THE USE OF VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

3D virtual worlds can and have been used as a meeting place for distance education courses. Virtual worlds allow for group learning of the kind enjoyed by students gathered in a virtual classroom, where they know they are in a communal space, they are aware of the social process of learning and are affected by the presence and behaviour of their fellow students and tutor.Traditional ethnography has been adjusted to virtual environments and much research on this issue has been carried out under the umbrella of virtual ethnography. The increase in diverse Internet applications can be pointed out as the cause of this inclination and increase.

In this study, the authors explain the method of virtual ethnography in detail, inform about data gathering instruments such as participatory virtual observation, online and offline (face to face) interviews touch upon ethical questions related to field studies and highlight the elements that call for attention in the use of virtual ethnography in distance education studies.

Keywords: Distance education researches, virtual worlds, virtual ethnography, online participant observation.

INTRODUCTION

Online education is growing as a viable supplementary or alternative approach for instruction and learning as long as computers and internet connections are accessible to greater numbers of people. Applying distance learning is one of the rapidly growing uses of cyberspace that can affect the way students perceive knowledge (Abdellatif, 2008). The Web is the central method for distance education courses, but there are many avenues educators and students can use for delivery of information, including a wide range of virtual learning environments from a more traditional learning management system to holding class in a 3D virtual world like Second Life (Annetta et al, 2010).

For some more timid or shy students, distant communication gives the ability to open up when they are not being observed by others and allows them to participate feeling less stressed (Abdellatif, 2008). Learners in virtual worlds are not only passive observes of the process that are going on the monitors of their computers, instead, they can participate actively in every event they see. (Canbek, et al, 2010).

With its rapid increase, the Internet has become the biggest cultural phenomenon of our time and communication in technological environments has included elements of daily life more than ever. Online and offline worlds have been in interaction with, effected by and transformed one another (Gajjala, 2000; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff and Cui, 2009).

The term Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) recalls virtual games, social networking sites and software services such as virtual worlds, which take place in Internet interfaces through i-pods, cell phones and PDAs.

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It is necessary to distinguish the Internet from other forms of communication due to its components such as multimedia, interaction, simultaneity and hypertext. (Wood and Smith, 2005). Although, for communication facilitated by computer technology to take place, there must be a sender, a receiver, and a message. If this message is intended as learning instruction, we must also then consider the environment in which this educational communication occurs. Hence, this paper argues that in the design studio environment computer technology holds the potential to benefit the educational system (Abdellatif, 2008).

In addition, internet is currently perceived as a new "living" space where people spend their time. In this social media, a new form of society emerges and in virtual communities, people can express their values and identities as well as experiencing new life styles (Whang and Chang, 2004).

Virtual games and worlds are among the virtual life applications that emerged through computer-based communication and develop as an alternative to the existing definition of reality (Timisi, 2003). Alternative images and resemblances are put forward in virtual life environments, independently from their meanings and side-meanings in the world (Robins, 1999). Everything can be recorded in this environment where social diversity exists and users can simultaneously share in front of their computers (Timisi, 2003) and give feedback to the user (Binark, 2007). In this process where text, sound, graphics, image, video and multiple types of communication come together (Timisi, 2003), emerging practices both affect cultural patterns of real life and create new patterns in virtual reality (Soyseckin, 2007). In addition, the anonymity of cyberspace can benefit people in many ways. In fact, this virtual community created in the new communication media enables people to show their appreciations, evaluate what they defend, engage in intellectual arguments, transmit their knowledge, receive new knowledge, share their feelings, make plans, gossip, have fights, fall in love, find friends, play games, flirt and spend time (Rheingold, 1993).

With its distinct technical properties and working mechanism, computer-based communication differs from other electronic environments and affects people's perceptions, behaviors and choices (High and Solomon, 2010). Therefore, computer-based communication should be approached within the perspective of epistemological change and should be evaluated as an alternative form of communication that emerged out of new cultural forms; a new place for the discussion of online cultural phenomenon (Williams, 2008).

