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Secrecy and illusion
Second Life and the construction of unreality

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the main Second Life Grid—an Internet-based business platform with dynamic social, techno-economic, sensual-aesthetic, and psychological complexities—as an example of public relations. It argues that Second Life is a more subversive, politically oriented, and powerful form of public relations, because it invisibly exploits and invades the process of the formation of public opinion. The paper argues that Australian organisations such as Telstra, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS), which lend Second Life credibility through their recruitment, need to ask critical questions about the ethical implications of promoting this market-driven cyber-illusion. The paper begins by defining public relations (Habermas, 1995, 1984, 1989; Gramsci in Storey, 2006) and investigating any links between public relations and Second Life. In particular, it investigates Second Life’s defining claim that it is ‘imagined, created and owned by its residents’, and concludes with a series of questions that organisations seeking involvement in Second Life should consider as part of their decision-making.

Introduction
Ask what Second Life is and you will be met with a range of opinions, studded with contrasts and what seem like contradictions. Some say it’s a new and advanced form of reality, a public cyber-space that promises an exciting mix of consumerism, recreation, imagination, and community (Craig, 2007; Moses & Hutcheon, 2007). Others claim that the unusual convergence of commerce, gaming, and shopping in Second Life has a darker
moral dimension, and, moreover, that its popularity with audiences is grossly overestimated (Wagner, 2007; Walsh, 2007). 'Second Life' is a product and a registered trademark of the US-based company Linden Research Inc. The product is described on the Second Life website as a '3D digital world imagined, created, and owned by its Residents'. An important claim made by Second Life is that this 'world', the size of a small city, is frequented by 'gamers, housewives, artists, musicians, programmers, lawyers, firemen, political activists, college students, business owners, active duty military overseas, architects, and medical doctors', hailing mostly from the USA and Britain. A selling feature of this web-based product is the user's ability to extend their identity through animated, customised, human-like representations called 'avatars'. Users of Second Life can manipulate avatars to participate in a range of activities, such as socialising in nightclubs, shopping, or playing fantasy games. Indeed, Second Life states that 'if you want to start a business, create a game or build a skyscraper, you can'. However, even avatars need money to do this. Second Life's 'official' money is called Linden Dollars and the company claims that 'residents can buy and sell in-world L$ from the Linden Dollar Exchange and from other third party websites'. According to Telstra, one Australian business that has set up an 'experimental' Second Life presence, users can also 'exchange Lindens with real world US dollars through Linden Lab either to or from your registered credit card'.

Second Life's potential for marketing to a large audience is itself an object of marketing. Demographic breakdown figures posted on the home page show the number of people logged on and how much they have spent in US and Linden Dollars in the last 24 hours. Estimated to have swelled to over six million people, Second Life's audience is spread across 100 countries. However, critics argue that 85% of its users do not pursue any meaningful long-term involvement with the program (Shirky, in Fullerton, 2007). In Australia, there are (approximately) 3,000 active users of Second Life (Moses, 2007). The Second Life Grid refers to the technological infrastructure that 'provides the platform, tools, programs, and support for educators, businesses, and organizations wishing to create interactive 3-D experiences'. It has not only attracted the attention of Telstra, but also the national broadcaster, which is set to develop an island in the shape of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) logo (Macey, 2007). Tertiary education organisations are also involved. For example, AFTRS, in partnership with the Laboratory for Advanced Media Production (LAMP), is using Second Life to equip participants with 'the tools they need to create compelling interactive content meeting the needs of the
audience and the marketplace'. Deakin University is also developing an island in Second Life, to which, at this stage, access is restricted. However, despite Linden's claim that Second Life 'is so cutting-edge it defies genre classification', this paper claims that it can be understood holistically and quite simply as public relations—that is, an instrument of business to engineer consent within a climate of consensus in order to achieve its organisational self-interest (Habermas, 1995).

