

## **Fearing your Avatar? Exploring the scary journey to the 3rd Dimension**

Kathryn R. Trinder

### **Abstract**

*Glasgow Caledonian University are currently, like many H.E institutions, developing an island in Linden Lab's "Second Life" for a variety of reasons (Kirriemuir 2008). GCU's initial top-down push comes from a marketing and recruitment perspective, but will be closely followed by uptake for teaching & learning activity and student support.*

*Recent staff induction has shown up some rather intriguing outcomes - new technologies have always had their enthusiasts and sceptics but our current experience shows that the 3.D Internet appears to polarise this normal state to extremes, potentially causing engagement, development, and uptake to be particularly problematic. We're finding that many people are initially rather 'scared', unsure, negative about this as a technology. Personalisation of an 'avatar' can be troublesome (Warburton, 2007), or the concept of a 3D world difficult to grasp.*

*This paper reports on early stages of enquiry into the experience of staff who have recently embarked upon exploring 'Second Life'. The study aims to capture initial experiences (of both person and 'avatar'), followed by later data collection as participants progress through stages of early exploration, personalisation, understanding, and eventual engagement or rejection of the technology.*

*The research design adopts a holistic approach where participants are perceived as experts in their own experiences. It aims to capture the participants' "lived experience". Through allowing participants themselves to highlight issues, problems, and fears pertinent to them (Sharpe et al, 2005) the study will develop an evolving conceptual framework that allows their stories to determine which issues emerge as significant.*

### **Background**

This strand of research was inspired by a perceived need to understand why members of staff are finding new 3d Virtual Worlds unnerving and are displaying

negative attitudes to becoming involved in this technology, even though the initiative at GCU is being supported at an Senior Executive level.

Exploration of negative attitudes and resistance to change whilst important aspects of this issue will be explored at a later date. The current focus of the research is this 'unnerving' aspect of the early experience.

The Caledonian University Virtual Worlds project known as 'C U There' has initially attempted to recruit staff and students in the University who had an interest and the enthusiasm to dip their toe in the water. At this early stage there is no intention or desire to attract the 'general mass' or those who are very resistant to the concepts of the 3d internet or virtual worlds for learning & teaching.

Part of the projects' initial activity was to gather like minded individuals together in a community atmosphere to share, bounce ideas and help each other with this new technology. There is a well recognised pattern in learning technology for small islands of activity, often by individual teachers or early adopters, who have little or no support from managers, colleagues and support staff. Projects come and go and often fade and disappear when an individual moves on. Our desire is that our project will become self supporting and self sustainable and not reliant on individuals. To generate an early sense of community a shared community space was developed (Trinder, Francino & Littlejohn, 2008).

The fact that this project was initiated top-down, driven by marketing and PR purposes also poses potential problems, whilst on the other hand providing unparalleled support for exploration of the environment as a learning technology

Since the "CU There" project began a series of demonstrations, meetings, talks and 'taster' session have been run to give staff an idea of what this virtual world was about. These sessions were varied from demonstrations of the environment to a range of sub-groups and boards within the university; invited talks from visiting academics; 1 hour lunchtime introductions & discussions; visits to local council and business. There were also tailored 2 hour sessions for groups of staff – i.e. librarians or module tutors from a particular school (interestingly these sessions were universally referred to as 'avatar training', even though those running the sessions had not called it such.)

The other major initiative was the running of a weekly evening class by the project manager. The class was initially advertised to students, but quickly had participation from interested members of staff and the local community as well.

The result of these events was that a number of staff took an interest in the initiative. Some took this further and either contacted the project team to find out about how to sign up and be involved, some entered a teaching & learning pilot project competition<sup>1</sup>, and some signed up and have initiated in-world events; are developing their own ideas for teaching and learning or for meeting and socialising with their students in world.

---

<sup>1</sup>"Competition - Use of 3D worlds for Teaching and Learning": <http://www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/news/index.html>

Not all of those who appeared to be interested have remained active. Some, whilst showing interest, got as far as registering, creating an avatar and sending friend requests to gain admittance to the GCU Pioneers Group, but we have not heard from them since.

Whilst much of this is to be expected, and appears to follow accepted technology acceptance models<sup>2</sup> and change process to institutionalisation predictions (Collis & Moonen, 2001), it potentially gives issues to need to be dealt to encourage staff in their engagement and uptake of this technology.

As a staff development issue, we wish to know what the potential barriers are and how we can overcome these.

## Method

Observation has prompted us to consider, then:

- What is it specifically about 3D worlds that can be so emotive?
- How may this 'consternation' and these 'fears', be overcome?
- What are the implications for this technology's potential use and uptake?