In this regard, there has been a transformation in the field of studies on the Internet and in addition to traditional field research, ethnographic works on virtual networks have increased (Gajjala, 2000; Wittel, 2000). Virtual ethnography is viewed as a method that provides important clues in understanding the virtual communities, culture and communication that develop in virtual environments (Gajjala, 2000). The use of virtual worlds in education and the portrayal of students' thoughts and behaviors in this environment have gained more importance. The ethnographic approach permits direct evaluation of the student's competence in networked learning. The objective of our paper is to describe an ethnographic approach to grasp the learning processes of student collaborative activities supported by virtual learning environment in their real contexts (Charnet and Veyrier, 2008).

In this study, the authors will provide information on the virtual ethnography methodology that has developed out of traditional ethnographic research; touch upon the differences between these two ethnographies and the instruments of data gathering used in this process.

FROM TRADITIONAL TO VIRTUAL FIELD RESEARCH

In order to understand the studies on virtual environments, one must touch upon traditional field research. A qualitative form of research, ethnography has often been used in social studies (Altuntek, 2009). Ethnographic research includes the study of human communities in their daily lives (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2008), and analysis of their cultural patterns and perspectives in their natural environments (Gay, Mills and Airasian, 2006).
As a tool of exploration, ethnographic approach is especially effective when the new, different and unknown is encountered (Punch, 2005). It is observed that ethnographical research has been used in virtual settings as well as face-to-face environments. This situation is closely interrelated with the increase in diverse Internet applications.

With social life's dynamics and effects, the Internet now influences all aspects of life. Emerging forms are virtual cities, universities, communities, organizations and reality environments. More and more people communicate with each other through virtual chat rooms, social networking groups and email groups (Gajjala, 2000; Wittel, 2000; Tyagi, 2010). The most effective way to understand this community, described as the "network society" by Castells (1996), is carrying out ethnographic work. Therefore, the increase in ethnographic studies on the Internet is no surprise (Gajjala, 2000; Wittel, 2000). Like a social system, the virtual space is a self-sufficient environment. Through their avatars, users can freely exist in these environments that have unique rules, customs, values, communication modes, economy, and official and unofficial politics (Jordan, 2010). In this regard, online interaction and communities in virtual settings should be analyzed with attention to their concepts, meanings, shared values and unique contexts (Gajjala, 2000; Hine, 2000).

The ethnographic research technique in virtual environments is described as "online ethnography" (Correll, 1995), "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), "nethnography" (Kozinett, 2002), Web-negraphy or "cyberethnography" (Jones, 1998). All of these different names refer to the same concept, the description "virtual ethnography" will be used throughout this study. For Hine (2000), virtual ethnography is a special branch of ethnography. Hine (2000) suggests that virtual ethnographical research must begin with accepting dialogues through the Internet as social interactions. As a developing research method, virtual ethnography delves into virtual culture and examines interactive websites and virtual communities. Virtual ethnography is a method developed for understanding the interactions, communication and communities in online environments (Jones, 1998). In order to build relations with the lives of participants, the researcher may have to be online at all times (Browne, 2003). Therefore, virtual ethnography can be described as a study of online interaction (Gajjala, 2000).

Although there are many similarities between them, virtual ethnography differs from traditional ethnography. Virtual ethnography avoids biased opinions about the existence of communities. Instead of studying with a group and identifying it as a community, it allows multiple persons to assume leadership roles within the reality, status and principles determined by participants (Ward, 1999). Virtual ethnography explains how virtual communities are more divided and unstable than traditional communities. The fact that participants are not obliged to belong to groups for longer time periods contributes to this case. Although the work process continues in the virtual environment, there is always the possibility to look back and elaborate on the topics that are studies. Reflective conversations with the participants are a component of the virtual ethnography process. In traditional ethnography, ethnographers have to count on their ears and fast writing skills.

Due to the limits of her senses, the ethnographer may not be able to have high quality input. And the virtual ethnography can be overwhelmed by the vast amount of information that was recorded through computers. However this case makes data gathering easier for virtual ethnography (LeBesco, 2004).

