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**Producing knowledge in collaborative research about virtual worlds:
discursive constructions of *Second Life***

By Louise Jane Phillips
Roskilde University, Denmark

Abstract

The topic of the paper is the production of knowledge about the virtual world, Second Life, in a collaborative research project in Denmark on sense-making processes and social and cultural innovation in virtual worlds. The paper applies a discourse analytical approach (based on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis) in order to analyze how participants in the research project co-produce knowledge about Second Life by drawing on different discourses, that each represent particular ways of talking about, and thus giving meaning to, objects and subjects. Three main questions are addressed. In the construction of Second Life as an object of discourse, what meanings are ascribed to Second Life? How are researchers and users constructed as discursive subjects? And how does the discursive construction of "Second Life" and of users and researchers delimit the production of knowledge about virtual worlds in the collaborative research project? The paper argues for the importance of highlighting the implications of the delimitations identified for how virtual worlds are understood and studied. And, on the basis of the post-foundational epistemological position that all knowledge is context-dependent, it stresses the value of casting a reflexive eye on how "Second Life" is constructed as a research object and field of social practice through collaborative research practices.

Keywords: collaborative research; discourse analysis; discourses; discursive construction of virtual worlds; knowledge construction; reflexive analysis of research process; Second Life; virtual worlds

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Producing knowledge in collaborative research about virtual worlds: discursive constructions of *Second Life*

By Louise Jane Phillips
Roskilde University, Denmark

Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the production of knowledge about the virtual world, *Second Life*, in a collaborative research project in Denmark on sense-making processes and both social and cultural innovation in virtual worlds. The collaborative research project under study in this paper brings together university researchers and other partners who work practically with virtual worlds in different organisational contexts. I apply a discourse analytical approach (based on the form of critical discourse analysis developed by Norman Fairclough (1992; 1995; 2003) in order to evaluate how different kinds of knowledge are produced through the discourses that the research participants draw from collaborative research workshops in order to talk about, and thus give meaning to, virtual worlds.

A central assumption underpinning this paper is that our ways of talking are organized in discourses that are not mere reflections of a pre-existing reality—they construct reality by ascribing particular meanings to the world in ways that exclude alternative meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this sense, discourses are constitutive of reality, including knowledge and identities. Thus discourses drawn on by researchers in talking about *Second Life* represent a framework for meaning-making that enable *and* delimit the meanings given to *Second Life* as a research object and the identities ascribed to researchers and users. A focus on processes of meaning-making is, of course, a focus that discourse analysis shares with other qualitative approaches. But discourse analysis differs from other qualitative approaches by its interest in how meanings are produced within the discourses that people draw on as resources in order to talk about, and thus produce knowledge about, aspects of the world.

In presenting an analysis of how particular kinds of knowledge about *Second Life* are produced discursively in research, this paper has two related aims. One aim is to delineate the particular ways in which the discourses identified delimit the production of knowledge on virtual worlds in the research project under study. Secondly to and within this aim is to highlight the implications of those delimitations for how virtual worlds are understood and studied not only in this project but in research on virtual worlds more generally. Another related aim is to pursue the post-foundational epistemological position that all knowledge is context-dependent, as well as to demonstrate the value of casting a reflexive eye on how research-based knowledge about virtual worlds results from collaborative research practices. The value of these aims is rooted in the *performative* nature of research practices, according to the premises of post-foundational epistemology: since research practices contribute to creating the reality that forms the object of study, engaging in reflexive analysis of how those practices construct research objects in particular ways that exclude alternatives is important (Bourdieu, et al, 1991; Law, 2004; Mauthner and Doucet, 2008).

To fulfil these aims, the analysis in this paper addresses three main questions:

1. In the construction of *Second Life* as an object of discourse, what meanings are ascribed to *Second Life*?

2. How are researchers and users constructed as discursive subjects?
3. How does the discursive construction of *Second Life* and of users and researchers delimit the production of knowledge about virtual worlds in the collaborative research project? ¶

First, the paper briefly describes the collaborative research project under study in this paper and my own position in the project. Then I outline the paper's discourse analytical framework and methods of data production. Following this, an analysis of how the researchers (university researchers and participating practitioners) discursively construct *Second Life* and users-researchers is presented. And finally, I discuss the implications of the patterns of meaning-making identified for research on virtual worlds more generally. In this last task, I return to the argument about the value of taking a reflexive stance towards how research is carried out in particular contexts that enable and delimit the kinds of knowledge produced. In particular, I highlight the importance of considering the implications of the prevalence of a situated, partisan discourse whereby the researchers position themselves as engaged user-analysts and advocates of *Second Life*.

