multiple voices as a Cherokee, Appalachian, middle-class, wife, mother, grandmother, sister, daughter, professor, dancer, and artist, to name a few identifiers, and the issues of voice and silence, impact my perceptions of identity. A key to this is the idea of perspective (place in the world, identity, and worldview), which perspective/position is in effect, and the inter-play. The text play is also a pedagogical approach that I offer as an example, and conclude this presentation of my narrative inquiry with a discussion of the implications of such an approach to learning and teaching about visual culture and gender constructions. I utilize a standard play format.

### Act One: Rain’s Inworld<sup>1</sup>

(It is a bright sunny morning—no clouds in the sky. Sitting outside of a café, by the pool, Rain begins reflecting with her creator, Christine, and several close avatars, one being Brooke.)

<sup>1</sup> This term is used to designate when one is in *Second Life*.

### RAIN

My name is Rain Winkler, and I live in *Second Life (SL)*. I am forever young, tall, and curvaceous. I dance, watch movies, teach, and visit exhibitions. Life is without stress and, for the most part, I concentrate on me. I was born February 2007. I have had hundreds of transformations. Here I am when I graduated from Orientation Island (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> At this point my appearance has not been altered from the standard template.

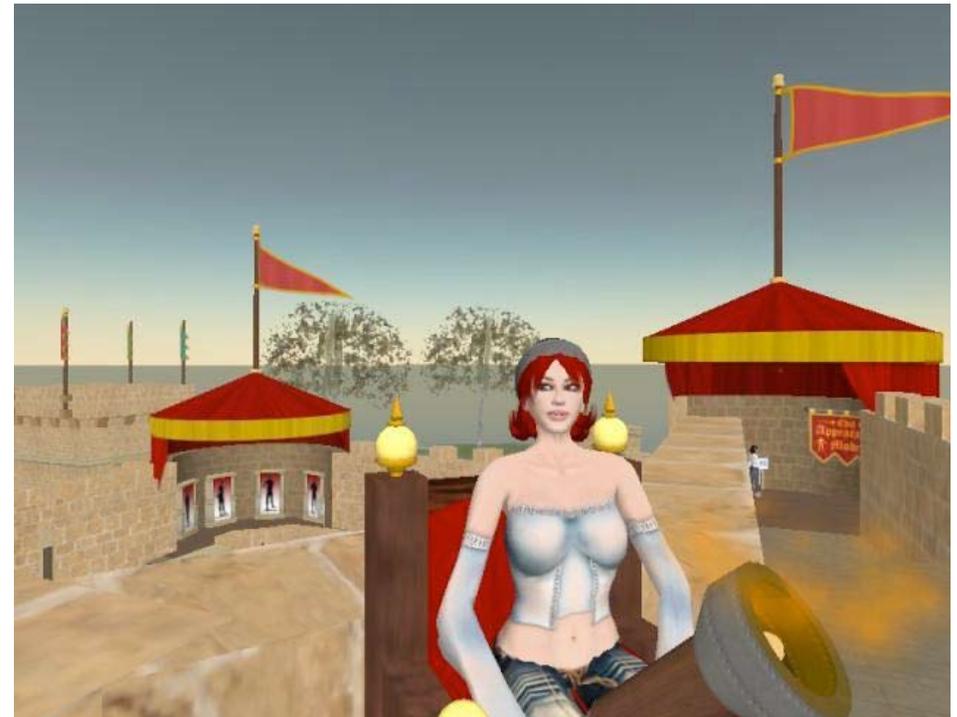


Figure 1. Rain Winkler’s Virtual Birthday. Photograph by Christine Ballengee Morris.

Christine and I have explored our process of developing as an avatar and what that means in Real Life (RL). She is especially interested in the idea of visual aesthetics in relationship to *SL* and *RL* identities. My part in her research is to provide alternative experiences that resist social

<sup>2</sup> Orientation Island is where all new avatars can go to become introduced to the skills of walking, flying, scripting, and policies in *Second Life*.

constructs around aging—avatars can stop the clock—the sun can always shine—life is without stress, pain, and poverty.

