



Cyberspace as Culture

*A New Paradigm
for Therapists
and Coaches*

by DeeAnna Merz Nagel
and Kate Anthony,
with Gretta Louw

What is it about being connected in a virtual world that some people don't "get"?

I am not a gamer. But I understand how one can become connected in a virtual world like Second Life, and even become absorbed to the point of neglecting one's responsibilities and relationships in one's real life or "first life" (as Second Lifers refer). But that's not really the story that needs to be told. Connections are taking place. New relationships are being built. Students are learning. Co-workers are listening.

And yet there are many people who don't understand any of it.

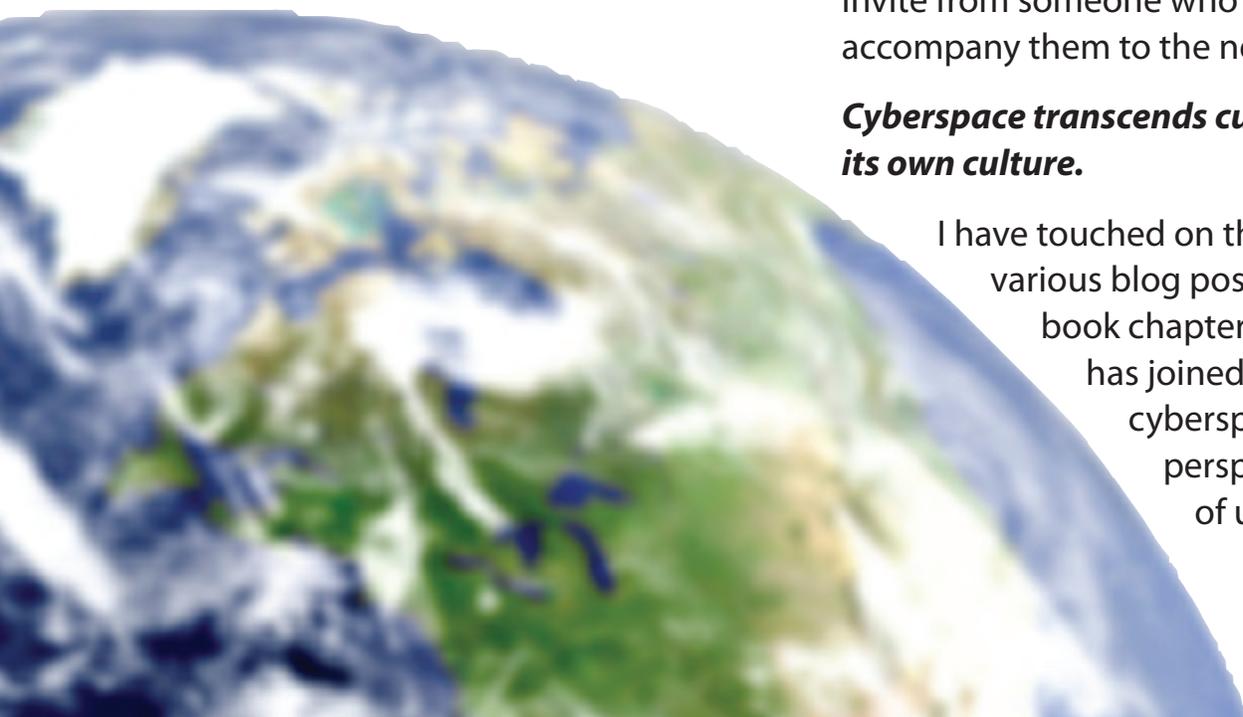
In one's role as a coach or therapist, a person's life journey is heard from many different

perspectives. People tell their stories in different ways. Coaches and therapists may even give the client tools to discover different ways to tell their story -vision boards, sand play, gestalt, art, music and other expressive therapies are considered a quite proper adjunct to the work.

So how would most of us react (at least the unseen reaction) to someone telling their story through an avatar in a virtual world? Would you be open or would your biases be immediately obvious? Would the fear of the technology itself keep you from joining with your client to hear possibilities? Or would you embrace the opportunity as a sacred invite from someone who has chosen you to accompany them to the next guidepost?

Cyberspace transcends culture while being its own culture.