Collaborative Research Project: Brief Outline

The project under study is organised as a collaboration between university researchers at two universities (five senior researchers including myself, two post-doctoral researchers and three doctoral students) and a range of different practitioners – dubbed 'partners'. These 'partners' work with virtual worlds in different organisational contexts, encompassing both public organisations (such as libraries) and private businesses (such as an estate agents) as well as a job recruitment agency. The duration of the collaborative research project is from 2008-2011 and the project has, at the time of this writing, run for two years. A series of workshops have been held that represent the *fora* in which all the collaborating actors – the university researchers and partners – engage in the co-production of knowledge that constitutes the collaborative research process. My role as one of the university researchers in the collaborative project is to follow and analyse the production, negotiation and sharing of knowledge's about *Second Life* in the collaborative project itself. My analysis is a form of reflexive meta-analysis from *within* the project as a participating actor, the driving assumption being that a reflexive analysis of the research process can be harnessed to shape the practices of research in a positive direction. In my own research practice, I try to follow principles of interactive, practice-oriented research, engaging in continual processes of dialogue with the other participants in the project.

The collaborative project's starting-point is that virtual worlds carry a potential for user-driven social and cultural innovation by virtue of possible new forms of social interaction based on communication among *avatars* being made possible – digital representations that are able to perform actions and are controlled by a human agent in real time (Bell, 2008, p. 3). The purpose of the project is to gain insight into the potential for innovation by various aspects, including: by carrying out in-depth, explorative, empirical studies of users' sense-making in relation to their practices in virtual worlds; by using a diverse range of theories and methods including sense-making approaches, actor-network theory, theories of social learning, discourse analysis, virtual ethnography, active observation with Instant Message interviews and logs in *Second Life*, video-based interviews designed to explore the interplay between virtual interaction and activities on the outside; and by experimentation with simulation and virtual spaces in interplay with experiments in physical space (Jensen, 2009). The project's orientation is practice-based in two respects. First, it is directed at exploring a myriad of diverse virtual world practices, adhering to

the premise of virtual ethnography that research on online phenomena should avoid sweeping generalisations and engage instead in systematic analyses of online practices in the contexts in which they take place (Antonišević, 2008; Hine, 2000; 2005). Second, the project aims to further the development of virtual practices partly through close collaboration with users of virtual worlds. All the participants – both university researchers and practitioners – are active actors in *Second Life* practices through their engagement in the project; in most cases, their interest and engagement in *Second Life* extend beyond project-related activities.

Virtual worlds represent online 3-D environments, persisting over time, in which people – through their avatars – engage in social interaction with others, treating them as their fellow inhabitants (Schroeder, 2008, p. 2). The key characteristics of virtual worlds are encapsulated in a succinct definition formulated by Bell - ‘A synchronous, persistent network of people represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers’ (Bell, 2008, p. 2). All the activities in the project thus far have concentrated on one particular virtual world, namely *Second Life*, which is owned by a company called Linden Lab and is a type of virtual environment that, unlike online role-playing games, does not revolve around one specific activity (such as playing a game); it is a world consisting of hundreds of square kilometres of virtual space that users experience themselves as inhabiting, that they have contributed to building themselves in processes of user-driven content generation, and where they can engage in an enormous range of activities, spanning education, business, collaborative work, party-going, gossip and sex (Gordon, 2008; Schroeder, 2008).

Analytical Framework

The paper’s analytical interest in the discourses that the collaborating researchers draw on to give meaning to virtual worlds as fields of social practice is based on the discourse analytical assumption, mentioned earlier, that discourses work to constitute reality – including knowledge, identities and power relations - in particular ways that mask, marginalise or totally exclude other forms of social organisation and other ways of knowing and doing. This represents an understanding of discourse that is based on Foucault’s definition of a discourse as a limited set of possible utterances that set the limits for what we can say and, therefore, do (Foucault, 1972, p. 117). Thus, by giving particular meanings to *Second Life*, discourses *delimit* the existing and future production of knowledge in the collaborative research project.

For Foucault, discourse is tightly linked to power and knowledge. According to Foucault all knowledge-claims emanate from particular power-positions within particular discourses, such that one can never gain access to truth outside discourse (Foucault, 1980). This builds on the post-foundational epistemological position that all knowledge – including that produced in research – is a situated and contextual product of context-dependent, contingent representations of the world rather than a neutral, context-independent foundation (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Silverman 2001). The researcher – like all others – is a subject of discourse, ascribed *subject-positions* within discourses rather than being an autonomous agent with privileged access to truth. And individual identities – for instance, as researchers and users or inhabitants of virtual worlds – are created in the meeting between different subject positions (Hall, 1996).

In this paper, I apply Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (1992; 1995a; 1995b; 2003) which has been widely applied in media and communication studies including research on digital media (Fernback, 2007; Masso, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009). Fairclough operates with the concept of discourse as a *way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular*

perspective (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138; Fairclough, 1995a, p. 135). According to Fairclough, discourse both shapes, and is shaped by, the wider social practice of which it is a part¹.