(In RL, Christine sits in an antique rocker, at a very old library table, with photos of her family surrounding her laptop. She stares at her Cherokee regalia that hang on a wall and a collage of grandson images that brings a smile to her face. She watches Rain dance around in her world and proceeds to express herself in her academic voice by writing, pausing every once in a while to command Rain to dance one more time.)

#### CHRISTINE

As an avatar creator, I have spent time contemplating the impact and possible applications of a virtual space like *Second Life*. The company, Linden Lab, is headquartered in San Francisco and employs 250 people across the United States, Europe, and Asia. *Second Life* is a three-dimensional virtual world that was launched in 2003. Ondrejka, a Linden Lab designer, stated:

From the shape of their avatars to the design of their homes, from how they spend their time to what types of affinity groups they form; *Second Life's* design was focused on fostering creativity and self-expression in order to create a vibrant and dynamic world full of interesting content. (2004, p. 1)

The designers' vision of *Second Life*<sup>3</sup> was to create a space where a person can build an avatar and spaces that function as in the real world. The hundreds of thousands of residents from over 50 countries have opportunities to interact among 12,000 virtual acres that include a variety of activities and members. According to the explanation online, "Second Life is a free online virtual world imagined and created by its Residents.

3 See <http://lindenlab.com>

From the moment you enter Second Life, you'll discover a fast-growing digital world filled with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity" (Linden Lab, n.d.a., ¶ 1).

*Second Life* provides opportunities for participants to create identities that could be free from societal and physical limitations of ethnicity, gender, geography, sexual orientation or status, and yet key to this virtual world is its capitalist and sexual overtones. According to Linden Lab, the company who developed *Second Life*, "There are hundreds of organizations currently in *Second Life*, including many Fortune 1000 companies and government institutions" (Linden Lab, n.d.b., ¶ 1). Companies such as *Starbucks*, *Victoria's Secret*, and *The Gap* have virtual stores, but there are also small businesses, theaters, art galleries, social clubs, universities, and even an international art education association in *SL*.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the cultural constructs within *Second Life* appear to be Western manifestations. To purchase items in *Second Life*, money (Linden dollars) must be earned or can be bought with RL money. Capitalist consumption possibilities are available around every corner. Some individuals challenge the capitalism mentality by offering for free items such as body parts and home furnishings. I do not buy items. I find it more interesting to obtain my items for free or to make my own. But actually that is how I am in RL—second hand stores are favorite hunting grounds.

Through the process of building virtual embodied lives, with accessories such as pets and homes, there is a possibility that boundaries and a sense of self and identity challenge the concept of reality. Virtual worlds provide opportunities to transcend beyond the realities of RL human flesh through customization and to face the temptation to build an ideal body that becomes the preferred self.

(Christine reviews what she has written and is tired of talking about *SL*. She quickly sneaks a peak of her lovely grandson and goes back inworld.)

4 The slur! to find the International Art Education Association (InAEA) in *SL* is <http://slurl.com/secondlife/DACE/118/239/319>. Art educators meet the first Monday of each month at 18.00 hour *SL* time, which is Pacific Standard Time.

(Rain and Brooke are lounging around on Brooke's island. Brooke's maker sends Christine a snapshot of herself and then settles into a conversation with Rain.)

RAIN

While I was attending a film premier at Sundance, I met Freeze. He said that some of the big corporations that are in this world are collecting research so that they can apply what they learn in RL. Buying habits and styles are emerging interests. Oh, I also learned that many avatars want to talk about their identity construction and development. One of my friends, Brooke, communicated her thoughts about virtual identities.

BROOKE

My creator purposefully made me the way she would like to look in RL. So, I suppose as you look at me, you can think of the opposite and you will be able to picture her—except the gender of course. She says that no matter what she does, she has a hard time overlooking the fact that she is female. I do have a brother though. Tinderbox Ember is my creator's male avatar. My identity—hmmm ... I'm powerful as evidenced by my stature. I am many races, but primarily I am of the earth (see Figure 2), (albeit virtual, I know ... this world is full of contradictions! Don't you love it?).

