Memory and digital technologies – a reflection on remembering in a virtual world

by Mathilda Rosengren

Introduction

We are increasingly dependant on digital technologies and on our escalating individual presence in "online" worlds. This raises questions regarding how our human experience translates, and potentially changes, in and through digital technologies. More and more a part of real life,[1] these technologies invade our way of being, thinking and acting in the world. Projects and planning, as well as history and memory become tangled in ontologically unstable settings; not quite real, not unreal, but virtual[2]. How are we to deal with memories of what was never the case; how are we to recreate a history of a utopian place?

In this essay I will examine the place of memory in the context of the virtual world Second Life, assessing what forms of memory are allowed to exist within this world. Grounding my analysis in sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' ideas on memories as socially determined (*On Collective Memory*, 35-53), anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano's anthropology of memory (*Imaginative Horizons*, 148-177) and philosopher Walter

Benjamin's evaluation of the relations between memory, modernity and shock (*Illuminations*, 152-196), I will investigate how the users of Second Life relate to remembering and active memory creation.

Second Life was created in 2003 and a decade later it has about one million monthly users.[3] The digital technologies that the World is born out of allows its "participants to create personalized avatars and interact with other avatars in simulated environments largely built by participants [themselves]" (Zhoua et al. 262). Unlike many other virtual worlds, Second Life is not a game *per se* and, just like in real life, there is no "goal" or "winning". Instead, as the name suggests, it concerns a second *living* (where, of course, gaming occurs but never as the virtual world's defining feature). With Second Life's motto being "Your world. Your imagination.", it is clearly constructed as a virtual world in which "everything" is (or can be made) possible. The company behind it, Linden Lab, owns and runs the basic platform for the world; "a landscape with land, water, trees, and sky; a set of building

tools; and a means to control, modify and communicate between avatars" (Boellstorff 11-12). But, as anthropologist Tom Boellstorff – who conducted several years of fieldwork in Second Life – points out: "Second Life is based upon the idea of user-created content" (11). In the form of your infinitely malleable avatar you can change your eye colour every other minute, fly instead of walk, become an animal, build a castle in the sky, turn the world upside-down (fig. 1), decide whether it is dawn, midday, dusk or night, and so on. In this world of constant flux – with avatars[4] and sims[5] appearing and disappearing every minute of every day – how are the processes of memory and remembering affected and utilised?

"Memory makes us human. Without it people are turned into a formless mass that can be shaped into anything", argue historians Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich (qtd. in Kuehnast 191). This may be a contentious statement but it does provide an interesting starting point for a reflection on memory in relation to virtual worlds. As one of my informants, Jamie Marie[6] explained, "one could argue that all of it is not real, just computer pixels, bits and things, but it is

the people behind the keyboards that make [Second Life] real".

Accordingly, without the real-life human presence behind the Second Life avatar, the avatar could indeed be described as "a formless mass that can be shaped into anything". With a human being behind it, however, the avatar is imbued with meaning, thus attaining an unstable ontological status. The avatar becomes a *consciously* fashioned digital mass, still flexible in form but now being changed into *something* as opposed to anything. Thus if memory is the requisite for us being human in real life, and the human being is the requisite for an avatar to transcend the "pixels" of the virtual realm, then memory must be intrinsically linked to the social foundations of both.

Definitions of memory

Firstly, a distinction needs to be made between personal and collective memory. Crapanzano links the former to "memoralization" and the latter to "commemoration". Memoralization is "individual recollection",

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fig. 1 – My avatar tildaros is exploring inverted gravity in the virtual reality of Second Life

the personal remembering of each one of us. Commemorations we do as a collective – a society – and partake in together through rituals, memorials, ceremonies and so on (158). Simply speaking, remembering your dead granddad is memoralization. Taking part in Remembrance Sunday, remembering those who died for the Commonwealth in World War I, is, however, commemoration. Consequently, commemoration is part of the

socio-historical structures found in society whilst memoralization is more unstructured, informal and personal. Nevertheless, to think that memoralization can exist without any influence from the outside world would, I believe, be a mistake. Believing all memories to be grounded in the social, Halbwachs argues that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and

localize their memories. (38). Thus, both when memories are shaped and when they are remembered, the present socio-cultural structures play a part in influencing this creation and recreation – Halbwachs even goes as far as claiming that "the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (39-38).