In the case under analysis in this paper, the discursive meaning-making about *Second Life* contributes to producing and maintaining *Second Life* as a field of social practice. Moreover, the collaborative research process that shapes meaning-making about virtual worlds can be understood as a social practice that is part of a wider “shift to dialogue”; in this shift, researchers co-produce knowledge with diverse social actors with a view to meeting the supposed need of the “knowledge economy” for knowledge that can contribute to economic growth and social and technological innovation (dubbed Mode-2 research in an influential analysis by Gibbons et al, 1994; Nowotny, et al, 2001; 2003). The kinds of knowledge about *Second Life* created in the collaborative research workshops are shaped by the nature of the project as a collaborative research venture in which the university researchers have declined their traditional role as sovereign agents of knowledge production and instead invite other actors – practitioners in virtual worlds – into the research process as co-producers of knowledge². The *ways* in which the different collaborating actors position themselves and each other – for example, as different kinds of experts - in processes of negotiation shape the kinds of knowledge produced. And the practice orientation of the project also fundamentally shapes knowledge production since the aim is to produce a set of products that can be of use to all participants in their future practices in, or relating to, virtual worlds. In collaborative research processes, certain discourses - and the different identities and forms of knowledge they articulate – dominate while others are marginalised or silenced. The aim, in applying critical discourse analysis, is to open up for reflexive consideration of the discourses at play and the ways in which they delimit the nature of the knowledge produced. Arguably, by homing in on how research is delimited by socially and culturally specific discourses, such reflexive consideration can work to refine the practices of research on virtual worlds.

The methods of data production are participant observation and audio-recordings of the five all-day workshops on the virtual world, *Second Life*, that were held during the first year of the collaborative project (the kick-off workshop, two major workshops and the two smaller workshops). The data take the form of a corpus of transcriptions of the audio recordings and field notes from these five workshops. As noted above, the workshops represent the *fora* in which the university researchers and partners engage in the co-production of knowledge that constitutes the collaborative research process. Topics for workshop discussion have included the potential and limitations of *Second Life* as a field of social practice that opens up for social and cultural innovation; the concept of innovation itself; the Danish media discourse on *Second Life*; and libraries in *Second Life*. The observation-based data are the product of detailed field notes. The observation data and audio recordings are combined with informal conversations with participants, power point presentations that the participants have given at the workshops and email correspondence. The observational lens is shaped by a theoretical interest in which kinds

Notes

1. But in contrast to Fairclough, this move is not based on an *ontological* distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive. The establishment of an ontological distinction, I argue, involves underplaying the role of discourse – the representation of social practice in meaning – as a *constitutive* dimension of every social practice. Instead, I make an *analytical* distinction between discursive practices – the object of empirical analysis – and broader societal developments – the background for analysis. In other words, I bracket the question of the ontological status of discourse and treat discursive practice as an analytically distinct dimension of social practice.

2. See Louise Jane Phillips (in press), for a detailed analysis of the virtual worlds project as a case-study illustrating the dialogic turn.

of knowledge about virtual worlds are constructed and negotiated in interaction among the different participants in the collaborative research process and in how they are constructed and negotiated in that interaction. And my approach to observation is based on an ethno-methodological approach to ethnography, focusing on how the research project on virtual worlds is constituted discursively through the actions of the participants (Silverman, 2001).

Following Fairclough's framework, data analysis concentrates on three dimensions: *discourse practice* – the discourses drawn on in constructing particular representations of the world and particular identities and social relations; *text* – the ways in which these discourses are constructed linguistically in texts³ – and *social practice* – the wider social and cultural structures and processes that the discursive practices are shaped by *and* work to reproduce and change. In analyzing the *text* dimension, the focus is on linguistic features such as modality – the speaker's degree of affinity with or affiliation to her/his statement⁴ – and transitivity – the ways in which events and processes are connected with subjects and objects⁵. As a preliminary step towards analysis – and in common with other qualitative methods of analysis – the data corpus was coded into themes through a lengthy process of reading and rereading the transcriptions. An open approach to the coding was adopted that was informed by the discourse analytical framework and by existing research on virtual worlds and, at the same time, sensitive to the plurality of meaning – making at play in the data.

Mapping the Discourses of Second Life: Analysis

The following gives an account of the main discursive constructions of *Second Life* and of user/researcher identities that I have identified through a mapping of the discourses articulated in the research workshops. As is the convention in the presentation of discourse analysis, and indeed in many other forms of qualitative analysis, the account is presented as an interpretation of the data and illustrative examples from the data corpus are given in order to provide textual support for the analytical claims made. According to the analysis presented, the discourses were co-articulated without significant tensions or conflicts; in the co-articulation of discourses, hybrid identities were formed for the researchers and inhabitants of *Second Life*.

3. The concept of text is used in a broad sense in Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, referring both to written and printed documents such as doctors' journals and newspaper articles; transcriptions of spoken language such as meetings, interviews and focus groups; and multimodal communication combining language, pictures and sound such as websites, virtual worlds and TV-programmes (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3).

4. For example, the statements, "Second Life is full of potential", "I think Second Life is full of potential" and "Second Life may be full of potential" are different ways of expressing oneself about Second Life; that is, they represent different modalities by which speakers commit themselves to their statements to varying degrees. In the first case, a categorical, objective modality is used in which the speaker commits herself completely to the statement, expresses her/himself authoritatively about reality and presents an interpretation as if it were an objective truth or fact. In the second case, a subjective modality is employed, stressing the status of the truth-claim as the speaker's own interpretation rather than as a fact. And in the third case, a modality is used that expresses a lower degree of certainty (Second Life may be full of potential but it may not). The modality used has consequences for the discursive construction of both social relations and knowledge and meaning systems (see Fairclough 1992; 1995a; 1995b; 2003 for much more detailed accounts).