## The Research Design

To address the questions it became evident that an approach was required that allowed for the whole early experience to be explored. The research attempts to take a holistic approach in order to elicit a range of feelings and insights in to what it is that causes such 'consternation'. It was felt that an open ended methodology would allow those involved to speak with their own voice in order to highlight the issues that were relevant to them, rather than starting with any hypothesis as to what these potential issues and barriers may be.

As the main researcher already had experience of prior research exploring the experiences of e-learners - The Learner Experience of e-Learning (LEX) (Creanor, Trinder, Gowan & Howells 2006), using a methodology adapted from a particular approach, it was decided to use a similar approach here. This would give the added benefit of extending/adding that work in developing this methodology.

In the course of their research the LEX team developed a methodology that adapted aspects of an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) (Reid, Flowers & Larkin 2005). This approach *“rests on the premise that the interviewee is expert on their own experience.”*

IPA allows participant to highlight what is important to them, and provide the researchers with an understanding of feelings, intentions, motivations and attitudes, rather than answering a set of questions previously devised by the researchers (Sharpe et al, 2005).

---

<sup>2</sup>TAM: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology\\_acceptance\\_model](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology_acceptance_model)

*“This inductive approach deliberately avoids testing hypotheses and making prior assumptions, but rather encourages participants to provide their own detailed narrative, interpreting their understanding of their experiences firstly for themselves and subsequently for the researcher.” (Creanor et al 2006)*

The approach has the added advantage in that it can draw out shared experiences across a group and so was deemed very suitable in this situation as a way of finding out and presenting shared meanings, interpretations and experiences within the group of practitioners who were being studied.

The LEX team also combined loosely IPA with what was termed 'InterviewPlus' (See Creanor et al, 2006). This is a technique that uses an artefact or activity that allows the participant to 'think aloud' as they talk through the activity and show the interviewer what they have create or how they go about an activity.

InterviewPlus seemed a useful addition to the research reported here as it was envisaged that it would allow a participant (where they had got beyond orientation), to show what they had achieved already with their avatar and to talk about this in detail. It was expected that in doing this the person would naturally demonstrate their relationship with their avatar as well as highlighting issues such as motor skills, conceptual understanding of a 3D environment, or more general IT ability.

Another angle for exploration of data gathering was to consider interviewing not just face-to-face in the physical world, but to also interview in-world. It was hoped that this may add a 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension of immersion and embodiment by being in the virtual environment itself. This would be a way of seeing at first hand how the participant as avatar reacted to the virtual world and how they coped. It would give an insight into their navigation skills, search skills, interaction and communication skills as well as showing adaptation to the culture in terms of appearance and etiquette.

### ***IPA sampling***

IPA samples are usually small in number, with around 10 being the optimum size before saturation takes place (Flowers, 2005). Sampling is purposive and therefore suited to study of a group, though it is accepted that this does not allow for inclusivity or range (i.e. gender or ability) (Smith 2004). IPA is also not appropriate for comparative analysis, though in this first phase of the study where the focus is on a particular group this is not a concern.

In this study an initial group of 6 will be interviewed. These will be chosen from a known number of staff members who have already show an interest in the use of this technology. The participants may already have a professional relationship with the researcher, which in some aspects is a cause for concern, though again the IPA technique allows for this in that rapport needs to be achieved between interviewer and participant in order to draw out a deeper dialogue.

## **Practicalities**

This approach requires interviews of a duration of approx 1 hour. Interviews are between 1 interviewer and 1 participant. The face-to-face interviews are audio recorded and sent to a transcriber. The transcripts then provide part of the data set.

In-world interviews are carried out using the text based instant message facility available in Second Life. Interviews are logged through the private chat channel, directly between the interviewers' avatar and the participants' avatar.

One of these in-world interviews was tagged on the end of an audio interview, with the interviewer and participant sitting at a desk together with 2 computers, side by side and with the audio recorder still running between them. It was envisaged that the interviewer would be able to observe how the participant moved and which controls were used, how easy this was for the participant.

The second in-world interview was carried out remotely, at a distance. Unfortunately much of the chat text was lost due to a Second Life client crash.

The audio transcripts and chat-logs from the interviews will be coded for emerging themes that will then be further analysed and grouped into 'super themes' for further analysis. In order to do this the documents are divided into 3 columns. The transcript text is left in the middle column. The right hand hand left hand columns are used to mark codes and emerging themes.