In her musing on the human body, memory and technology, sociologist Celia Lury states that "questions of memory have always been entwined with the construct of the individual" (105). Seeing how the action of the individual avatar is the basis of all interaction, creation and meaning- making in Second Life, the focus here will lie on memoralization. Nevertheless, I believe it is worth keeping in mind that the social factor is always present to some extent as well as the fact that the lines between memoralization and commemoration can and do sometimes blur.

The second definition to be made is between personal memory and the *mnemonic*, the object by which you remember something. According to Crapanzano, "Mnemonics, reminders – they are often taken for the memory itself" (162). For example, the

photographs of your granddad that you look at to remember him are mnemonics, *not* the memory of your granddad.

Crapanzano mentions several common mnemonics – physical locations, foods, odours, texts, music, statues, photographs and many more – thus showing, in accordance with Halbwachs, how the expressions they take differ depending on the socio-cultural context of the person who does the remembering (162).

In real life, mnemonics make use of all five human senses. Yet in the digitised world of Second Life only two of these – sight and hearing – are functional. This courts the question how the act of remembering works in such an environment. Sight being the means through which the avatars navigate and make sense of their virtual surroundings, Second Life projects itself primarily as a visual world. Admittedly, there is music playing in some sims and the option to use your human voice to speak does exist. Nevertheless, due to slow Internet connections and preferences to be anonymous[7] many people revert to using the chat window to communicate and their sight to understand the world. With sight then

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[7] For instance, visual culture theorists Robert Alan Brookey and Kristopher L. Cannon show that people who gender swap in Second Life prefer to stay anonymous to not face prejudices (157).

being the dominating sense in Second Life, assuming that most mnemonics in Second Life are of a visual kind is not farfetched.

Early on in my research, when exploring this virtual world both "in-world"[8] as well as on other online forums, I was struck by the abundance of photographic representation of avatars, sims, in-world events, etc, that existed online. For instance, the official Second Life blog, *Inworld*,[9] focuses solely on the posting of "Second Life Pic of the Day" – selected photographs taken by Second Life residents. Furthermore, the largest Flickr group devoted to Second Life (there are also several topic-specific groups) has been active since 2004 and has almost 18,000 members who together have uploaded close to half a million photographs.[10] Considering this prominent role of visual material being created and shared among Second Life residents, in the following analysis I have chosen to focus on perhaps the most obvious of virtual mnemonics: in-world photographs.[11]

Thirdly, let us turn to Benjamin's (152-196) reflection on the Proustian ideas of *mémoire volontaire* and *involontaire*. Benjamin argues that urban modernity only allows for one sort of (personal) memory, the *mémoires volontaires*. These are conscious memories that can be recalled at will. They stem from a certain happening, a certain experienced event in a specific time – what Benjamin calls *Erlebnis* and that he contends is the kind of experience dominating modern, urban life.

The *mémoires involontaires*, on the other hand, are the memories of *Erfahrung*, an experience in a more deep-seated, subliminal sense. A *mémoire involontaire* is what Proust is experiencing when, through the mnemonic of a *madeleine*, he is transported – swept even – back to a past utterly untouched by the present. So when Halbwachs argues that the memory of the past is always shaped by the present, the memory that he is talking about is the *mémoire volontaire*. And, according to Benjamin, this should make perfect sense since Halbwachs' writing

is born out of the modernity of the early Twentieth Century.

With the aforementioned concepts as a backdrop, I will in the following analysis firstly examine conscious memory-making and its forms of expression in Second Life, before introducing Benjamin's idea of shock as preventing involuntary memory creation, and ask if in the post-modern, digitised world of Second Life, *mémoire involontaire* is ever possible.