Social networking sites, games and worlds in virtual space can be research fields. With their authentic economies, cultural structures, value systems, modes of communication, technological equipment that allows interaction between users, and avatars formed by users, virtual worlds and games can be evaluated as a virtual social system. Therefore it is possible to collect comprehensive and rich data in this field through offline and online data gathering tools. There have been many studies on the use of ethnography in virtual space. Through its avatar in Second Life, Boellstorff (2008) actively took part in this world and collected his data through participant observation. Paccagnella (1997) observed the Italian cyber community Cyberpunk for 18 months, recorded the messages written here and examined this environment. Correll (1995) observed a virtual lesbian cafe. Hine (2000) investigated the Louise Woodward murder through the ethnographic analysis method in the virtual environment.

Kendall (2004) employed participant observation in the social networking site BlueSky for 2 years and made face-to-face interviews with 30 participants. As in other participant observations, the researcher became a member of the group and participated in certain events. Uzun (2011) collected data in the virtual life platform Second Life for 2 years through participant observation and compared the users virtual daily lives and performances with their real life counterparts through the face-to-face interviews he made with the participants.

Although there are several studies on the experiences of students in virtual educational environments (Charnet and Veyrier, 2008; Krüge, 2006), there is not much research on educational activities in virtual worlds with the use of virtual ethnography (e.g. Firat and Yurdakul-Kabakci, 2011; Kobak, 2011). It is believed that the cause of this situation is that the studies are at the application phase and have not yet been concluded. Related efforts are increasingly made in especially the virtual life world Second Life.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS IN VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

There are guides for a researcher using traditional ethnographical methods on how to collect data but there are no such resources for researchers in the virtual environment. With this thought in mind, theorists and researchers have adopted ethnographical and anthropological methods to the virtual setting (Ward, 1999). In order to carry out virtual ethnographical research, it is important to understand the properties and data collection instruments of traditional ethnography.

The basic components of traditional ethnographical research are working in natural environments as opposed to laboratories, informing the participants fully so that they can reflect their perspectives and behaviors, and gathering inductive, repetitive and unstructured data throughout the research process (Gay et al., 2006).

Going out in the field and being close to the daily life experiences and activities of other people are the basic activities of ethnographers.

The concept of "being close" simply refers to physical and social proximity to the daily repetitions in people's lives; for this purpose the researcher must have a central location in the key places/areas where people spend their lives.

The ethnographer must "delve into" the lives of others in order to understand what is meaningful and important in other people's lives. With the "delving into" principle, the researcher has the chance to have an insider's perspective on how people carry out repetitive daily acts, live their lives, what they find as meaningful and how they form these meanings (Emerson et al., 2008).

By this, the researcher will also learn the language, jargon and special uses of word that take place. Another point to emphasize is the process in which the researcher becomes a part of the culture or the group that is being studied and the influence of their culture on the researcher (Goulding, 2005). Through this information, we can find clues on how virtual ethnographical research should be carried out.

Traditional ethnography's methodological perspective has been widened and reformulated for the creation of data collection tools in virtual ethnography. Many of the terms and techniques in virtual ethnography are related to traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2002). Hine (2000) describes the importance of using face-to-face interviewing methods as well as interpersonal or group interviews in the virtual environment. Traditional ethnography covers many tools such as participant or non-participant observation, unofficial or semi-structured interviews, textual analysis and detailed description of the life presented. It is possible to make use of these tools in virtual ethnography. Along with this, the fact that hypertext is an important part of virtual ethnography (Gajjla, 2002), highlight the importance of oral narratives as well as written accounts (Wilson, 2006). Since virtual ethnographers do not interact with research participants physically, they may not have to use their interpersonal communication skills in order to enter and make send of the virtual world. Instead, they mush improve their ability to comprehend visual and written data. Due to the anonymity brought by the virtual space and the lack of physical existence, the process of entrance in the virtual environment has different mechanisms.

Ethnographers must determine what and how they will research, how they will present themselves and which ethical considerations they will take into account (Bowler, 2010) before they enter a community and perform computer-based visual and written tasks such as email communication, online chats and writing personal messages (Garcia et al., 2009). The research phase of virtual ethnography follows the six steps of traditional ethnography. These steps are planning the research, entering the field, collecting data, analyzing data, fulfilling ethical criteria and preparing a report. If she is gathering both online and offline information, the researcher must first know how and when to connect the information she gathered through face-to-face and online interviews.