5. Central types of process include action, event, relational and mental processes. In action processes, for example, subjects can be positioned as active agents such as those used in the following example: "I have thrown 140 avatars out of my area". Such a positioning can contribute to building an identity for the subject as authoritative social actors (see Fairclough 1992; 1995a; 1995b; 2003 for much more detailed accounts).

Constructing *Second Life* as an object of analytical reflection and as a space in which social rules are being established

One discourse that was dominant across the workshops was the **discourse of *Second Life as an object of analytical reflection***. Within this discourse, different knowledge forms are constructed, and, in particular, an experience-based expert knowledge that stresses the actors' active engagement in the field of practice and ascribes actors with the subject-position of experience-based expert. Another discourse that was dominant across workshops was the **discourse of social rules under construction**. This discourse constitutes *Second Life* as a new space for social practice in which social conventions and rules of conduct are in the process of being established. Within the terms of the discourse, the necessity of establishing and regulating rules of conduct is taken for granted; it is also implied that violations of the rules are a threat to the social order of *Second Life*. This discourse works to constitute *Second Life* as a space for social interaction in which social conventions are established, shared and regulated (Boostrom, 2008; Carey, 2007). Social actors contribute to the discursive construction of *Second Life* as a social space through their assumption of identities that are established relationally⁶. Key identities are those of the law-abiding social actor who behaves appropriately and it's Other, the law-breaking social actor who violates the rules, and also the experienced, well-functioning social actor and it's Other, the Newbie who is new to *Second Life* and lacks the necessary social competencies to be accepted as a well-functioning inhabitant. The deliberate violation of rules is, of course, a well-known phenomenon of virtual worlds, dubbed "griefing" (Wetsch, 2008, p. 7).

The two discourses, the discourse of *Second Life* as an object of analytical reflection and the discourse of social rules under construction, are often articulated together in the workshop sessions. The co-articulation of the two discourses creates a hybrid identity across the subject positions of ***experience-based expert*** and ***active participant in, and advocate for, Second Life***. In the co-articulations, the researchers as subjects are not experts producing neutral analyses but positioned experts who are actively engaged in *Second Life* as actors and who are committed, to varying degrees, to furthering *Second Life* as a field of practice. And they are used to navigating in fields where *Second Life* is subjected to criticism. In particular, actors respond strongly and frequently to the Danish media's representation of *Second Life* as a failure or flop (the so-called 'anti-hype') that followed an initial period of positive publicity for *Second Life* (the so-called 'hype').

This active stance-taking on virtual worlds is the case both for the partners in the collaborative project and for the university researchers. Generally, *Second Life* is not constructed as a neutral study-object but as an object whose development the project wants to further. This kind of situated, partisan perspective whereby the researchers position themselves as engaged user-analysts of *Second Life* rather than just as analysts pervades other research in virtual worlds. For example, Nesson and Nesson (2008) construct their article as an argument, based on empirical, practice-based research, in favour of the 'current value and future potential' of virtual worlds in education (2008, p. 273). In the article, they directly address the reservations of critics and sceptics.

The following example of the co-articulation of the discourses is taken from the kick-off workshop on 25 February, 2008, where the workshop participants have been divided into two groups to discuss on the basis of their experience with *Second Life* (if they have any) what they see as the problems with *Second Life*, what ideas they may have for solving those problems and

6. See also Boostrom (2008) for an analysis of how the social construction of the virtual reality of *Second Life* is partly accomplished through the articulation of stigmatized identity of the Newbie.

opening up for the use of *Second Life* in processes of innovation, and what new knowledge they see that we will have a need for. The speakers position themselves as engaged user-analysts and as law-abiding actors in opposition to law-breakers. In the example, the first speaker (Anders) is a highly experienced professional user of *Second Life* who is participating in the collaborative project in this capacity. He positions himself as a central agent in the regulation of social behaviour in *Second Life*, and applies sanctions against those who violate the rules, such as expelling them from his island:

Anders: And then there are all those idiots who move into *Second Life*, right? From people who cause trouble in our sandpits or run around and shoot at people and cause trouble, people who can't behave themselves properly. But there are also firms. The mind boggles [...]

Marie: Does it require more social skills?

Anders: I don't think that it requires more than in real life or that it makes particular demands. Well there are also many who say that *Second Life* is their *Second Life*. It may be that it is for some people. It isn't for me. I am the same person, whether or not I am in the one platform or the other platform. I try to be the same person. Whereas many people don't play with open cards [...] The problem with *Second Life* is that you can be anonymous. There are some people who enjoy that, right? You can do whatever you like. Because in principle you can't trace it back to who it is who has caused trouble [...] (Kick-off workshop, 25 February 2008, lines 579-602)

Established relationally through being contrasted with what it is not, the subject position of law-abiding social actor is created in opposition to the Other of the law-breaking social actor who behaves inappropriately (for example, by causing trouble, shooting at people and not behaving properly).