I have touched on this before through various blog posts, presentations, book chapters and articles. Kate has joined me in teaching cyberspace from a cultural perspective. For most of us therapist



types, a requirement of our schooling is a class in multiculturalism or Multicultural Awareness. I still remember my text book- I can see the old cover - *A Handbook for Developing Multicultural Awareness* by Paul Pederson (now in its third edition). Several new multicultural textbooks are available today but I am not aware that any of these courses include a section on cyberspace, gaming or virtual worlds. Lago (2011) briefly addresses online counseling and distance training as a route to better understanding of transcultural work, but defines the speed, volume and breadth of social networking, mobile phone and computer technology as anxiety-inducing and causing the “sense of overload or threat” that subsequently causes inter-relational problems, rather than it being a question of learning a new culture as we are arguing here. Such talk is usually set aside for discussion within the overview of cyberpsychology. But unless that is one’s particular area of study, most therapists and coaches miss the opportunity to learn about the very culture that they depend on in some way either for work, leisure or relationship building. Certainly, our clients and potential clients participate in cyberspace in ways that extend well beyond Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and all the rest. And while cyberpsychology offers us an understanding of how people behave in cyberspace, it does not address the more central issues assigned to culture such as shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices.

Kate and I had the recent fortune of being a part of a project that goes beyond our basic

RC: [Our discussions] could be in Second Life (SL) too.

Gretta Louw: I think the learning curve would be a little steep to set that up so quickly, so if it’s possible to [have the conversations in] Skype that would be better.

RC: I could make the learning curve simple for you, if you just took my avatar, one of my avatars... You just have to feel it. Just a couple of hours, I’ll show you around, then I think it’ll all be a lot clearer.

understanding of cyberspace. I was asked to write a [short essay about Internet Addiction](#) to be included in a book about cyberspace and relationships. The book, [Controlling Connectivity: Art, Psychology, and the Internet](#) is a summary of an art project by Gretta Louw. Gretta made herself available 24 hours a day for 10 days for discussions, emails, comments and interviews from any internet user from anywhere in the world.

The performance uses the pervasiveness of internet-based social networking as well as the obligation and opportunity for constant connection with these platforms as a paradigm for a severe and systematic disruption of normal, socially accepted patterns of life and interpersonal interaction during a self-documented performance.

The subsequent exhibition at the Art Laboratory Berlin not only documented the performance but analysed the phenomena of

total connectivity.

When I received my copy of the book I was quite bowled over with how succinctly Gretta captured the various cultural innuendos of cyberspace from Twitter to Google+ hangouts and Second Life. Not only did she capture cyberspace as culture, but she captured the transculturalism of Cyberspace! As I read her interviews with people sharing their Second Life experiences, I immediately asked for her permission to use her material.

At the Online Therapy Institute we have been busy preparing the curriculum for our Avatar Therapy Certificate Programme as part of our Specialist Certificate Programme Series. As counselor and coach educators, we incorporate the concept of cyberspace as culture. We feel it is critical to understand

the culture of cyberspace in order to be able to deliver the best coaching and therapy services via technology. Consequently, there is much emphasis on the culture of virtual worlds in the Avatar Therapy curriculum. We have included video clips, required movie viewings, opportunities to participate in virtual world environments and other experiential assignments. Try as we might to capture that 3-D virtual world environment through various show and tell avenues, what captured it best- right at its essence - were the written words in Gretta's book. She included excerpts from interviews she had conducted with people in Second Life and the verbatim transcripts of those interviews made me think, "If people read this, they will *get it*." I passed along the reading to Kate and she agreed. We dismissed our original idea

GL: How would you explain your lifestyle choices to someone who doesn't use the internet [regularly]?

RC: When you go into a virtual world... at first it's just like a video game. But you start to realise very soon that the people you're talking to are just like you, they're real, behind these pretty avatars there's a real human being. It's not like you're shooting at monsters, you know? **What seems to happen is some people get that and they start to really live in SL as a real person. Some don't, some just play - serious people try to stay away from [them], because they are very hurtful.** Once you... start to see that this IS real, it's very exciting, and that SL can either supplement, or even take the place of Real... It can just take you away. Now that's good and bad; a lot of people talk about SL addiction. Most of the people here are addicted.

GL: How would you define SL addiction?