Second, the differences within online social environments must be understood and evaluated carefully in order to employ ethnographical techniques effectively and consistently. The study begins with the preparation of research questions and the determination of the virtual community to be studied (Garcia et al., 2009). With this information, it is possible to explain the tools of data collection in virtual ethnography.

Participant Virtual Observation

Virtual ethnography also benefits from its traditional counterpart on the topic of data collection through participant observation. Ethnographic research is observation-based due to the need for providing details descriptions of behaviors that exist in any environment (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Yildirim and Simsek, 2006). Observation activities can be divided into two; structured and unstructured (Yildirim and Simsek, 2006). There are two main sources of information in ethnographic research. The first one is behavior-oriented observation; the second is oral reports (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994).

In participant observation, an important method to gather data in ethnographic research, the researcher has an active role in the community, observes people's behaviors directly and communicates with people in order to make sense of people's acts. In doing so, the research can find clues that help understand the habits people had unconsciously gained. For this reason, the researcher must spend time and participate in activities in the community that is being researched (Gay et al., 2006). Due to its structured aspect of its process, observation takes place through a series of activities. These activities begin with the selection of and entrance to an environment, and continue with observation and recording. As the research continues, the quality of observation changes and focal points that require more selective observation and clear research questions emerge. The collection of observation data continues until theoretical maturity is reached (Punch, 2005). In this respect, observation becomes a personal experience and the meaningfulness and validity of the phenomenon being observed can be closely related to the researcher's ability and experience. It is natural for certain qualities of the researcher to influence the results of the study in such a process (Yildirim and Simsek, 2006).

As it was mentioned before, virtual ethnography is based on participant virtual observation. In virtual ethnography, the researcher personally collects data through virtual observation in the virtual environment. This gives her the chance to both better understand the online community and its members, and better analyze the events and the interaction that takes place within the online community (Garcia et el., 2009). For this reason, Walstrom (2004, p.86) uses to term "participant-experiencer" instead of participant observation in order to explain the role of the researcher in this environment. In participant virtual observation, the focus is on integrated and large-scale patterns of behavior. The focus and events can only become clear during the observation. No matter what recording device she uses, the observer must be present in the event scene but affect it as little as possible (Punch, 2005). Through this information, it is possible to suggest that the important aspects of participant virtual observation do not differ much from traditional ethnographical observation.

Many researchers first participate as lurkers in the environment of their study. The lurkers initially gather data without asking questions to people about themselves or their environment. A lurker is someone who passively observes discussion groups, chat rooms and email lists. They do not actively participate in group discussions. Some researchers may role-play order to gather data. The passive observer may all of a sudden become more active (Whitty, 2004).

The researcher can take different positions in the ground. The observer: the complete participant, the participant observer, the observer as participant and the complete observer (the lurker). In the networked learning context, each participant is identified and has a status. That means the researcher is identified as a student, as a teacher or as a tutor. The complete participant does not reveal his status of researcher and participates entirely. On the other side, the complete observer observes some location or process without becoming part of the setting in any way. In our context, that means the observer has access to the learning environment but does not participate in it (Charnet and Veyrier, 2008).

The nature of observation changes because the ethnographer does not observe people directly in participant virtual observation. Along with this, the recording of events, interactions and places technologically change the role of field notes and influence the reporting of findings (Garcia et al., 2009). The recording of field notes and diary keeping can be exemplified through the work of Uzun's study (2011).

In order to carry out his study in Second Life virtual world, Uzun (2011) created a female avatar on 4 April 2009. He noted the observed events, behaviors and written and oral communication in Second Life. He also recorded important written communication made privately with the users. When needed, the researcher took pictures and used these as archival data. Using the help of another person, the researcher went to an island where a lot of Turkish users were present and in here, here received help from Turkish users on how to dress in Second Life, use menus, visit clothing shops, carry out written and audio communication. Although the researcher had initially experienced difficulties in using Second Life's menus, he was able to resolve this issue quickly. In the first step of his study, Kobak (2011) taught the students in SL how to use menus and carry out certain activities. The researcher believes that understanding how to use the virtual world is important for adjusting to the environment.

In the several islands of SL, Uzun (2011) first did little and stayed as a lurker but without losing his presence in the community. In doing so, he observed the behaviors, interactions and activities that took place among the users. He hid his identity as a virtual ethnographic researcher throughout the observation. The researcher logged into the virtual world on certain days of the week, official and religious holidays and on the days which had importance in Turkish agenda; to spend 6-7 hours a day in average.