RAIN

(To Christine) As she states, Brooke is the fundamental nature of her creator. Gender choices in *SL* are limited to male or female, since Brooke's creator desires to explore both genders, she is forced to create two avatars—one female and one male.

(Rain shifts her conversation from Christine to Brooke.)

I am very female. Brooke, the template used for me was a female club dancer. My body type choices included height, breast and hip size,

short to long legs, hair, skin color, eye shape and color, make-up, and dance moves. My creator challenges herself by having me behave and think in ways that are not available to her in the real world. I am her alter ego, unlike your creator viewing you as the fundamental nature. I also have a male brother called Snow, but his physical appearance and personality have not been developed. Our maker has not identified with him yet.



Figure 2. Brooke at her island. Photograph by Pamela G. Taylor.

My persona, unlike my creator, is spontaneous, playful, and youthful. As I move through *SL*, I am not concerned with daily chores, schedules, responsibilities or obligations. If I feel like dancing in a middle of a meeting, I do. If I feel like leaving, I do. I am about being—Christine refers to this as her teen philosophy for living.

(Sipping on club soda and lemon, Christine contemplates Rain and Brooke’s stated experiences and how much their experiences align with other avatars.)

CHRISTINE

(Softly ponders) What is it about Rain that resonates with me? What role does she play? Don’t I have enough cultural indicators that I desire a virtual one or two? Gender exploration is a part of the original movement within *Second Life*—not being constrained by the norms that are present in RL and yet, those who can’t let go, maintain inhibitions in *SL*. Hum, am I doing that?

(As she begins to write, her Mac makes the “you have mail” sound, and she sees that it is an article that she has been anticipating by Christine Liao.)

I have just finished reading Liao’s (2008) article in volume 3 of *Visual Culture & Gender*, “My Metamorphic Avatar Journey.” She attempted to create a gender ambiguous avatar. In the beginning of her research, she was exploring the technical inabilities of creating a genderless avatar. Her inworld experiences, which included ridicule from other avatars to being kicked off a site because she was gender ambiguous, led her to emotional and personal explorations. She found that in the process of becoming genderless, she tried to detach herself from her avatar. She states:

However, the more I tried to separate my feelings from my avatar, the more I felt the impossibility of doing so, if the avatar body were nothing to me, I would not care about how it looks. But I do. I realize that I did not want other people to see my avatar with a gender ambiguous body. (Liao, 2008, p. 31)

Pamela G. Taylor, B. Stephen Carpenter, and I explored avatar development in an unpublished manuscript and in a presentation at The National Art Education Association Convention in New Orleans, 2008. We contend that the virtual body becomes a part of the participant’s identity. When referring to her avatar, Taylor uses the pronoun “I.” Carpenter refers to his avatar by name—“Metaphor,” whereas, I move back and forth between first and third person in referring to my actions and thoughts, and those of my avatar Rain. The three different relationships we have with our avatars reflect the complex discourse of identity and the relationships faced by users and their avatars in virtual worlds. As Liao (2008) concludes, we as creators care about the visual representation/identity of our avatars.

(The sun is changed to a noon light and Rain is transported to a *SL* library. Rain proceeds to explore identity development and social presence theory (see Figure 3). Lounging under her favorite tree, Rain contemplates and continues the dialogue.)



Figure 3. Rain reading in *Second Life*. Photograph by Christine Ballengee Morris.

### RAIN

Christine, as my creator, you seem to be motivated in the making. For others it is the social aspect, but you seem to want to know the possibilities, and I demonstrate what those are in *SL*. At the Communication and Information Technologies mini-conference of the American Sociology Association in *Second Life* on August 12, 2007, identity was explored and defined by Magallan Egoyan. Egoyan (2007) explained that social presence theory is the process by which someone comes to know and think about other people's characteristics qualities, which can lead to a better perception of oneself and others. This is considered one of the first theories of communication media, which explores interpersonal involvement. *SL* identity is viewed as performative and is determined by the quality of interactions with others and its relational capabilities and interpersonal exchanges. Attendees discussed identity as a related concept that is intertwined with presence, which is connected to how one avatar relates to other avatars or makers. Some stated that since humans are transformative through culture, we are virtual, and virtual is essential to the real.