For a more detailed overview of this technique please see the LEX methodology report.(Mayes 206)

## **Discussion of the technique**

Interviewing in-world was a novel experience for all concerned. Whilst it does offer a rich technique, combining an open style with InterviewPlus, the mechanics of this as technique should be considered. The main problem is that most of the participants involved so far are not regular users of 'chat' style instant messaging (IM), and their on screen reading and typing skills make dialogue slow and difficult. The ebb and flow of conversation becomes somewhat lost, and typing errors can make later coding tricky and meaning becomes lost.

If used with more experienced Residents<sup>3</sup> and an interviewer who is also experienced at using IM tools, then this should be much less of a problem and becomes a very tempting technique to explore further.

Another benefit of in-world interviews is the possibility afforded to take photos of the interview session, providing richer



<sup>3</sup> Second Life avatars are traditionally referred to as 'Residents', as they reside in the virtual world.

evidence of the interview and interaction. It may also be worth considering in-world 'machinima'<sup>4</sup> recording of interviews.

As was mentioned technical difficulties were encountered but to some extent these can be over come, for example if the Resident/participant had also logged chat, effectively providing a backup, then the loss of the interviewers records would have been less problematic.

Even with these problems this is still an interesting combination.

It is not yet clear if the IPA style of interview is entirely suitable for this subject matter. An open style is certainly required to enable to participants to tell their own stories, it was felt by the researchers that in many ways the participants did not yet have enough experiences to share and discuss in-depth. Perhaps this will change in subsequent interviews once more experience has been gained.

## Results so far

To date 4 participants have been interviewed, all volunteer members of staff.

3 participants were interviewed face-to-face. During the interviews they were asked to log in to Second Life and show the interviewer their avatar whilst talking about what they had done with it, show how they moved around, and to further talk through how they felt about their experiences.

One of the participants agreed to use chat in-world during this process. The chat logs were subsequently saved as transcripts. The 4<sup>th</sup> participant was interviewed entirely in-world.

Several themes have already begun to emerge from early analysis, though these are still to be further analysed within the bulk of the full data set, once finally collected.

Early emerging themes include mention of aspects such as feelings and emotions, perception of ability and skill in using technology, age and gender, prior experience of being a computer gamer, and pre conceived notions of what the world and technology are, or what they offer. Issues such as motivation, investment of time, and relevance to own work also feature. All participants so far have given an insight into their relationship with their avatar.

Here we present a small sample of some of the emerging themes.

### **Perception of Ability**

Participants have mixed views on their existing abilities and how this may impact on their ability to use a virtual world. All participants so far are regular computer users with reasonable levels of skill and ability for self-learning, however confidence can be lost quickly in an unfamiliar environment, leading to further unsure-ness about their ability to use Second Life.

---

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machinima>

*“...well because I’m so old of course I get very scared about anything that’s new.”*

*“I found it all pretty straightforward, it was reasonably intuitive, yes there was no problem with registering or anything like that, it was fine. “*

One participant mentioned age and how he therefore feels less likely to develop his skills using this technology. He compared himself to the young students whom he works with and felt that they would have an easier experience:

*“I suspect that the students are far more comfortable with that because the chances are it’s not as “foreign” to them as it probably is to me, so it might be a, it might be a generational thing, a kind of native versus immigrant thing.”*

### **Control**

Control of the avatar (navigation), and control of the experience were commented upon, and how this leads to feelings of embarrassment when a lack of control is shown in front of others:

*“Even navigating around that kind of introductory landscape was quite difficult for me because I’m going well I’m not entirely sure even what it is that I’m looking for”*

*“...of course there’s a whole kind of control thing ... you press a button and all of a sudden your perspective changes or you’re suddenly not sure where you’re looking...so orientating yourself physically as well sometimes right, where am I now? Aha and I think at one point I actually hit a button and started to fly and didn’t know how to stop flying. And of course at that, at that point even although you know this is a virtual environment, even although you know that these people could be anywhere you’re thinking I must look really stupid flying about [laughs].”*

One participant expressed a need to find a more familiar environment in which to practice, and told how once he'd got to the university island it felt familiar, home like, and how that then gave him confidence to go out and explore further:

*“So I found myself in [the University] space and kind of because that was a familiar environment to me then I felt slightly more comfortable walking round about there. Because I thought well I know this space. I, I know where I am, I am orientated within it. ..So and I felt more comfortable trying stuff out in it just in terms of basic control you know so flying up and down places and getting myself down and changing my views and my perspective erm, and then searching for, it was almost like well now that I’ve got a base ...it’s like well I know where I’m coming back to and I’ve got, it’s almost like a kind of comfort blanket, a comfort zone.”*

## **New social experiences**

It seems that many participants were uncomfortable because they felt that they had been 'dropped into' a situation about which they knew nothing - "...literally being a stranger in a strange land", as one put it. They all reported feeling at a loss as to what to actually 'do' in-world, other than the initial orientation activities supplied by Linden Labs.