This discursive reproduction in *Second Life* of offline social conventions is, of course, not surprising; as many other studies point out, online social relations are interwoven with offline relations in social actors' everyday lives and the social norms and rules of the physical world are drawn on in social interaction in virtual environments (Antonijevic, 2008, p. 235; Bell 2009, p. 4; Carter, 2005, p. 154; Yee, et al, 2007). What is interesting here is precisely how the manifestation and management of social relations in *Second Life* are constructed in meaning. In Anders' talk, *Second Life* is understood not as a separate world but as a world in which you take your "real life" identity in with you. The problem, according to the discourse, is that there are some participants in *Second Life* who do not adhere to the rules and this problem has its roots in the possibilities that *Second Life* gives the individual of (re) presenting the self in different ways: "Whereas many people don't play with open cards [...] The problem with *Second Life* is that you can be anonymous". This problematisation of identity construction in *Second Life* contrasts with a discourse outlined below on the advantages of *Second Life* as a platform for the flexible construction of multiple identities, a feature of new media that is often celebrated in postmodernist texts on the new media.

In the co-articulation of the discourse of social rules under construction and the discourse constructing *Second Life* as an analytical object, the researchers are ascribed identities not only as law-abiding social actors but also as authoritative experiential experts. While all the speakers

position themselves as experts of experience, Anders is given a privileged position as the most knowledgeable with his authority conveyed linguistically through the use of categorical, often objective, modalities that express total certainty in the truth of the statement (for example, from his statement above, “The problem with *Second Life* is that you can be anonymous”). In the moment immediately following the Anders statement above, the research leader, Susanne, also positions herself as an expert. In her case, the expertise is research-based:

Susanne: In the book that I am writing at the moment, I have a case-history [...]. And there are some stories about how you can be cheated and conned and really be subjected to terrible things. So that’s completely right. (Kick-off workshop, 25 February 2008, lines 604-608)

While Susanne’s authority is reinforced through her positioning as an agent in an action process in which she acts as a researcher (“In the book that I am writing at the moment”), her research-based expertise is clearly rooted in her experience as an actor in *Second Life* and, more specifically, as a law-abiding actor. Thus, her identity is created across the two discourses, the discourse constructing *Second Life* as analytical object and the discourse of social rules. In the following statement, this hybrid identity as both experiential expert and social actor is articulated clearly:

Susanne: I can remember, wasn’t it at the University of Southern Denmark? A long time ago. Where there was somebody who threw a virtual bomb. Yes. But the situation was also totally incredible. It was all set up for a big meeting with a discussion about what universities were doing in *Second Life* and that kind of thing, right? And then someone comes and throws a virtual bomb, and a countdown started. And it broke in and destroyed everything. All we could do was sit there and follow the countdown and then it exploded, right? And he did it several times!

Anders: Nothing happened, but it was annoying.

Susanne: Yes, an example of chicane. (Kick-off workshop, 25 February 2008, lines 609-616)

The roots of Susanne’s knowledge in her experience as a law-abiding actor in *Second Life* is stressed here by being framed within an narrative eyewitness account of an event in *Second Life* in which the contrasting figure of the law-breaker violated the social rules by throwing a virtual bomb. By backing up each other’s narrative accounts, Anders and Susanne work to construct a consensus of meaning within the discourse of social rules under construction. In the exchange that follows, the discourse of social rules is again co-articulated with the discourse of *Second Life* as analytical object and Anders is ascribed a privileged position as knower:

Anders: Well, I’ve kicked 130 avatars out of my area. And many of them are returnees. I kick them out and then they make a new avatar. And then they are in again.

Susanne: How can you see that they are returnees?

Anders: Yes, well, one of them, he's always called Mr. Benson as his first name. But with 8 different surnames, right? The big idiot!

Helene: Can't you just "mute" Mr. Benson? [people laugh]

Anders: There's nothing written down. It can't be done.

Philip: They sent someone out onto a barren field, a cornfield, once a long time ago. It was someone who had done a lot of cheating [...] The avatar has to go out onto an island that's totally isolated and sit there for 1-2 days and get bored. That was some years back, and there was one who ended up out there and served his sentence because he had cheated at something or other. And then he could get permission to come in again [...] (Kick-off workshop, lines 617-648)

All the speakers in the extract speak within the terms of the discourse of social rules, and their identities as law-abiding social actors and as authoritative experiential experts are constructed linguistically through their positioning as agents in action processes. For example, Anders asserts that "Well, I've kicked 130 avatars out of my area". This contributes to building a hybrid identity for Anders as a powerful social actor who plays a central role in the establishment and maintenance of rules for appropriate behaviour in Second Life (discourse of social rules) and as an experiential expert (discourse of Second Life as analytical object). By supporting Anders' and Susanne's accounts, the other speakers contribute to creating a research project "we" of law-abiding actors in Second Life. Accepting the terms of the discourse, there is no questioning of the shared concern over the violation of the rules or the application of sanctions against those who are guilty of a violation. Philip suggests that the problem with the lack of control of aberrant behaviour in Second Life can be solved through borrowing a convention from another medium, E-Bay. This is in line with Carey's point that people using new media may often borrow conventions from a previous or related medium in order to regulate behaviour (Carey, 2007, p. 84).