The 'PRoblem'
If Second Life can be defined as public relations, then organisations that seek to become part of this venture need to carefully scrutinise their decision-making. This is because public relations, or the engineering of consent by organisations, has reputedly complex and arguably harmful consequences for the formation of public opinion and dissent in a democratic society (Beder, 1997; Hager & Burton 1999; Nelson, 1989; Salleh, 2005; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). In part, this is because, to be successful, public relations is ideally recognisable as such. The characteristic invisibility of public relations is the means to its effectiveness, but also a driver of its sinister reputation for secrecy and manipulation. According to Habermas (1995), invisibility in public relations occurs if it represents itself as both an object and an authority of public interest. Seen in this light, Linden Research Inc. has produced 'Second Life' as an object that represents itself as a cyber-illusionary society, complete with all its dynamic social, economic, sensual-aesthetic, and psychological complexities. It develops its authority by recruiting as many 'real-life' institutions as possible, for example, Telstra, the ABC, and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), among others. So it is, to reinforce the object's authority and status, that Linden Research Inc. works to influence and promote a discourse. For example, according to Telstra, jargon like 'IM' refers to 'instant message', 'avatars' refers to the animated personas, 'in-world' refers to Second Life, while 'rez' stands for the word 'appear'. For example, 'So your avatar can rez (appear) in-world'. Demonstrably, Second Life, as an object and authority, serves the underlying self-interest of the unseen authority, Linden Research Inc., and, as such, has become invisible public relations.

Another characteristic of mainstream public relations is discursive control—entrenched hegemonically—over audiences. Hegemony refers to 'the combination of force and consent', whereby the control appears to be 'based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion' (Gramsci, in Storey, 2006, p. 85).
For Fairclough, the notion of hegemony is a way to theorise power relations, which gives rise to discursive change (1999, pp. 96-8). Fairclough suggests that discursive practices are ideological in so far as they contribute to sustaining or restructuring power relations in hegemonic struggle—but not all to the same degree. A good example of this in relation to Second Life is the use of the words ‘community’ and ‘residents’ to describe its users. These words connote positive social relations organised around group living and local politics, and are preferred over the more accurate descriptor ‘consumers’, which has negative connotations linked to ‘the planning and attempted control of markets which is inherent in large-scale industrial capitalist (and state-capitalist) production’ (Williams, 1985, pp. 76-79). In Second Life, the hegemonic use of ideologically invested discourse serves to camouflage traditional power relations between its producers and consumers. Consumers are transformed into ‘residents’ of a ‘community’, while the producers, by the harmonising of language, are an unseen authority. This contributes to a climate of consensus or harmony that lends the producers even greater control, in the form of cultural uniformity, over audiences, and inexorably growing control over their social space.

Second Life’s public relations identity and activities are most apparent in its attempt to replicate the public sphere. For Habermas (1995, p. 27), the public sphere is a conceptual space, separate from the state and business, where citizens, in a free and open way, engage in dialogue and debate focused upon issues of common welfare. Linden Research Inc. promotes the representation of Second Life as an alternative society, complete with all the complexity of political dimensions and the processes by which public opinion is formed. For example, activities are reported in ‘in-world’ media outlets such as the The Second Life Herald, Second Life Times, and New World Notes. Linden Research Inc. uses these fake news sources to blur and, arguably, genuinely erode the boundaries between the real world and the fabricated space. Moreover, to entrench and refine the fabrication of a public sphere, they seek the involvement of real-life media outlets such as News Corporation, NBC, Sky News, and Reuters. Second Life’s fabricated public sphere is vitally strengthened by the presence in its world of credible and socially important organisations such as Telstra, the ABC, and AFTRS. Indeed, a spokesperson from the ABC’s new media division recently perpetuated the charade that Second Life is an authentic form of the public sphere when she stated that the ABC saw Second Life as an opportunity to ‘to create more of a public space for Australians’ (Moses & Hutcheon, 2007). However, Wagner James Au has a different view. He argues that
it should ‘not be surprising: user-created content inevitably leads to user-generated news’. Reflecting the ideas of Habermas (1995), news content on Second Life serves merely to detour public opinion back to the unseen authority’s self interest, rather than to an authentic public sphere. Therefore, while the involvement of real-world media and other organisations in Second Life appears to some to have expanded the public sphere, this is not the case; rather, the public sphere has lost its political characteristics (Habermas, 1995, p. 163). Second Life, in its invisibility and complexity, is a subversive, politically oriented, and freshly powerful form of public relations, as it exploits and invades the process that forms public opinion in new, unseen ways that have manipulated public institutions such as the ABC.