Methods

Between the months of January and March 2013 I conducted a short stint of fieldwork in Second Life, visiting the virtual world on a regular basis as the avatar *tildaros*. The potential for virtual ethnography has been accounted for by many, with participant observation in such worlds being particularly highlighted (Boellstorff; Boellstorff et al; Hine). Nevertheless, since my intention was to explore individual memory, I made the decision to focus on conducting semi-structured and unstructured private interviews with avatars,[12] to allow, as

Boellstorff puts it, "residents to reflect upon their virtual lives and discuss what they saw as significant or interesting aspects of Second Life" (77).

Concerned with the processes of active memory-making and mnemonics of in-world photography, I found my eight informants through the Second Life Flickr group mentioned above. Aiming to speak to avatars that had participated actively for some time in the photo practice, I chose to contact people who had uploaded photographs in the last month, had been active users for more than a year and whose photostreams[13] projected the resident's life in Second Life. Considering the time constraints, technical difficulties and privacy of the informants, I let them decide where and how the interviews were to be conducted, with half deciding to be interviewed over email and half in-world (fig. 2).

I notified all informants of the details of my research and told them that they could opt to be anonymous and keep things "off the record", if they so wished. I have changed names when requested and always received permission before taking photographs or

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[8] "In-world" is the term used by residents when referring to being online, "inside" the virtual world of Second Life.

[9] "Inworld".

[10] Second Life Flickr group.

[11] Though photographs taken in-world are sometimes also referred to as "screen captures", "screen grabs" or "screenshots", the majority of the time my informants chose to use the more general term "photo/photograph" (perhaps to assert the link between their real life and their virtual one, as opposed to making a clear distinction between the two). Taking this into consideration, this kind of photographic practice and its outcome will be referred to simply as "photography" and "photograph" in the text below.

[12] Interviews, as sociologist Robert G. Burgess argues, "can help the researcher to gain access to situations that through time, place, or situation are 'closed'. In this sense, interviews might be used to gain access to the biography of an individual or to obtain a career history" (106).

[13] A photostream is the individual virtual photo album to which each Flickr user uploads his or her photos.

[14] If not otherwise indicated, the photographs displayed here are all the author's own.

using some of their own photographs for this essay.[14] All the informants will be referred to using their avatars' first names (except for where the names have been changed in respect of the informant's request for anonymity). I have also taken the liberty to correct any obvious typographical errors to avoid this becoming a distraction.

Alongside interviews with my informants I documented my fieldwork through taking snapshots – thus partaking in my own conscious making of in-world mnemonics. Early in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag's influential critique on the role of photography, Sontag argues that "[a]s photographs give to people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (9). For me as a researcher, these snapshots, together with a selection of photographs from my informants, functioned as effective enablers to understand and make sense of both the

fig. 2 – In-world interview with Swerdred at her Second Life home

novel, virtual *space* I found myself in as well as the individual, virtual *pasts* and *presents* I had set out to explore.

During my fieldwork in the virtual realm I encountered certain specific issues and obstacles connected to the digital technologies – upon which the world relies – either failing or being hard to use. For instance, one of my informants, Kitti, wanted to meet up in-world but had continuous trouble with her Internet connection and had to email her thoughts instead. It also takes a considerable amount of time and practice just to be able to walk, turn and stop your avatar in a graceful and effortless manner, making it hard for new users to feel fully a part of, or immersed in, the virtual world.[15]

Mémoire volontaire and photography in Second Life

From the interviews the use of several mnemonics in the memorialization process for *mémoire volontaires* can be distinguished. Jamie Marie, whilst showing me around the air base that is her virtual home and also the place where she does most of her photography, mentions talking to others about someone or something as a way to bring back voluntary memories. Sonia,[16] who started photographing in Second Life back in 2006 when she was still new to the virtual world, agreed with this, stating that, when wanting to reminisce about something, "meeting with people or just chatting when we are online in the game at the same time [helps to trigger her memory]". These voluntary memories rely on the social relations between avatars in-world, stressing Halbwachs' idea of how we remember things in and through a social context. Jamie Marie also uses things she builds in-world as mnemonics. At the air base she has built a memorial for her real life cat, Coco, that died whilst Jamie Marie was training to become a Second Life pilot. She says that she remembers Coco each time she visits the memorial and when flying an aircraft or spacecraft (fig. 3).