Susanne continues with a positive articulation of the discourse of social rules, making the point that rules are being established through self-regulation among the existing Second Life communities:

Susanne: I think now that it seems like it's under construction. I have a clear understanding in any case that it's in any case very difficult to do anything in Wonderful Denmark that doesn't go round in circles in the Danish groups, right? It's almost like in a village, it's so quick to circulate. Gossip and other things. And also if there any events. They circulate also quite fast. I think it depends a lot on where you are. That is also I think one of the problems that one talks about Second Life as if it is one thing. And a lot has to be done in order to make that differentiation. There is crap in Second Life, real crap, and then there are some things that are sublimely good. And masses of things in between. And that differentiation, that's going to be necessary soon. You showed me the mainland at one point, and that demonstrated it clearly. How completely awful it is. And if you go in as a newcomer and see it,

there's nothing to say, if you think 'Second Life what on earth is there for me here?'
(Kick-off workshop, 25 February 2008, lines 649-663)

Here, the discourse of social rules is articulated together with a discourse that constructs Second Life as a plurality of diverse practices and which argues that this very diversity ought to be made clearer to newcomers. The discourses are harnessed in argumentation in support of Second Life, ; the development of Second Life being dependent on its becoming more popular. In order not to lose disenchanted newcomers, Susanne states, "differentiation, that's going to be necessary soon". Thus she positions herself as an engaged, partisan analyst and active participant working to develop Second Life, and Second Life is constructed both as an analytical object and as an object to be supported and developed further. The view that Second Life should be supported and developed through the recruitment and retention of new members belongs to a marketing discourse that is also articulated in consumer research on Second Life. For example, Wetsch (2008, p. 1) argues that organisations need to "effectively recruit real world consumers into Second Life and retain them through positive interactions".

Constructing Second Life as an arena for experimentation

Another discourse that was frequently articulated across workshops was a discourse that constructed Second Life as an arena for experimentation through co-design. The following example comes from a description by the research leader, Susanne, of the project's site in Second Life – named "Research Island" - that was under construction at the time and which is intended to serve as the project's platform for experimentation with simulation:

Susanne: I love being able to go into something and see it from perspectives that otherwise aren't possible. I think it would be good if we could play with this on our Research Island. I don't know if we should be able to swim in the stomach of a shark. And see what it actually looks like inside. [...] We have the ground level or the underwater level, where we can play a bit with the more imaginative. And then there's the surface of the water or our big arena and then we'll have the levels up to the level of the sky which are our experimental plateaux. In fact, we would really like to get you on board with ideas. What is it you would like us to experiment with on these plateaux? The idea is not that we'll build something which just stands there and then it's finished. The idea instead is that what's fun in Second Life is to build and create and construct. And we will experiment with the ideas that lie behind the design. And then we will pack it up again and make something new. Because I think that that's the way that's going to be the most fun. We're trying to follow the same principle in the arena. [...] And it would be good if we just could press a button and reveal a cosy little seminar room of a completely different character than the big arena [...] And we should be able to. Well, it's made for experimenting. And Helene thinks we can definitely do that.

Helene: It can be done.

Susanne: So we'll try and see if you're right, Helene, okay? And you have any ideas for something, you think it could be fun to try to experiment with, then mail them to us. (Workshop 2, 3 April 2008, lines 222-257)

Here, Second Life is constructed as a space for experimentation that can produce innovation through co-design by taking advantage of the unique characteristics of Second Life; Second Life allows us to see it from perspectives that otherwise aren't possible. The potential for innovation lie in practices where actors interact in novel ways not possible in physical spaces, and it is often related directly to the quality of immersion. In this case, it is an actual instance of immersive experience that is referred to: namely, swimming in the stomach of a shark. And the ideas for co-design put forward take advantage of what is distinctive about Second Life as a social space – that is, what's fun in Second Life is to build, create and construct.

The co-design is a joint endeavour among all the collaborating actors, whereby both partners and university researchers are ascribed subject-positions as, at one and the same time, both analysts and active participants in Second Life. Research is constructed as a co-production which is tightly intertwined with co-design processes in the social space of Second Life. The discourse of Second Life as arena for experimentation is combined with the discourse of Second Life as analytical object: research is an experimental, practical endeavour in which practical experience represents a main source of expertise and in which the researchers are ascribed the hybrid identity of engaged user-analysts. For example, Susanne ascribes an authoritative voice to one participant without academic research credentials, namely the project manager, Helene, on the basis of her experience as a user of Second Life (when) Susanne (says) “Well, it's made for experimenting. And Helene thinks we can definitely do that”. This privileging of experience-based knowledge is common across the discourses articulated in the workshops, which is made clear in the analysis in the next section of the co-articulation of two other discourses that workshop participants drew upon in ascribing meaning to Second Life.