Moreover, Second Life shares other subtle characteristics and tactics with mainstream forms of public relations, such as the engineered blurring of personal and commercial spheres of action. In Second Life, the deliberate interchanging of personal everyday experiences with commercial transactions makes it difficult for users to understand the medium precisely or consistently as a product of Linden Research Inc. For example, users are directed by the company to enjoy ‘hanging out with friends in the garden’ while talking about the latest news, property development, retail opportunities, and gaming industries that surround them—all within the one synthetic sphere. This may appear harmless, but seems less innocent if carefully analysed. Habermas argues that one way people interpret the world is as ‘system rationality’ and another way is as (communicative) ‘action rationality’ (Habermas, 1989, p. 333). System rationality refers to instrumental reasoning or means-end for coordinating action, such as engineering or laboratory science, where the self-regulating systems ‘over-ride the consciousness of the members’ (Habermas, 1989, p. 333). The second form of rationality is communicative; this implies an interpretative consensus of understanding and mutual agreement. Examples of this activity occur in church and community centres around issues such as morality and law (Habermas, 1984). If this fusion is engineered, a society saturated by media images and symbols may give the appearance of communicative rationality, but in fact avoid or neglect authentic contributions to communicative rationality and morality. This is precisely the case in Second Life. It is an example of system rationality, for example, a profit-driven business system, but one saturated with the symbols and images of communicative action. Therefore, Second Life can be understood as a particular form of system rationality, public relations, designed to neither look, nor seem to act, like a traditional ‘big business’. The emphasis on symbols of communicative action only
reinforces Second Life's deceptive appearance as a public sphere for the formation of critical debate.

A Second Life for subversive public relations?
Why has Second Life, a successfully unrecognisable form of public relations, appeared at this place and at this time? In the twentieth century, public relations, thinking and acting within the logic and privilege of early modernity, tried to suppress the distribution of statements about the objects of system rationality in order to limit their power and proliferation. To do this, it employed a range of tactics including greenwashing (the pretence of being environmentally responsible) and astroturfing (phony front groups). However, in many instances, these unethical public relations practices have been publicly revealed and their perpetrators reviled (Beder, 1997; Hager & Burton 1999; Nelson, 1989; Salleh, 2005; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). In part, this occurs because an 'alert and critical' public emerges within the transformed conditions of a risk society. Risk society refers to a social 'change from the logic of wealth distribution in a society of scarcity to the logic of risk distribution in late modernity' (Beck, 1992, pp. 19-20). In this sense, people's negative response to mainstream public relations can be understood to reflect their growing awareness of the hidden dangers and hazards of industrial society, which now 'begins to dominate public, political and private debates and conflicts' (Beck in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, pp. 5-6). Indeed, US public relations corporation Burson Marsteller (1992) acknowledged these important social shifts in this statement:

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have become one of the most important drivers of corporate responsibility since the mid-nineties. NGOs and citizen activists have gained attention and impact through the Internet, the global media, and the socially responsible investment (SRI) community. Their scrutiny and criticism of corporate conduct has succeeded in defining and driving policy agendas for entire sectors of the global economy.

Therefore, Second life, as an elaborate and purposefully undetectable form of public relations, can be analysed as a business response to these reorganised social conditions peculiar to late modernity. It responds, moreover, to educated publics historically troublesome for business, and able to draw unwanted mass attention to the private processes of public relations.

Inevitably, the social conditions of 'individualisation' in late modernity have influenced the new forms of public relations manifest in Second
Life. Individualisation is a concept of the individual existence in large-scale late-modern Western society. For Beck (in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000), late modernity is distinctive for the plethora of choices it offers people. He argues that, in these conditions, individuals design a life from a range of options around gender, marriage, sexuality, family, and work, doing so not by choice or in a voluntary sense, as the name may suggest, but because and as a mix of social and economic conditions forces them. Beck argues that ‘the individuals must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves’ under the social conditions ‘of the welfare state in developed industrial labour society’ (Beck in Beck, Giddens & Lash, 2000, p. 13). He also argues that, for a person to be a beneficiary of the welfare state, it is necessary to be an active and mobile participant in work and education and operate as an ‘individual’. Therefore, ‘social rights are individual rights’ (Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 15). In contrast, a person who adheres to the limited social chains of ‘traditional ways of life and interaction’ is denied access to the benefits of modern society (Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 16). Beck explains how, in early modernity, class-based industrial society ‘presumes the nuclear family, which presumes sex roles, which presume the division of labour between men and women, which presumes marriage’ (Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 13). He argues that, in early modernity, individualism is embedded because it is institutionalised, and that the appropriate sociological approach is to analyse it as a self-reproducing superstructure (Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 65).

Furthermore, individualisation in late modernity differs and cultivates in people an instinct to pursue their self-interest, in ways redefined by the uncertainty of risk society. He argues that the rapid techno-economic development of industrialised society is leading to a disembedding of the known and understood ways of behaving in the social environment, and is only over time re-embedding new ways of behaving (Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 13). This upheaval creates social disintegration, where norms of behaviour are constantly questioned and challenged and the individual is released from the dominating and restrictive cultural patterns of the past with ‘the compulsion to find and invent new certainties’ (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 14). Individualisation, disembedded within the social conditions of risk society, creates people with the confidence and knowledge to review traditional relationships and understandings in unusual and innovative ways. ‘[I]ndividualization does not remain private, it becomes political in a definite, new sense’ (Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000, p. 16). Hence, today’s individuals, driven by necessity to act as economic and...
social units and imbued with the confidence to rethink conventional knowledge, seek new certainties in Second Life to counterpoint the uncertainty of a risk society.