Highlighting that the reason why he spent a lot of time in SL was not only getting to know the virtual world closely or delving into it, the researcher points at the difficulty of logging out because it carries the risk of losing the bond of trust he built with the users over time. In order to observe the users closely and examine their behavior, he became friends with some of the users. Initially, the researcher tried to communicate with as many people as possible but later on, he focused more on the individuals through whom he could gather more in-depth information. By spending more time with these individuals in different parts of Second Life, he tried to understand the values, jargon and the routines of this virtual environment.

Believing that it is necessary in order to build a build trust bonds, the researcher did not hide his real gender, marital status, education level, city and other demographic information. He expanded the communication he built in Second Life to other virtual environments. For example, he opened Skype and Windows Messenger accounts for his alias, share photos taken in Second Life, use Skype instead of SL voice chat and use Messenger to have written conversations. This was helpful in exchanging documents and information with other students.

Online Interviews

There are different ways of carrying out online interviews. IM (Instant Message) was used as a communication tool to carry out online interviews. IM is a way of simultaneous messaging and can be preferred by people who do not enjoy face-to-face interviews. Speed, the freedom of not traveling, flexibility in choosing a place and time and inexpensiveness are among the advantages of this option where descriptive information is produced. The anonymity of IM created trust in the users and encourages them to take part in the research. In addition, anonymity encourages the users to be open-minded. In online interviews, the users are able to convey their feelings through words only (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009).

Electronic communication is based on a written world. Although it is difficult for a virtual ethnographer to perceive non-verbal communication codes such as voice tone, body language and posture (Angrosino, 2007), Hinchcliffe and Gavin (2009) suggest that this is not unique to text-based communication and problems such as putting non-verbal communication codes in context after face to face interviews can take place.

All of the details that are paid attention to in face-to-face interviews must also be taken into account in online interviews. It is possible to run into problems in online interviews. For example, the interviewee may have to respond to the messages and invitations of her other friends, or leave her computer to do another task. In such cases, the researcher may take a short break or conclude the interview in order to motivate the interviewee and be able to continue with the process later on (Uzun, 2011).

It is also possible to gather data through emails in virtual ethnography. Email interviews are an asynchronous way of conducting online interviews. With more email correspondence, the relation between the interviewer and the interviewee can develop. This type of interview can be more personal and carefully conducted (Kivits, 2005).

Offline (Face to face) Interviews

Multiple data gathering techniques can be employed simultaneously in ethnographic research. This both enables the evaluation of data in terms of consistency and credibility, and diversifies the findings of the research (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). As an important data gathering technique, interviews aim to extract information from people. Observation does not convey information about the past and interviews enable the in-depth analysis of information gathered through observation (Gay et al., 2006).

In addition to online interviews, Uzun (2011) also made face-to-face interviews with the users of the virtual world and found the opportunity to compare the behaviors in both worlds. The research shared his real identity with certain users and asked them if they would like to participate in his study. He requested to make online interviews with those people who were not willing to give a face-to-face interview.

Convincing virtual environment users to make face-to-face interviews is a difficult process. For this reason, online interviews can be more appealing to those people who do now want to participate in a face-to-face interview. In his study, Uzun (2011) explains this situation through one of his interviewee's statement.

"...voice recordings huh. no, my real personality would not allow that. I have only spoken to 2-3 people and do not really want to do this. It is complicated, it is not a matter of insecurity, i'm already answering your questions here. Do not tire yourself, we'll do it through here. i think it is better if identity stays like this, i am not just any player and i do not play with such players..."

Reactions to face-to-face interviews do not solely derive from the worry of being exposed. Uzun (2011) states that he received the following statements to his request of meeting users in their hometowns:

"This courage you have for the game" ; "Your research can be done through the game" ; "how will you come, you do not know these places " ; "How brave for a girl" ; "why do you do this research" ; "what results do you expect" ; "Are we going to be guinea pigs" : ".....city, why" ; "i would not be useful, i really have nothing" : "you will literally make an interview huh"

In addition to these issues, problems can be experienced before and after the interviews. For example, there may be users who initially accept to have an interview and later change their minds or do not show up to the interview venue (Uzun, 2011). mHinchcliffe and Gavin (2009, p, 330) explain the differences between online and face to face interviews in the following way (Table: 1).