### CHRISTINE

I often think that identity in *SL* is performative; therefore, this lends toward the first/third social presence. How does one synchronize one's real life and second life? I read the Learning Technologies Conference Blog concerning a backlash of *Second Life* in which Chester and Breterton (2007) conclude "cyberspace is not a virtual world without connection to the rest of people's lives. What we do and who we are online are shaped consciously and unconsciously by who we are offline. The Internet is, after all, a part of our real life" (§ 7).

### BROOKE

Rain, my creator, likes the making, and prefers to merge our identity into one. But we are performative in a limited basis, since the island is invitation only. We enjoy creating, which is a solo act for us sometimes.

### RAIN

Christine is always fussing and making sure I receive attention from the other avatars. So, although she states it is the creating, there is always a desire to meet and greet. Now, I would like to get back to my book. By the way, I am wearing a pair of Prada-like shoes, a skirt and top that Christine designed for celebrating a great political year. (Whispering) I have matching thongs and wings (to illustrate my flightiness), which a friend gave to me.

(Wishing that she could spend a day laying in the grass and reading a book, Christine continues writing and realizing that she is beginning to go to a place that is uncomfortable. She goes through her iTunes and decides on listening to a collection of songs that are calming and proceeds to write.)

### CHRISTINE

Very few avatars illustrate age beyond 30, excessive weight, receding hairlines, etc. Most strive for an ideal of beauty that focuses on being young, toned, and White. In Steven Holtzman's (1997) book, *Digital Mosaics: The Aesthetics of Cyberspace*, he explores examples of cyber-art and the aesthetic principles utilized, which focus on nonlinearity, disruption, and autonomy. Endless possibilities and timelessness of experiences and narrative are key components of cyber aesthetics. The term *virtual aesthetics* explores the idea that one can create new conceptions of reality, identity, and sexuality that actually explores or ignores issues in one's RL. Virtual aesthetics is also interactive, relational, and centers on exploration of self and others through dialogue and sharing of stories, space, and experiences. Through Rain, I learn about areas of my self that remain silent in RL. Through careful analysis, I can identify emerging themes in RL that are explored in *SL*. Since I was four, I understood ethnic difference, cultural borders, and bi-tri-cultural understandings, which strongly influenced my identity development and career choices. As my life chronologically progressed, the volume or silence of the internal voices of each role and identity entity was expressed accord-

ing to external needs. Through Rain, I remain young, in great shape, free to be spontaneous without guilt, and have relationships with others that span multiple communities. The difference between my RL and *SL* experience is the ability to manage one's identity and social presence in *SL* due to the lack, or rejection, of outside interference.

(Christine pauses and realizes that she has arrived at a place that requires further examination about aesthetics and the virtual place. Rain is transported to Brooke's island, since she is an invited guest and decides to relax in a lounge within an environment that encourages contemplation (see Figure 4). Christine does an Internet search and finds a few sites to share.)



Figure 4. Rain lounging at Brooke Hyacinth's island.  
Photograph by Christine Ballengee Morris.

## CHRISTINE

In one Internet site, Lev Manovich (2005) states:

Another aesthetic feature of virtual worlds lies in their peculiar temporal dynamic: constant, repetitive shifts between an illusion and its suspense. Virtual worlds keep reminding us about their artificiality, incompleteness, and constructedness. They present us with a perfect illusion only to reveal the underlying machinery next. (§ 40)

He continues his exploration with an example of his idea of virtual aesthetics that connects some Residents' (members of *Second Life*) needs to duplicate the RL, the relational component, and the capitalistic foundations of the site:

The best place to experience the whole gestalt is in one of the outdoor cafes on Sunset Plaza in West Hollywood. The avatars sip cappuccino amidst the illusion of 3D space. The space is clearly the result of a quick compositing job: billboards and airbrushed café interior in the foreground against a detailed matte painting of Los Angeles with the perspective exaggerated by haze. The avatars strike poses, waiting for their agents (yes, just like cyberspace) to bring valuable information. Older customers look even more computer generated, their faces bearing traces of extensive face-lifts. You can enjoy the scene while feeding the parking meter every twenty minutes. A virtual works is waiting for you; all we need is your credit card number. (Manovich, 1995, § 62)

## RAIN

I've been there but I don't have an agent—they cost money. Well, I hate to interrupt your academic contemplations, but the other day, Brooke and I were talking about this, and for her it is the possibilities that are important to Brooke's aesthetic and identity development; she said:

## BROOKE

Well, even though I vehemently proclaim ... why represent RL exactly the way it is in a virtual world?, I understand that there needs to be recognizable metaphors, or people would simply be confused all the time and not be able to maneuver through this virtual world. That said, I like to use the fact that the constraints of the real world do not limit us in this virtual world—for example, gravity, weight, oxygen. I love building in the sky and underwater—I love participating in art exhibits that literally transform me into another being or another place or literally tie me in knots (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Brooke in knots. Photograph by Pamela G. Taylor.

## RAIN

Brooke is an example of the virtual disruption and possibilities that Holtzman (1997) states are elements that define this type of aesthetics, which serve as an attraction to be a part of this world as a creator.

## CHRISTINE

Timelessness is a creative motivator for me. I struggle with the idea of aging in RL, and the idea of being able to escape the gray skies in *SL* is enticing. And possibly the word *escape*, is not correct, but actually an obsession with *transcending age* is better stated. As a middle-aged woman and a grandmother of 4, the idea of being *sexy* and *desirable* seems to be fleeting with every ache and pain with which age rewards me, so an ageless, forever-young avatar is alluring and eases me into accepting the inevitable.

## RAIN

I could be a grandmother, but in *Second Life* wearing one's age is not mandatory or possible. Identities are easily transformed and transcended, but there is a limitation regarding how old I can be or how heavy I can be due to technology.

## CHRISTINE

I was reading the *International Herald Tribune* when I was in Japan on August 11, 2008, and Aaron Britt wrote, "*Second Life* avatar does and is precisely what the player wants, not just a little Mario who can be made to run and jump or a shapely diva gyrating of her own programmed will, it comes far closer to being a full fledged virtual persona" (2008, p. A10).

## RAIN

I heard that there was a conference this past August in the Netherlands at the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the participants explored identity in virtual worlds. I understand that the central focus was that spaces, such as *Second Life*, give those in RL the possibility to become someone completely different or, conversely, expose oneself to the world. One can explore questions, such as: How is identity created in

virtual worlds? What does it mean for privacy and self-image? Does the virtual world have an influence on our real world? Why are people using different identities, anyway? All of these questions are what you ask, Christine.

CHRISTINE

You are right, Rain, I have explored some of those questions already, but the one that intrigues me at this moment is the impact that virtual worlds have on real worlds. For me, one of the attractions is that it has a parallel or alternate reality; for instance, although the language is *SL* or *RL*, I approach my avatar and myself as interchangeable (at times), meaning we become *WE*. The appearance choices within *SL* are hypersexuality and agelessness. In *RL*, I have been as transformative and disruptive as this world will allow and have embraced as many age-defying tools as my checking account will support. From green, blue, hazel, and gold eyes, and from black to blonde hair, Botox, skin rejuvenations, peels, and scrubs, I have struggled to maintain a dewy but “aging-gracefully” appearance. In the virtual world, it is much cheaper to maintain your youthfulness, Rain. The difference is that in the virtual world, one can transform with a click of the mouse. However, creating visual identities within *Second Life* can also be time-consuming. I have spent up to six hours designing clothes, hair, makeup, and shoes.