For both Kitti, who became involved in Second Life as part of a university project, and John, who uses Second Life as an outlet for his fantasies, going to visit places linked to certain experienced events functions as

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[15] The controls (combination of mouse and keyboard gestures and clicks) are superficially intuitive, but quirks and unexpected interactions make the experience quite unpredictable. Just like being on a real-life boat at sea, knowing how to counteract these oddities is imperative in order to walk, turn and stop smoothly – longtime residents intuitively do so but for beginners this does not come naturally and has to be learned.

[16] Not her real name.

fig.3 – Jamie Marie and tildaros at the Coco Memorial Air Base, Hotaru Island

fig. 4 – Meeting Starheart at her sim (personal photograph by Starheart)

a means to remembering. However, places constantly disappear or change beyond recognition in Second Life so this mnemonic is unstable by its nature. For all eight informants to retain this world continuously in flux, the best and most common way to do so is through in-world photography (made possible by the standardised snapshot function in Second Life). As Aida, who loves to document and participate in her in-world belly dancing groups, puts it, the "best things to remember anything [by] are pictures [...]

what can beat the impression of a lovely picture you have from an event you loved so much?" Aida's words, though far more positively inclined, resonates with Sontag's: "After an event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed" (11).

Furthermore, Starheart, whom I met in the peaceful Second Life sim that she built herself and constantly rebuilds to her liking,

argues that "at least if I photograph as I go I have a record." And indeed, a while after our conversation she did send me a photograph of our avatars at her home – a record of our meeting and something to remember it by (fig. 4).

All the informants mention similar reasons for taking photos. It is fun, a pleasure, and also a way to document their in-world experience. They photograph their avatars in different shapes, to showcase what they have

built, to document events, parties and places they have enjoyed, people they like and so on – just like people do in real life. Taking photos of what you or other avatars have built (which can amount to whole "worlds") is an important part of most informants' photo practice. As Annabell, who runs a Second Life fashion blog, says "if people don't take photos of it [your builds] it's like it is not there". Again Sontag's words come to mind: "Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing

something, for giving an appearance of participation" (10).

Thus the photographs work as a means of confirming the fleeting experience and existence of builds, events, places and even the avatars themselves. In her text on memory and family photographs Marianne Hirsch, paraphrasing Roland Barthes, confirms in a similar fashion how a photo "authenticates the reality of the past" (6). And, to be sure, by taking (and showing) these photos, the avatar is creating mnemonics (and to a certain extent memories), registering and even *realising* a past that would otherwise quickly disappear into cyberspace.

Crapanzano also sees a connection between the acknowledgement of a certain past and the way we use memory and mnemonics. He argues that "through the act of remembrance, we give *stature* to that which we have remembered" (158, my italics). In line with Annabell's statement above, I believe that, through their photographic practices and their creation of voluntary memories, the informants are giving stature to their past, in-world experiences. Maybe one can even go so far as to argue that they give stature to the virtual reality of Second Life itself.

It is interesting to note that using photographs to give stature to a new world that one inhabits is not a phenomenon tied solely to the technologies that enable and encompass a virtual life. Sociologist Rob Kroes shows that the Dutch who emigrated to America in the Nineteenth Century sent photographs of themselves and their newly built homes back to relatives in Holland (76-87). This was, Kroes argues, mainly for their relatives to maintain a visual memory of them but, I would add, also to affirm the existence of their new life. The photographs of them and their houses connect the relatives' "old life" memories of the emigrants to their new life – giving the latter a sense of grounding, acting as documentation and thus generating the feel of an uninterrupted life narrative.

fig. 5 – Photographic mnemonic of Tildaros disappearing into cyberspace

Fig. 6 – Swerdred's photograph of our meeting (see fig. 1) from another virtual world (personal photograph by Swerdred)

Anthropologists Dona L. Davis and Dorothy I. Davis come to a similar conclusion when examining twins' experiences of memory, stating that "[personal] memories are constructed through narrative. Memory creates narrative and narrative creates memory" (131-132).

