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Second Life: The New Way

RR2-2

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English 203, Section 19

Prompt: Select a stance towards common claims between any two of the following texts and argue in favor of or against what the authors state:

* “Facebook versus MySpace” (SOG, p. 324)
* “My So Called Second Life” (SOG, p. 329
* How Second Life is Redefining Privacy (Moodle)
* How Second Life Affects Real Life (Moodle)

Follow the guidelines for writing a reading response on Moodle.

In a rapidly advancing world, where communication technology and social networking have become an integral part of the life of almost every person who has Internet access, and where socializing has become a difficult issue compared to old times, more and more people communicate and socialize via social media using text or even voice chat. Second Life is one of the 3D virtual worlds where all this is possible and where users usually lead a virtual life parallel to their real life. While Second Life or other virtual worlds are thought by some as mere pastime or entertainment activities, or even useless ones, the reality has been proven to be otherwise. These difficult to use technologies, that give the users the ability to socialize, using fake looks and fake identities, have proven to affect their lives in various and amazingly positive aspects, thus making the virtual worlds more real than virtual.

One of the amazing aspects of virtual life is its therapeutic effects, which is actually being used today in behavioral therapy to enhance self-confidence. Stein in his *My So-Called Second* *Life*, justly considers Second Life to be a tool that helps the user discover himself, thus giving it the attribute of “a therapist’s couch” (2006, p.330), and so does Dell in her article, “How Second Life Affects Real Life”, where she takes the issue further to prove that achieving success on the level of online socializing enhances one’s self-image and as a consequence, ameliorates his real life socializing skills (2008).

Clearly, the absence of a real physical body in virtual worlds frees the individual from the binding wants or distractions of his body and gives him the chance to delve more into himself. Definitely, this is impossible in real life, because the continuous flow of overlapping and confusing signals one receives from his body and even his environment, don’t leave him enough space to clear- thinking. In the virtual world, where one’s presence is through his mind, the chances of pure thinking are enforced and as a result, the outcome can be an objective perception of the self. While this may take years of therapy to achieve, Stein’s experience (2006) proves that one visit might be enough for deep self-discovery, thus giving the virtual world an efficient therapeutic attribute.

In addition, the virtual bodies or the avatars of Second Life have proven to be of surprisingly beneficial therapeutic value for users. These exaggerated 3D cartoon characters, created by users, reflect all the aspirations or wishes of an individual’s perception of beauty or a good look or image in real life. The therapeutic attribute of the avatar comes from the fact that it frees the user of his preconceptions or misconceptions about himself, which are greatly responsible for a shaky self-esteem, thus giving the user more confidence to socialize and reach out for others. In addition, the avatar’s being an extension of the real self gives it power over the user and affects his life. From here comes the therapeutic effect of the virtual life as discussed by Kristina Dell (2008). The enormity of research in this area clearly reflects the importance of this issue. As explained by Dell, many researchers like Bailenson and his colleagues, have been studying, for years, how virtual experiences affect real ones. According to a research conducted in Stanford University, the qualities one acquires online affect his real behavior and consequently, the successful socialization of a good looking or tall avatar has the effect of boosting self-confidence in real life and enhancing socialization. Another Stanford research has reached the conclusion that avatars can also trigger healthy habits. For instance, seeing one’s avatar exercising motivates the user to do the same. Evidently, and as Dell justly claimed, virtual behavior extends to real life, making the virtual world a revolutionary therapeutic tool (2008).

Nevertheless, and as Stein cleverly hinted and Dell subtly supported, the main factor responsible for the positive effects of the virtual world on real life is that it is an extension of the real world and not a separate one. In fact, if there were a pronounced and clear barrier between these two worlds, making them different or separate, the virtual world would have been reduced to a mere entertainment tool or even a pointless activity lacking objective and practical value. Fortunately, and as Stein asserted, the virtual world is so similar to the real to the extent of being a replicate. This similarity is not exclusive to the existing structures or sites, but it also extends to the individual’s behavior and activities. Stein asserts this fact when he admits that his behavior in Second Life was no different from that in real life (2006, p.331). This leads to the conclusion that it is real world culture that governs the virtual world and that is why the power of the virtual can extend to the real. This fact is further illustrated by Dell’s future plans in Second Life where she intends to give her avatar a cottage by the sea and a charity job, hoping that this action will reflect to her real life positively (2008).

Finally, for all those who unjustly accuse the virtual worlds of being a waste of time activity and not for serious thinkers, it can be argued that navigation in these worlds is not for novices in technology, and the tools involved in creating the avatars and moving them are highly complicated and require conceptual abilities. If people like Stein, a Stanford graduate, need hours to design a character and to learn just how to walk (2006, p.330), and people like Kristina Dell, a successful journalist, confess to the difficulty involved in using the virtual technology tools just to achieve an unsuccessful avatar (2008), one is justified to claim that virtual world users can’t be ordinary computer users. On the contrary, they must be educated and must certainly have solid thinking abilities just like Stein and Dell, and this fact surly ads to the value of virtual worlds and refutes the fact that they are useless entertainment tools.

In the end, it can be inferred that virtual worlds, for all the benefits they can offer, could most probably be the more popular media of communication and socialization in the near future. However, as Dell mentioned, “the effect could potentially work both ways – for good or for bad” (Dell, 2008). Hopefully, the good will outweigh the bad so that this whole new way will be in the service of humanity.

References:

Dell K., How Second Life Affects Real Life, *Time*, May 12, 2008

Stein J., My So-Called Second Life, 2006