*"...here I am suddenly making a transition into a completely new environment with you know a whole, a culture that I don't understand, a way of doing things that I don't understand, an environment that I don't understand that I have no information about ... when you're put in those shoes again in a real situation because very often...looking at from the well I know what that feels like because I've done it but the Second Life thing strangely enough it's like wow! Here I am. What do I do now?"*

*"I went to orientation island and I had a wee kind of scout around there and that was, I found it a very bizarre experience. "*

*"... I think I was sort of struck by the technology you know that there were other people in that environment who could have been from you know, there's typically I don't know, forty thousand people online at any one point in time. ...who could be from anywhere in the world and it just seemed because I'm not really up with this field yet, it just felt just bizarre that you know you could be standing next to somebody in a different kind of reality but it was real in a sense."*

It may be that the usual affordance of an online environment that allows a new members to 'lurk' on the sidelines in order to observe practice, etiquette and socialisation before making themselves visible to an existing community, and to introduce themselves to a community in a controlled way (for example by initial postings to a forum), are stripped away in Second Life. When you log in for the first time you immediately 'land' right in the middle of a seemingly busy area with a lot of other avatars landing next to you, or on top of you, bumping into you, etc. You suddenly find, even though you may not even know how to chat or even move your avatar, that you have people talking to you and this seems a very unusual situation, not one normally encountered in the 'real' world:

*"Do they talk to me? What, I don't know what I'm doing and so I'm just randomly walking about this, this place touching and clicking and stuff to see what happens. Yes so just that whole feeling of uncertainty about where I was, unsure about how to behave and really well what am I supposed to do now."*

*"...that again probably goes back to this thing about my not being, comfortable's not the right word, but not being confident enough in the environment that you know it's like if I'm walking along the street and a complete stranger comes up to me and starts talking to me you go oh,*

*what's going on here....it felt a bit like that and I didn't feel threatened, I didn't feel threatened at all but it just felt strange, who is this person that I've never met before who wants to talk to me?"*

Concern was also expressed that it would be easy, in turn, to offend:

*"...am I doing something foolish, am I doing something wrong...am I behaving in a way that is you know just daft or offensive or improper."*

### **Withdrawal**

Some of the fears expressed possibly get to the heart of the matter of why staff do not continue with exploring this technology:

*"...being the kind of typical technophobe that I have become I just thought I'd better log out now you know."*

A typical reaction to an unknown situation is to withdraw. This attitude has emerged in all of the interviews so far, in varying degrees. All participants felt that they had done this at some point. When they went back in they reported often just popping in and out, and felt that they would need a large chunk of time, an hour or two, to really get to grips with the environment in a more meaningful way. This time investment was proving problematic to achieve at work, due to the expected and usual work pressures we all face, plus technical problems with hardware and access. The most successful so far were those who had found time at home - where they could log in in relative peace without being disturbed by colleagues and students and where they could gain help from family - or those who had attended one of the sessions or evening classes.

### **Relationship between avatar and self**

Warburton, in his article "Loving your avatar" (2007) comments on perceived stages that Residents may go through when creating an avatar as a personal representation of self, from initial early stages, up to the point where one bonds with the avatar. Participants here have shown similar feelings and emotions. A transition period is discussed in relation to developing a relationship with their avatar. This was seen in various stages with one participant feeling that she had now 'bonded' with her avatar, whilst another still referred to his avatar as 'it'.

*"...there's been an interesting transition has taken place I've noticed. Originally I didn't really see the avatar as being part of me, it was just a being that was separate from me and something that I had to do in order to fulfil the proposal requirements and proceed with this project."*

Most participants referred to their avatars at first as 'my avatar', but this changed the more they talked about it.

One continued to call it 'my avatar' until the point in the interview he logged into SL and the interview continued in IM. At this point the avatar was then referred to as him

or by its name. After 10 minutes or so in-world the researcher was corrected where she mis-spelt the avatars' name.

One participant frequently mentioned that she had invested a lot of time on the appearance of her avatar, and admitted that this time had in fact created a bond and sense of self in the avatar:

*“...but I never actually saw myself getting particularly involved in it and I’m not sure that I still do if I’m being completely honest but having said that I’ve since spent a long, long time on my appearance and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it and what I’ve noticed is that I’ve actually started to bond with [laughs] with my avatar and I think I have started to invest in it much more and I almost do now see it as and this sounds really cheesy but almost an extension of myself. I could see myself getting quite protective if I needed to be, do you know what I mean?”*

This again is commensurate with Warburton's observations (2007).