Comparably, many of the informants move between old and new worlds, real and virtual places, analogue and digital technologies, and make use of photographic mnemonics to maintain a continuous narrative of their lives. For instance, Swerdred, who is active in several different virtual worlds besides Second Life, told me that she brings old Second Life photos associated with cherished memories with her into other virtual worlds. During our conversation in her home in Second Life she sent me a photo that she had just taken of us, demonstrating how she was really "in" another virtual world (a so-called hypergrid) – through which she was accessing Second Life – whilst speaking to me (fig. 6). Furthermore, one of the images Annabell showed me during our in-world meeting was a collage of three photos she had taken of her avatar self throughout her time in Second Life. Looking at the collage, Annabell said, makes her remember how she looked before and how her avatar (and technology) has evolved through time (fig. 7).

Thus, I would argue, through the active creation of mnemonics in the form of photographs, memories of an avatars' virtual life is contained and recreated at each view. These mnemonics and memories provide documentation and stature to the virtual lives, and thereby present the avatars with a stable, continuous narrative in the ever-changeable world that is Second Life.

fig. 7 – Annabell's visual change throughout the years ("Anna Evolution 2010-2012")

Is *mémoire involontaire* possible in Second Life?

Finally, is there then an opportunity for *mémoires involontaires* to appear in the (arguably) post-modern, virtual world of Second Life?

"[I]t is [the *mémoire volontaire*'s] characteristic that the information which it gives about the past retains no trace of it", Benjamin states (155). And, in seeming accordance with Benjamin, Crapanzano argues that, although voluntary mnemonics

give stature and perdurance to memory [they do so] not without cost. In the name of permanence, they subject the remembered to their material requirements, their cultural evaluation and the interpretive conventions that surround them. They deny as they proclaim, the passage of time – their historicity. (162)

This historicity is related to what Benjamin finds lacking in the memories of modernity, the *mémoires volontaires*. Such memories formed of the instant experience, *Erlebnis* – this experience that seemingly has cut its links to the past, a past that remains unacknowledged yet still shapes it. Opposed to this conscious, voluntary remembrance stands the *mémoire involontaire*, found in the unconscious part of the human mind. The creation of these memories is only possible through *Erfahrung* and in order for this experience to be possible, to unconsciously register and remember, one must be open to impression, stimuli, from the outside world. However, Benjamin's modern man, being bombarded by stimuli

from the urban environment – indeed from modernity itself – is using consciousness as armour against this overstimulation – that is, against the shock. These defences block every stimuli and every shock, and thus deny modern man the creation and remembrance of the *mémoire involontaire*. In Benjamin's own words, "That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of having been lived in the strict sense [*Erlebnis*]. If it were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience" (158).

The overstimulation described by Benjamin seems to have hardly diminished during the last century, instead an extra layer has been added to it in the form of ever-evolving digital technologies and the virtual worlds these technologies enable. In 1997 Hirsch argued that we "live in a culture increasingly shaped by photographic images" (14), and I would argue that the fact that Second Life developed some years later out of this culture is not surprising. Perhaps it is also not a coincidence that just this visual aspect of life seems the easiest aspect to control. We have seen that the process of creating *mémoires volontaires* through the photographic practice is just this: a way to control, shape and authenticate a past *through* the present. Second Life is a world where the human

behind the avatar can control every inch of the virtual, visual space. In such a context, with the person always in control, "on guard", the chances of *Erfahrung* and *mémoires involontaires* seem non-existent.