RAIN

This sets up a value towards an avatar’s identity. The more time we spend with our avatars, Heim (1998) posits, the more meaning and value we place on them. Our virtual body, like our real one, is judged by our appearance and then how we perform. I have had up to eight shades of skin and eyes, and 60 hairstyles in a month’s time. My makeup and hair color are frequently changed, depending upon the outfit Christine has created. I have a variety of clothing and shoes that reflect my activities, such as swimming, ballroom dancing, disco, and political activities; I have casual looks to attend movies and wild inventions that have yet to find the right event, but I wear them anyway, everywhere. I often send postcards to *RL* that capture my looks and the places I visit. With an easy push of a button that shutters a snapshot in the virtual world, I can be

transported to a new space; I can capture the Kodak moment and share in *RL*.

(And with a click, Rain transports to a gallery and stops and talks with a few of the avatars that she sees at other galleries. Rain flies over the gallery to find a more private space and lands on top of a nearby building. Looking down onto the road, she reflects more deeply.)

CHRISTINE

The impact of aging, and the struggles with remaining young, are significant in my identity development, which means I have not escaped the power of media representation and its construction of “reality.” Why are standards of beauty (and age) imposed on women? Research indicates that the roots are economic. In the Quebec Action Network for Women’s Health in its 2000 report *Changements sociaux en faveur de la diversité des images corporelles*, “Age is a disaster that needs to be dealt with. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits” (¶ 5). Was it the Barbie I played with, and my hope that I would be as beautiful one day as her? The models that I see everyday in magazines and television become younger while I become older. Sandy Landis (2002) conducted an analysis of media representations and some of her findings included:

In the May 21, 2002 issue of *Family Circle*, of the approximately 185 identifiable faces in illustrations, 15, or 8%, were conceivably over 55 years of age. Of fifteen representations, four were part of the same story, and seven, nearly half, were connected with products or services to help with the “problems” of aging: arthritis, anemia, incontinence, and wrinkles.

Of the approximately 177 identifiable faces in the June 2002, issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*, 22, or 12% were feasibly over 55. Of these 22 “old” faces, three appeared in a single movie ad,

and five were advertising health products for the elderly.

In the June 2002 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, of the approximately 159 identifiable faces, only ten, or 6% were likely to be over 55. Of these ten older faces, three appeared in one advertisement for an upcoming film release and four were advertising health remedies for the aged.

In the June 4, 2002 edition of *Woman's Day*, 24 of 229 identifiable faces, or 10%, were possibly over 55. Of these 24 older faces, ten appeared in a single photograph and five were advertising health products for the elderly.

(Humm!) But can this really be just about appearance?

RAIN

I live in a world without age, which functions as an equalizer, which is empowering. Christine, you have had to work so hard to be seen from a position that gives you voice, position, and playfulness. It seems that in RL, those elements are hard to combine, while in *SL* it is easy.

CHRISTINE

You are right, Rain. My earliest power struggle in wanting to express myself was when I was 4 years old, and I wanted to pick out my own outfits. My mother told me “no.” Well, I packed everything I could fit in the empty, round oatmeal container and set out to run away. I got to the corner and realized that it was as far as I could go because I was not allowed to cross the street. As I turned around, I saw my mother waiting and I ran to her crying. It was a big step for me and for her. She negotiated a deal where I could lay out my outfits every night, and she would approve. Soon, I gained her confidence, and my empowerment began. But it hasn't always been that easy to maintain, even in areas of appearance (which seems shallow, at times, to talk about). I remember when I went through a stage of my life when my hair was streaked with unusual colors for RL, like pink, fire engine red, green, purple, or blue. I was also an administrator. I could see people looking at me and knew that

my playfulness with color was disturbing. People would say with mock admiration, “Gee, I wish I could be that colorful.” When the provost also asked me about my pink highlights, I stated that they were cultural. But I understood these questions and the not-so-subtle messages that they carried. So I changed the hair to a more realistic color to conform. My creative and playful voice was tucked into an internal space, and it has taken *Second Life* to bring it back out.

RAIN

Do you think, when you stated it was cultural, that your answer had elements of truth in it, and you just thought you were being a smarty-pants because your job was working with diverse groups of people as an advocate?