Constructing Second Life as a unique social space and as a space that is or is not useful

Other key discourses that were used to construct Second Life both in terms of its potential and its limitations were two related discourses: one that constructed Second Life as a unique social space with special characteristics and one that understood it in terms of usefulness. These discourses are obviously closely linked to, and sometimes intertwined with, the discourse described above that constructs Second Life as a space for experimentation. As described above, experimentation is seen to be grounded in the possibilities that Second Life affords immersion. In many cases, the discourse that constructed Second Life in terms of its unique or special qualities focused on the social relations that Second Life made possible rather than the quality of immersion, as in the following utterance by the project manager, Helene in an account of her own experiences as an actor engaged in setting up a virtual personnel recruitment business:

Helene: In reality, Second Life opens up for incredibly good ways of getting in contact with people who have both opinions and ideas. And if you lock yourself up in your own little place, you won't necessarily meet them. But if you are open to different networks and travel around like an egg [avatar in the shape of an egg] or whatever you want, then there are actually a lot of possibilities of getting feedback on a project you're in the process of doing. And it's a really easy way of getting in contact with people. You don't need to ring to them and ask am I disturbing you? They're standing there as an avatar in front of you and want to engage in dialogue. So it's really an open hand to take and make use of. You just need to find people, they all want to help you. (Workshop 3, 29 May 2008, lines 6-13).

Thus this discourse constructs Second Life as a social space that facilitates forms of interaction that are not as easy in other spaces. The following example of the application of the discourse of usefulness derives from a librarian's account of her experience with her library's trial-run in Second Life. Here, the discourse is also articulated in argumentation for the unique possibilities that Second Life offers:

Birthe: But some of what I think is that you can start to pick up clothes and dance too. That's some of what can attract you as a new beginner, right? Because wow, here you get something you can use for something, right? (Workshop 2, 3 April 2008, lines 125-129).

The discourse of usefulness was also drawn on in argumentation about the limitations of Second Life with respect to what it can be used for as part of a discussion about the potential and limitations of Second Life in relation to social and cultural innovation. Here, the absence of obvious usefulness was often linked to the openness of the space in reference to function. This was presented as an obstacle to its becoming more popular. The user-driven character is defined in negative terms as a source of difficulty for the user in this example which represents a comment by one of the practitioners:

Grethe: But the next issue is what's the point of my being in there? Why should I be in there? It ought to offer something extra, something that you just can't get in real life. That's hard to tackle, right? And there's a lot of talk about user-created content today on the net. You can say that Second Life, is one of the places where everything is user-created. And that's also a huge challenge. Let's say that you can find out how to control your avatar very quickly, to undress it and dress it. And then what? The next step is to create something inside. And you create something inside, you start to reproduce something you know. That's hardly likely to be unique. In our project, it started there where we had a bit of firm ground under our feet, right? The next step should be to create something in terms of the premises of the universe and something unique. And I think that's a challenge to get that far. (workshop 1, 25 February 2008, lines 747-762)

Second Life and the steep learning curve

Another feature observed as a limitation was the steep learning curve required of newcomers to Second Life. In the following example which was also from the discussion about the potential and limitations of Second Life with respect to social and cultural innovation, the steep learning curve is incorporated into the discourse of social rules. Here the argument is that newcomers should be able to come in as guests without rights:

Anders: And there's another challenge with the learning curve. It's steep. All that you've got to go through and answer and take a stance towards and the only thing you want to do is see what it's about. You have to dress your avatar and learn to talk and everything. And it's just not necessary. There ought to be some finished avatars that are ready to jump into, guest avatars. . Which don't have any rights, but which can be used to browse with. (workshop 1, lines 667-674)

There is also a problem with the steep learning curve in relation to university studies (where Second Life is a study object and medium of communication):

Susanne: Well, you can say that that learning curve is steep. And experience from the workshop which has just finished confirms that it's steep even for young people, you've got to remember that, right? They're in the middle of their twenties, these young people. And they are university students so they're not total idiots. They are actually quite bright. Some of them, Søren, you must admit [laughs] And yet they sit there and have problems. We are group-oriented so the students pull each other up by their boot-straps. But there are still some who cannot be pulled up by the hair, it's that hard. (workshop 1, lines 737-746)

The discourse of high hopes

Another key discourse articulated across workshops is a discourse of high hopes in which the existing limitations with respect to Second Life are acknowledged and weight is placed on the potential of Second Life in the future:

Anders: It's been about a year since I started up. And I did that because I'm convinced that virtual worlds will become big. They'll become really big. It's about getting in on it from the start and getting a solid head-start in relation to the competitors that are going to pop up at some point. I haven't seen any of them yet. (workshop 1, 25 February 2008, lines 428-432).

Here, a belief in the potential of Second Life as an innovative field for social interaction is presented as the central motivation for entering Second Life and setting up a business. The low level of participation in Second Life is acknowledged as a problem but at the same time, presented in positive terms - the absence of competitors allows Anders to get a head-start.