RC: I would say that it's on a continuum. The extreme would be when you're on SL all the time, you neglect your Real to the detriment of your physical and financial stability. I have tried to quit unsuccessfully and successfully at different times... I have pulled away... when I have found "Real" - the woman that I want to be with in Real - when I move in with somebody or whatever, I pretty much turn SL off.

GL: Do you see the two things [SL and real life partner] as competing?

RC: Yes, I think they do, they compete for your time.



to open the course with a video and opted instead to use the written word. Why? The written word is foundational to the concept of transculturalism in cyberspace. The use of written language is embedded across cultures and is familiar. Images of words on a page are not new or startling. So perhaps describing an unknown culture with words on a page is more palatable somehow. To immerse oneself in a new culture, we usually start with educating ourselves through the written word, whether through travel books, textbooks or even googling a location. This

RC: I really want you to experience SL, and I'd like you to let me guide you through it... I have a female avatar, I can just give you the name and just guide you through.

RC: It's so beautiful, it's so interesting. It's so real! It's sort of **like living a soap opera instead of watching it**. But, the people are real and the pain is real.

GL: I think I would find it really difficult to be unaware of... my context.

RC: If you spent any time in SL it would just be a couple of days before you would be able to feel this immersion. It's true, there are some people who come in and say 'I don't want this, this is scary', but not usually.

GL: What about people who come in and say 'I don't want this, I find it boring'.

RC: If they find it boring, it's because they can't see. They can't see the depth of it... Anything that's in the real world, you will find a counterpart in SL.

new culture of cyberspace began with written language via emails, chatrooms, bulletin boards and the like.

What are the implications for the profession in treating Cyberspace as a cultural phenomenon rather than just a new communication tool? Many of us remember a time without the Internet or mobile devices – our culture was different back then. Ten years ago we struggled as a profession to embrace the new way of living and working (and many of us still do). Yet clients and the professionals joining the profession today have been brought up in a different culture, wherever they physically live. They have grown up in the culture of Cyberspace. Uphoff (2011) defines the invisibly diverse – those from different cultures that are not immediately identifiable by their accent or physical appearance. When considering Cyberspace, we can see the parallels with being invisibly diverse when accents and physical appearance are removed altogether, and this has been hailed as what makes the internet a power-leveler for all (after all, [on the internet no-one knows you're a dog](#)).

So what are we left with? If Cyberspace allows transcultural communication, is the perception of cultural barriers being broken down? Kate and I argue differently – it is time to embrace the new culture of Cyberspace and address the issues for the profession in light of that (including the invisibly diverse as they exist within it). We have little historical reference points to use – traditionally, online therapy and coaching have been a game of catch-up – writing ethical guidelines as the



issues become apparent rather than preempting them; writing anecdotal evidence for its success rather than pre-and post-therapy RCTs. By treating Cyberspace as a cultural phenomenon, we can do better than that for the future of the profession. We can learn from previous transcultural examination and apply it to how society is changing in light of the new technologies. Your son or daughter may live in the same culture as you offline. But they are *invisibly diverse*.

We believe that it is only once we accept the online generation as being diverse in

their own right will the profession be able to work effectively with that client group. We can do this by immersing ourselves in what we already know about the culture of Cyberspace, through experiential training and a shift of how we look at those different to ourselves. For too long, we have been struggling with the concept that relationships held online are somehow “not real” or “less real” because they are not conducted face-to-face. If we look at face-to-face work as being a different cultural phenomenon – one that will always have its place but that also belongs to a different culture – we are free to examine

(Interview with members of a SL 'Vampire Clan' and RC)

V1: I have been on SL for almost 2 years now... I've tried lots of other things and it's... all sexual stuff... I just wanna have fun and enjoy friends and I've met a lot of great friends... I followed Mom to this new clan.

Mom: I am Mom.

V1: Yeah, that's Mom. She's my Mom.

RC: Mom's the Queen [of the Vampire Clan].

V1: My story is that 3 years ago my Mom in real life (RL) got cancer... In May my Mom passed away from cancer, and I almost gave up SL. I didn't want to do anything, and this mother here and my family have kept me going. They are my family, they are my friends. I mean **everyone thinks it's just a virtual world, that it's just a game**, but I have made actual friends - and if it wasn't for them, I probably would have laid down and gave up.