CHRISTINE

Well, Rain, you may have something. Cross (1995) suggests that identity is a cognitive map that functions in a multitude of ways to guide and direct exchanges with one's social and material realities. Through MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), aspects of our personal cultural identity are shared through stories, with different social groups that creators choose. The power is that there are choices—autonomy. A person's existence and participation within these groups are often the bases for positions of power and, like RL, can lead to violence or discrimination.

(Christine realizes that Rain serves in several roles that are deeply connected to the identities that remain partially invisible in RL. Leaning back in her rocker and turning the music off, she glances at the clock and realizes that this self-exploration must end.)

CHRISTINE

The question becomes, is this type of learning transferable? Can I, as a creator, learn from the process of creating the avatar? Isn't that one of the questions that the conference in the Netherlands asked?

RAIN

Yes it is. You mentioned Cross (1995), and in the same article, he contends that, from birth, the individual mirrors behaviors; maturation results from continued human interaction through images and language.

CHRISTINE

Well, according to Cross (1995), the effects of images and language shape the innate characteristics of identity development. Judith Butler (1990) contends that identities are perpetually performed and are never fully complete or stable, but they are continually becoming and repeatedly enacted. *SL* is one way of performing and transforming.

(Rain stretches her body and transports to an undisclosed island and decides to float in the pool.)

RAIN

I have been told that there have been several researchers within *Second Life* who have argued that the use of games in the classroom engage and provide opportunities to explore identity development that transfer to RL.

CHRISTINE

As you know, Rain, I have taught in *Second Life* through you. In an unpublished manuscript with Taylor and Carpenter, I wrote about this project. You are eloquent in your description; could you restate it?

RAIN

We teach a course that explores identity, race, sexual orientation, and gender that occurs in *SL* and RL. My students document and analyze their avatar development in *SL*. As I lecture to the students in inworld,

Christine demonstrates how to create avatars, and she has her students record each decision, from type of avatar to eye color. She asks them to explain how close their decisions were based on their real appearances. They journal as they proceed through Orientation Island and meet other new avatars. I encourage the students to talk to other avatars, particularly about their avatar construction process. Once the students join *SL*, I take them on field trips to places that specialize in exhibiting race, gender, and sexually-oriented visual culture. Through interactive spaces and film presentations, they explore such recreated concepts as stereotyping in *SL*. Interestingly, discussions in *SL* seem to flow more freely and openly than in real life. After only one week in *SL*, students felt comfortable enough to explore difficult diversity issues that would typically take almost six weeks for students to feel safe enough to discuss in a real life classroom. Scholars in *Second Life* state that one reason for this openness is that students remain anonymous inworld—only the professor/teacher know both identities.

CHRISTINE

Thank you, Rain. This type of exploration takes virtual aesthetics to a deeper level based on the belief that *SL* can transfer knowledge to RL. Nakamura (2008) used the framework of “visual culture studies to focus on the ways that users of the Internet collaboratively produce digital images of the body ... in the context of racial and gender identity formation” (p. 5). Further, Nakamura (2008) urges scholars to consider the Internet “as a popular environment for representations of identity” (p. 5). The social, cultural, racial, gender, age, sexual, and other contexts through which identity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated all find new territory and relevance within virtual worlds such as *SL*. Constructing an avatar, analyzing the decisions that are made, creating dialogic opportunities with self and others about the context of identity formation such as in the form of a play in RL or *SL* can encourage knowing truths through paradoxes and juxtapositions.

Other opportunities that *SL* provides encourage global connections and collaborative projects because travel is a click. On the educational page of *Second Life*, it describes the educational opportunities as:

Hundreds of leading universities and school systems around the world uses Second Life as a vibrant part of their educational programs. Linden Lab works enthusiastically with education organizations to familiarize them with the benefits of virtual worlds, connect them with educational peers active in Second Life, and showcase their inworld projects and communities.

A large, active education community—with hundreds of K-12 and higher education members—are engaged in Second Life. The Open University, Harvard, Texas State, and Stanford are just a few of the many universities that have set up virtual campuses where students can meet, attend classes, and create content together.