Linden Research Inc., understanding the effects of these conditions on its target publics, represents Internet-based Second Life as a form of bottom-up, decentralised, digital democracy, its logo stating that it is ‘imagined, created and owned by its residents’. It presents itself as grassroots, deinstitutionalised, and as a quasi-alternative state that promotes greater, even unprecedented, individual freedom. But, according to Walsh (2007), the whole notion of bottom-up ownership on Second Life is a farce. He argues that ‘many users of Second Life invest dozens of hours into their avatars—from naming and customisation to developing and joining in intricate social networks, to building up a reputation’. He claims that the ultimate value of this is dubious. Indeed, the following statement in Second Life’s Terms of Service challenges normative understandings of possession: ‘Linden Lab retains ownership of the account and related data, regardless of intellectual property rights you may have in content you create or otherwise own’ (Clause 3.3, p. 4 of 8). According to Walsh, this means that users can be denied the means to access their content. He says, ‘that’s like having a bank account you can put money into but be locked out of on a whim. Not the kind of bank I’d do business with’.

These social theories (Beck, 1992; Beck, in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2000) also shed light on Second Life’s emphasis on an individual’s personal advancement and self-gratification. Indeed, a ‘big part’ of Second Life’s population are so-called ‘gamers’ and shoppers. As mentioned earlier, much emphasis is placed on the appearance of ‘avatars’ or the cartoon-like personas. According to Craig (2006), shops in Second Life offer to change the appearance of people’s avatars ‘beyond their wildest Barbie dress-up dreams’. However, self-gratification in Second Life is also centered on sex industries. Indeed, Wagner (2007) says there are real-life by-products of ‘virtual strip clubs and sexual encounter rooms (that) become mainstream activities’. He reports on instances of simulated child molestation and of child pornography on Second Life that are being investigated in the UK. In particular, he discusses an activity, called ‘ageplay’, known to occur in Second Life and involving the hybridisation of identity. Users construct avatars to resemble children, and according to Wager, ‘some of the ageplay community engages in simulated sex’. In this respect, Second Life, as an invisible form of public relations used as an instrument to conceal legal and moral transgressions, can also be analysed as a manifestation of an
industry responding to the conditions of neoliberalism that promote
deregulation and borderless markets, or ‘globalism’ (Urry, in Beck &

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is another approach to business
in late modernity. Indeed, it is seen as a promising counter to the
uncertain social effects of globalism and the narrow pursuit of profit
(Freeman, in Andriof et al., 2002, pp. 7-8). CSR is an approach ‘to
companies’ existence in society, and a recognition that companies are
part of, not separate from, society’ (Andriof et al., 2002, p. 23). Andriof
et al. argue that CSR has two fundamental premises: ‘First, in a form
of social contracting, business exists at the pleasure of society and,
In particular, they discuss the notion of the ‘egocentric organisation’,
that is, one that is ‘pitched against their environments in the sense
that they act on their own behalf, pursuing local interests rather than
furthering the joint goal of the organisational collectives in which they
are immersed’ (2002, pp. 37-38). Indeed, these principles are reflected
in policy documents released by some of the organisations that Second
Life has sought to recruit. For example, Telstra argues that ‘CSR is just
as relevant to telecommunications as it is to the mining, banking or
manufacturing industries’. The ABC states that it has an obligation
to ‘contribute to a sense of national identity’ (ABC Corporate Plan
2004-07, p. 5). Similarly, the AFTRS upholds a social responsibility to
provide educational storytelling around Australian cultural identity, and
in pursuing this objective values ‘creativity, courage, diversity, respect
and excellence’.

It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that when these ethically-oriented
organisations seek partnerships and networking opportunities with
external commercial entities, they should apply their internal principles
to affiliate organisations. Telstra, the ABC, and the AFTRS should assess
Second Life in terms of its integrity, social interdependence, and its
role and accountability as a moral agent. In this respect, claims around
issues of ownership and morality need to be investigated. Another issue
that needs to be investigated is the effect of the recruitment of third
parties in the production of an inauthentic public sphere, in particular,
the ethics of the engineering of consent in Second Life. These activities,
and attachments to them, have the potential to be politically and
culturally subversive, and therefore socially irresponsible.