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Table: 1
Combined Respondent/Researcher Losses and Gains of Online
Interviewing using IM Compared with Face-to-Face Interviews

Online Interviews using IM	Face-to-Face Interviews

Losses
    1-Non-verbal signals
    2-Technical problems
	Gains
	• **Presence of non-verbal signals**

Gains • **Access to previous responses** • **Enhances confidence** • **No transcription** • **Increased cognition** • **Accurate** • **Succinct accounts** • **No interruptions** • **Perceived anonymity -widened participation**	**Losses** • **Technical problems** • **Time consuming, can be costly** • **Commit previous responses to memory** • **Lessens confidence - apprehension** • **Long, arduous, inaccurate transcription** • **Loss of cognition – apprehension** • **Inaccurate - mishearing/not hearing** • **Long winded accounts** • **Frequent interruptions** • **Self-consciousness, apprehension.** **Barriers to participation-psychological, physical, emotional, sensory difficulties, spatial distance**

Data gathering through the observation of email and discussion groups can have advantages and disadvantages. The chronological recording of the data gathered through the observation of email and discussion groups can be helpful during the analysis stage. It is easier to select keywords and classify accordingly in this numerical information. This makes possible content analysis and sophisticated evaluations. Still, we may come upon problems such as having limited access to discussion groups, missing information or struggling to comment on vague message contents (Kleinman, 2004).

ETHICS IN VIRTUAL FIELD RESEARCH

Important ethnical problems are inevitable in studies undertaken without the attention of the people being observed (Paccagnella, 1997). The discussions on the ethical aspect of virtual environment research emerge from the question of whether online interaction is within public or private spheres (Veale, 2002). This ambiguity of the Internet with regards to the public and private spheres, aliases, the comfort of being anonymous, the global and accessible nature of the web can create different problems (Frankel and Siang, 1999). Paccagnella (1997) views messages sent via the Internet as public transactions and states that they are made for public consumption. However, some people say that virtual life data should be treated differently than the information from televisions, radios and written materials (Frankel and Siang, 1999). Still, it can be said that ethical principles of offline research can be applied in cyberspace studies; only in some special circumstances may occur in online research (Veale, 2002).

In some cases, for example, a researcher how is gathering information for statistical analyses (Paccagnella, 1997) or a lurker who passively observes can gather data without informing people (Veale, 2002). This should actually be seen as a facilitative factor for having access to people's speeches and stories in virtual field research (Frankel and Siang, 1999). Hiding users' real identities, informing them about their rights and getting their approvals, protecting their intellectual property rights, giving them trust, treating them equally and respecting their behaviors or principles are important components of ethical discourse (http://www.buzinkay.net/blog-en/2009/05/part-3-ethical-issues-of-virtual-ethnography).

Uzun (2011) hid his researcher identity during passive observation but later explained his research's aim before online and face-to-face interviews. Telling interviewees that their real life information will be hidden, they can withdraw from the interview at any time or see the interview text, as well as keeping their virtual and real names anonymous are among the ethical considerations a researcher should take into account.

CONCLUSION

This article included information on the development of virtual ethnography, its similarities and differences with traditional ethnography, how and with which tools it can be done in the virtual environment and how these are important in distance education research. Virtual ethnography is a useful method in the interpretation of virtual communication and understanding virtual communities. Virtual ethnography is mostly based on participant virtual observation and can be supported by online and offline interviews. Passive observation is key to understanding and entering the virtual community and culture, as well as gaining the users' trust. It is important for researchers to carry out distance education applications in virtual worlds to understand this environment so that they can interpret the effects of these media upon students. The question of ethics in cyberspace studies deserves attention. Offline ethical principles are applicable to online studies, where in some cases special treatments are also made.

Authors' Note: This study is the reviewed and improved version of a section in the dissertation "Second Life: An Ethnographic Approach to the Determination of Self-presentation in the World of Virtual Life", completed in the Communication Department of Social Sciences Institute in Anadolu University in 2011.

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