Nevertheless, I am not convinced that *Erfahrung* is forever out of the (post)modern human's grasp. What I believe Benjamin wants to point out when stating that the (post)modern human's experience is one of *Erlebnis*, is that there is an inability for (post)modern man to truly immerse him- or herself in the experiences of life. He or she is unable to let go of his/her (assumed) control over its existence and experience life on a "deeper" level, the level of *Erfahrung*. However, I would argue that this control could be diminished in certain circumstances: consider, for instance, the sense of overwhelmingness and detachment music or feelings such as love (and likewise sorrow) can entail. Here one finds a loss of control with the potential of making room for *Erfahrung*.

Yet the question remains as to whether the immersion necessary for *Erfahrung* can ever emerge through the usage of digital technologies in virtual worlds like Second Life. As noted earlier, even to walk properly in Second Life takes significant practice and the nature of immersion that *Erfahrung* seemingly requires is surely not possible

when one is still interrupted by one's lack of skill, or technological quirks. Yet, for the more experienced users, like my informants, and when no technical difficulties occur, there may be a chance of it.

Lury, in the wake of the digital revolution, uses the term "prosthetic culture" in debating the contemporary visual representation in the Western world, developing from self-reflection to self-extension:

> The prosthesis – and it may be perceptual or mechanical – is what makes this self-extension possible… [And in] the mediated extension of capability that ensues, the relations between consciousness, memory and the body that had defined the possessive individual as a legal personality are experimentally dis- and re-assembled. (3, my emphases)

Second Life is indeed such virtual extension of a human being and not a separate world or culture. To experienced Second Life residents this merging between virtual and physical realities, I believe, can have an immersive effect – with consciousness, memory and body subtly entwined. In fact, it may even be a heightened state, as you experience the world from two positions at once (or even more as in Swerdred's case) – through several representations (extensions) of yourself, with

not just sight but *all* of your senses involved. In this state perhaps *mémoires involontaires* can appear. Or maybe we even need a new definition for memories and remembrance of this kind? With virtual worlds being a relatively new ontological phenomenon, this still remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Memory and remembrance take on multiple sets of meaning in Second Life. As we have seen, the creation of mnemonics and memories through the photographic process gives stature to the virtual world and the lives that the informants lead therein. The mnemonics that induce *mémoires volontaires* are easily controlled and provide an uncomplicated, continuous narrative to adhere to. Furthermore, as Halbwachs points out, memories never appear in a social vacuum and social structures shape and are reflected in the memory construction. Accordingly, from this active memory-making in Second Life one discerns (perhaps not surprisingly) the importance of the visual in the virtual world.

Nevertheless, the impact of socio-cultural and historical structures is not contained within the realms of the virtual and the use of digital technologies. Anthropologists Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat argue,

in relation to ethnographic practices, that "ethnographers come to the field with memories of their own [and] that their experiences there creates more" (11). This was true for me during my time in the virtual field but it is certainly also true for my informants. They have come to Second Life with memories of their own, unrelated to virtual worlds, and the ones they obtain from their virtual life will always be attached to the former ones. Thus, memory is also connected to the sphere outside of Second Life, the real life. As Kitti concluded in her interview, "[a]lthough Second Life has been given to us to create a whole new world, we seem to spend a lot of time re-creating the world we know beyond the computer screen".

So, in regard to which memories are possible in Second Life and in virtual worlds in general, perhaps the key lies in whether the human behind the avatar relates his or her in-world practice to a larger context outside virtual worlds and digital technologies. For Swerdred, "time is time, if I spend time in real life or here, it's my time, and it's me", and as Starheart pointed out, "[people] are kidding themselves [if they don't think that] whoever or whatever they represent here in virtual is an aspect of who they are in real life". And, as has been debated, when the residents do not aim to keep the worlds separate and real life and Second Life are

allowed to overlap, to interact, there might be a possibility for Benjamin's *Erfahrung.* For once the line is blurred, Second Life becomes less like a controlled visual space and more an extension of real life, opening up possibilities of memory-making and remembrance of *mémoires volontaires* as well as *involontaires*. Perhaps even for a restructuring of memory in the conjunction of the real and the virtual worlds?

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