Drawing on a CSR framework (Andriof et al., 2002) and on some
of the ideas raised in this paper, organisations should review their
involvement with Second Life and ask: What motivates Second Life to seek third party endorsement by external organisations? How does consumerism link to and shape the production of knowledge in Second Life? At what point does the marketplace, using new media, become a theatre of unprecedented and unnoticed political control? Are the ‘residents’ of Second Life merely customers, or are they political subjects? Precisely what are the economic, cultural, and political values that Second Life seeks to produce and reproduce, and do they correspond with those of the organisation? How does Second Life act as a moral agent in society? What are the long-term social and economic effects of deregulated virtual living and the ‘unlimited freedom’ of Second Life? In particular, does Second Life unethically weaken the public sphere, and, by extension, subvert the formation of critical public opinion? If so, how does this threaten the independence and integrity of the Australian media environment? How does Second Life relate interdependently to other cultures, businesses, and state and civil sectors in Australian society? Is Second Life an ‘egocentric organisation’, separate from the rest of society and motivated only by self-interest (Andriof et al., 2002, p. 38)? Do activities on Second Life that violate moral and legal boundaries risk the reputations of the recruited organisations?

To date, Second Life appears to have been successful in recruiting many companies and organisations that have a recognisable and esteemed social or economic identity, acquiring their gravitas along with their products and services. Presenting a capacity to capture and create new media markets seems to have been a particularly fruitful recruiting strategy. This is especially the case in the areas of communication, knowledge, and media production. However, organisations such as Telstra, the ABC, and AFTRS should be aware that they are not making a politically neutral decision by participating in this venture. There are a number of issues raised in this paper, with social, cultural, and legal implications. At the very least, these organisations must develop a critical distance to investigate their role in giving legitimacy to Second Life. Second Life goes far beyond simple marketing or benign public relations. It is a subversive species of public relations, and by applying the method of third-party endorsement by credible organisations, Second Life seeks to bind many people much more securely to its illusion. Therefore, business and other organisations, especially those that espouse those values of CSR, need to be particularly cautious in associating with this unusual cyber-conglomerate.

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Conclusion

This paper argues that Second Life can be defined as an egocentric organisation, a subversive form of public relations that exercises control and authority, and a significant reproducer of cultural values relating to identity, sexuality, and gender linked to market forces. Linden Research Inc., motivated by a profit-driven agenda, attempts to blend their cyber-illusion with reality, replete with all the attributes of a free-thinking society permeated by ideas. This is neither ethical nor honest. Second Life claims that its ‘3D digital world is imagined, created and owned by its residents’. Indeed, their logo states that it is ‘Your world, Your imagination’. But how is Second Life imagined and created by its ‘residents’? On first contact with Second Life, users have no option but to choose a persona and customise it by following the flow of information provided for them. These ‘created’ personas interact with other similarly ‘created’ objects, and focus, or even fixate, on dominant themes of money, sex, the personal, and the ego. To participate in Second Life, users must accept an illusion. They must bow to its legal structures as well as its cultural and discursive control, which, in fact, limit the emergence of any authentically creative alternative ideas emerging. This act of surrendering, moreover, denies the user the instruments and atmosphere of analytical criticism. Hence, it is not unreasonable to allege that the users of Second Life are bound to a new form of citizen subjugation culturally linked to market forces. Therefore, more than free-thinking, idyllic creativity, Second Life promotes an ideologically invested cultural uniformity hegemonically controlled by hidden relations of power.

As a social environment, Second Life, a seeming confusion of system and communicative rationality that intervenes in the public sphere, is demonstrably public relations and requires careful ethical monitoring. For Habermas (1995), the invisible practices of public relations are deeply entangled in the political realm of the public sphere. Linden Research Inc., the organisation that owns and operates the virtual simulation Second Life, understands the power of digital images, text, and interaction to create, control, and subjugate global customers. Through the ‘manufacture of consent’ and the reinforcement of discourse, Second Life ‘residents’ willingly offer themselves to the marketplace as targets and as political and cultural subjects. Money, sex, the personal, and the ego saturate Second Life. Rather than a place of creativity and imagination, its potential is as a bleak and unsavory world of unreality—one that is politically oppressive and culturally stifling. Organisations, by affiliating with this dubious commercial venture, adopt the values of the host and must take responsibility for

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both their own actions and the actions of Second Life. Any negative social implications of such a phenomenon are the heavy responsibility of those credible businesses and organisations uncritically associating with this new, ethically questionable commercial product.

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