Another participant explained his lack of time spent on appearance in a way initially unexpected by the researchers, but since observed elsewhere:

*“But you know I wasn’t at the stage where I wanted to spend an awful lot of time you know putting on clothes, I’m a typical man you know [laughs] it’s like just give me a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and let me get out. ..I’m fine you know, keep my hair short, low maintenance erm, I ended up bald [laughs] so yes so it was a case of OK, fine, I’m not naked, let’s get out of here.”*

As an interesting aside it can be noted that 3 of the 4 participants, when asked on the consent forms if they would prefer to be anonymous or named and if named were they happy for their avatar names to be given, decided that it would be nicer if their avatar name was the only name used against any quotes. This also seems to point to the beginnings of a bonding process with, and a projection of self in to, the avatar.

## Early conclusions

Initial findings do seem to support the anecdotal observations that when faced with this new 'world' members of staff, even though they have great self motivation to join up and that use of this technology is relevant to their work, that there are many factors at work which can potentially hinder this process and hinder staff from investing in this technology.

It seems that a supportive environment for the early experience is important to most participants, in spite of their existing abilities and motivations. Those who went through a 2 hour 'avatar training' session reported that they felt a lot more comfortable after they had done that, and had got much further forward in their learning about the environment than they were managing during occasional and sporadic 15 minutes or so here and there.

Mutual support during the early experiences seem to be key to most participants, either via colleagues, in 'formal' sessions, or from friends or family at home.

It was observed in the formal sessions that small groups of 2 -4 appeared to get further through orientation than individuals and that these small groups, would help each other and would also diffuse fears with humour and mutual support. This has been reported in 3 of the interviews so far.

Knowing what these potential barriers and pitfalls are will help us develop a framework for support structures and activities that will allow staff to engage in the technology

Further into the study we will target participants who have dropped out and it will be interesting to see if any of these themes emerge as barriers to some.

### Further Research

Research is ongoing at this time. Further interviews are lined up both within the institution and outside with local business partners in order to explore this issue further and inform the training needs of both.

Analysis will continue on existing data and on the new data still to be collected. It is envisaged that more in-world interviews will take place, though the technique for this will be further refined, for example shorter sessions may be preferable to help overcome problems with typing skills. The researchers also wish to try voice chat interviews in world.

### References

Collis & Moonen, (2001), *Flexible learning in a digital world: Experiences and Expectations*, Routledge

Creanor, L., Trinder, K., Gowan, D., Howells, C. (2006a) *LEX: The Learner Experience of e-Learning Final Project Report*, Available online at [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning\\_pedagogy/elp\\_learneroutcomes.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/elp_learneroutcomes.aspx)

Flowers, P. (2005), *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, Workshops for LEX, November, Glasgow Caledonian University.

Reid, K. Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2005), *Exploring Lived Experience*, *The Psychologist*, 18, 1, 20-23.

Kirriemuir, J (2008), A spring 2008 "snapshot" of UK Higher and Further Education developments in Second Life, Available online at <http://www.eduserv.org.uk/foundation/sl/uksnapshot052008>

Mayes, T. (2006), *LEX methodology report*, Available online at [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning\\_pedagogy/elp\\_learneroutcomes.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/elp_learneroutcomes.aspx)

Sharpe R., Benfield G., Lessner E. & DeCicco E. (2005), Scoping Study for the Pedagogy strand of the JISC e-Learning Programme, Available online at [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded\\_documents/scoping%20study%20final%20report%20v4.1.doc](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/scoping%20study%20final%20report%20v4.1.doc)

Smith, J.A. (2004) Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 39-54.

Trinder, K. Francino, F., & Littlejohn, A. (2008), GRiID: Gcu research in Internet 3D, Poster presented at ALT-C08. Abstract available online at <http://tiny.cc/QLWCj5>

Warburton, S (2007), Loving your avatar: identity, immersion and empathy, Available online at <http://warburton.typepad.com/liquidlearning/2008/01/loving-your-ava.html>

## Authors

Kathryn R. Trinder  
Caledonian Academy  
Glasgow Caledonian University,  
Cowcaddens Road  
Glasgow  
G4 0BA

[k.trinder@gcal.ac.uk](mailto:k.trinder@gcal.ac.uk)

Kathryn Trinder is a Research Fellow in the Caledonian Academy at Glasgow Caledonian University. She has 20 years experience as a learning technologist. Current research interests include staff engagement with emerging technologies and 3D virtual worlds to support learning & teaching. Her Second Life avatar name is Goldfinch Weatherwax.

---

<sup>5</sup>TinyURL <http://www.tiny.cc/>