Second Life has also proven a valuable professional development medium for educators. Organizations such as the NMC have fostered shared learning among educators and are networking, running inworld seminars, conferences and symposia on learning and creativity related to virtual worlds. (Linden Lab, n.d.c., ¶ 1)

Engaging with *Second Life* challenges educators and learners with different sorts of questions and experiments that, in addition to being more relevant to today's digitally literate students, trigger meaningful critically reflective teaching and learning practices. In other words, working in *SL* makes us constantly question, think, and imagine. And isn't that what art education is all about?

### RAIN

I have had a great time exploring all of this with you, but I must go. One of my friends has sent me a calling card, and I really want to go to check out the new educational island. Bye.

(And with a click, Rain transports to TELR Island and begins socializing with other educator avatars. A sunset is added so that the two worlds are in sync. See Figure 6.)

### CHRISTINE

We cannot stop the clock—almost, but not quite. So is a space that allows that illusion, the next best space? What does that really say about society? What does it say about me? It is not really the age that bothers me but mortality. I enjoy life, as many of us do, and I can't imagine life without me, and me without life. I will miss it; and possibly, for a little while, it will miss me too. Until then, I will continue looking backward to move forward, my exploration of transformation and the endless possibilities of creating in a space that seems timeless and forgiving. And possibly, I'll find ways to bring back my humor and lighthearted ways of behavior in RL. With a click it was gone and with another click it can be born.



Figure 6. Rain on TELR Island. Photograph by Christine Ballengee Morris.

(Christine quickly saves the document and playfully names it “A Raining Afternoon: Growing Younger and Wiser.” She pushes the sleep button and lowers the laptop’s monitor, which reveals another snapshot of her grand children; she smiles. She rocks out of the chair and stretches her legs, arms, and neck, hearing slight cracks, and she moans. She slowly walks to the bathroom and stares at the image, running her hand through her hair.)

CHRISTINE

Maybe I will darken my hair a little, since summer is almost over. Darker hair will go better with the new blue contacts.

### **Epilogue: This Experience**

I found that in participating in a dialogue with myself, which we do privately, but rarely publicly, the process allowed me to consider other possibilities, issues, and avenues that were not necessarily written down in this document. This play was a slice of time, which only reflects a moment. This clearly models identity in that our identity is momentarily a set of constructs that change constantly due to multiple variables—many that are not in our control. A reflective process, like this, can provide a way to understand the complexities and ambiguities of identity and culture. It was my desire that through this methodological approach and writing process that my thoughts and positioning would be clearer in relationship to society’s concepts of aging and the internalizations of those concepts that Christine and Rain act out in this arts-based drama.

(The End)

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### About the Author

Christine Ballengee Morris is an associate professor at The Ohio State University (OSU). She has taught undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students at OSU since 1995, as well as served as the founding director of the Multicultural Center at OSU. In this position, she developed new offices, programming, and collaborative practices for the university that bridged Student Affairs with Academic Affairs. She serves as the Art Education Graduate Studies Chair and coordinator of American Indian Studies at OSU. She has served the art education profession as president of the United States Society of Education through Art, and as member of several editorial boards.

Ballengee Morris's research examines social justice, social reconstructivism, and postcolonialism as they relate to arts policy, curricula development, integrated curriculum, pedagogy, and identity development. She co-wrote a book, *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Art Education in High School*, which was published by the National Art Education Association (2006). Dr. Ballengee Morris's teaching experiences include fourteen years in the public school system, artist-in-residencies in the public schools, and international teaching in Chile, Brazil, Australia, and Ireland. She is trained to lead social justice workshops and mediation. She is the recipient of the 2007 Ziegfeld Award and the 2006 J. Eugene Grigsby, Jr. Award for her commitment to diversity; Ohio State University—Newark Research and Service Awards; NAACP Licking County, Ohio, Native American Women Leadership Award (2002); and Traditional Master of Flatfoot Dancing, Augusta Heritage, West Virginia.

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