In many other cases, though, the low level of participation is discussed as a serious problem for the development of Second Life. Often, the figure of the inactive participant in Second Life is invoked as part of the problem:

Anders: I've had contact with several businesses at several levels. And it's been a fun experience. Actually, the customer we have called Columbus – the bookshop. They had a criterion for success that they should just be the first Danish bookshop in Second Life. So we made a shop for them. I think that was in June last year, and it hasn't been touched since. It's stayed there completely untouched. Their success criterion was to be the first Danish bookshop.

Susanne: But they don't use it for anything?

Anders: They pay rent dutifully every month. It's good to get rent but it still irritates me that there's an empty shop there that's not put to any use and that they don't even change their poster once in a while. But that was apparently their criterion for success. (workshop 1, lines 501-532)

Here, the inactive participants are positioned as actors that do not take advantage of the possibilities that Second Life offers and that ought to do so. Other figures who are invoked as part of the problem are journalists. Frequently, the negative hype that Second Life has received in the media is blamed for the low level of participation, as in the following example in which Anders is asked about his experiences:

Lise: Have you experienced the negative hype as something that has had an effect?

Anders: Yes, because after the summer holidays about three months passed, I think, where not a single new customer came. And we could also see on the traffic-figure, that it went the wrong way and the press coverage was also negative. But then at Christmas time, in December, it started to show signs of life again. And then we crawled up the ladder again, slowly right? But we are far from the level we were at in Spring last year, it was completely wild then, right? I was able just to sit and welcome the customers – well, almost. The first 5-6 customers came by themselves, I could hardly keep up.

The personal investment that Anders has in the success of Second Life and the problems he faces from the impact of the negative hype are manifest in the above citations. The negative hype is treated as a direct threat to activity in Second Life. In the project as a whole, the negative hype was viewed as a threat which the project had to act directly to curb. This implies that the project as a whole had invested in Second Life in such a way that Second Life's well-being was in the interests of the project. Thus participants at one workshop, following discussion of the Danish media discourse on Second Life (and, in particular, the media's pronouncement of the "death" of Second Life), were invited to suggest constructive ideas for how to exert influence on journalists to produce more balanced representations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the body of knowledge about Second Life in the context of its production in an ongoing research project about social and cultural innovation in virtual worlds. I identified and analysed that body of knowledge through a mapping of the discourses articulated in the research project, that each ascribe particular meanings to Second Life and particular identities to the users and to the researchers who position themselves and each other as engaged user-analysts and advocates of Second Life. The starting-point was the premise that the discursive construction of Second Life and of users and researchers delimits the production of knowledge about virtual worlds in the collaborative research project. In adopting the post-foundational epistemological position that knowledge is context-dependent, I argued that it is fruitful to analyse the discursively constructed knowledge as the product of processes of negotiation among the collaborating researchers (university researchers and practitioners), rather than treating the knowledge output as independent of, and detached from, the context in which it is produced.

Those processes of negotiation can be understood as an integral part of collaborative research as a social practice belonging to a general shift to dialogue, whereby university researchers engage in processes of co-production with diverse social actors in order to satisfy the supposed requirements of the "knowledge economy" for knowledge that can contribute to economic growth and social and technological innovation. The practical orientation of the

project—with its thrust towards producing knowledge that is useful for both university researchers and practitioners—exerts influence on the nature of the knowledge produced.

One can then ask the question, in what particular ways do the discourses identified delimit the production of knowledge on virtual worlds? What discourses that produce alternative knowledge and identities are marginalised or excluded? The answers to the questions can be used to further ongoing research, both within the project and in other studies. To address these questions, the different constructions of Second Life identified herein can be related to other ways of giving meaning to Second Life produced in other research projects. The focus here in this instance can be on the special characteristics that are ascribed to Second Life as a distinctive space for social interaction and on what are defined as the possibilities and limitations of that space with respect to user-driven innovation. Above, for example, I have pointed out that a situated, partisan discourse whereby the researchers position themselves as engaged user-analysts of, and advocates for, Second Life is prevalent not just in the research project but across the field of research on virtual worlds. The example given was the article by Nesson and Nesson (2008), in which they formulate their article as an argument in favour of virtual worlds, and provide support to their argument in the form of detailed empirical analysis of the use of Second Life in a particular educational initiative. Another example is Gordon and Koo (2008) who argue that “the immersive, playful and social qualities (of Second Life are) uniquely appropriate to engage people in dialogue about their communities”.

My point here is not that the advocacy for Second Life and other virtual worlds inherent in research on virtual worlds is necessarily problematic in itself. A basic sympathy for virtual worlds is in line with the practical orientation of many of the research projects (including the one analysed in this paper), whereby a key goal is to produce insights that can be harnessed to further the practices of virtual worlds. However, unacknowledged advocacy is problematic. It is important – in order for that research to be critical – for researchers to take a reflexive stance and consider the implications of this partisan promotion of virtual worlds for the production of research about virtual worlds and for knowledge production processes in virtual worlds. A reflexive consideration of those implications can form the basis for opening up for other ways of understanding and acting as researchers and users in relation to virtual worlds – ways of understanding that may be innovative and may lead to innovative practices in virtual worlds.

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