GL: Something that I'm interested in... is this idea of a dichotomy between the virtual world and the real world; could you tell me a little bit about how you see that.

V1: People will go on Facebook, it seems like Facebook has hit it off real good. But really and truly Facebook is no different to what SL is... You go on there, and you have people and you become friends with them and stuff, and that's the same as what this is, except that we can do a whole lot more... Facebook seems to be acceptable to everybody, but really and truly SL is no different than Facebook.

GL: Most people that are using Facebook are adding people that they've met, that they know in real life.

V1: That's the theory but... like on Farmville, you have to have so many neighbours to even get anywhere in the game... It's really not just your friends because then your friends will recommend people for you to add so you can play these games.

RC: But without the whole sense of having a body, I think I'd like it much, much less.

Mom: It's not nearly as animated as a virtual world. And over here you can go sky-diving, hot air ballooning...

V1: **You can go anywhere, we went to Paris one time and climbed up the Eiffel Tower and hot air ballooned off of it.**

GL: Would you want to see the Eiffel Tower in 'real life' more or less [than in SL]?

V1: I would love to see the Eiffel Tower in RL, but I know I'm never going to. So, this is just like being there.

GL: So SL is a chance for you to do things you don't think you'll be able to do in 'real life'?

V1: I feel like I've actually been there. How can I explain it?... I mean, I can change my hair 15 times a day,

I can change my clothes 15 times a day - I can't do that in RL.

Mom: And everyone is beautiful.

V1: It makes you wonder why we don't get along in RL. In SL everyone fits in, everyone is family.

RC: Well, I wouldn't say everyone gets along in SL!

V1: I'm not gonna say that everybody on SL has real life problems, but **there are some that just don't fit in in RL. And when they come to SL, they fit in.** They have the family, they have the friends... RL can be really, really cruel. They look at you, or they see what you do, or they see that you don't have the fancy car. And on SL we don't care about any of that.

Mom: Not only that, in RL how many people can you reach? Right now our family is 150+. We've had deaths in the family, we've had attempted suicides, break-ups in RL - and they all come together here. Whereas in RL, how many people can you reach at one time when you need them the most? ... I'm kinda like a social worker, as the Mom. People come to me as the leader, and I help them... I did 27 years of law enforcement, I'm retired.

V1: It's almost like in RL, even if you think they're your friends, you have to put on an air. They expect you to be a certain way.

GL: [How do you think] internet-related technologies might be changing society?

V1: I'm hoping it changes everybody's outlook on RL because if we can get along on here and we can all be family... how come we cannot do it in RL.

Mom: [On SL] you have power of selection... You can select who you want to be friends with. If there's someone who's being very negative... you mute them.

GL: How many hours do you think that each of you spend online each day?

V1: Oh my goodness! (laughs) Sometimes I'm only on for an hour a night, but sometimes... we can be on for hours, and hours, and hours.

GL: Would you say that you were addicted?

V1: **I could stop at any time, I just don't want to.** I wouldn't say it's an addiction, it's more of a choice. This is my family, these are my friends.

Mom: We need to be there for our loved ones... And we can dance all night long and in the morning my feet don't hurt! And I never have a bad hair day!

GL: If you could take 10 or 20 of your favourite clan members and move them into your town, would you still spend as much time online, or seeing them in real life?

Mom: I think I would do both. We would get online and go to Italy, to Spain. And it would be fun because everyone would be there.

RC: How did coming in [to SL] change your perception of the world?

GL: Well there are some very interesting visual effects...

RC: It's gorgeous! It still has that edge of cartoonishness, but every year it gets more and more real looking.

GL: Well, I wouldn't say that it looks real at all, but it has a very particular aesthetic, which is amazing when you think about how many people are building it. That's an interesting aspect, this shared aesthetic across hundreds if not thousands of builders.

what we call “innovative” ways of working but which are actually just parts of a new culture that we are just getting used to. There will come a point when the new culture of living online will have become so ingrained, we will be back to studying the sub-cultures of Cyberspace rather than the sub-cultures of a continent or country.

We find we teach these sub-cultures in our trainings as related to online therapy and coaching. Regarding each type of online communication as a sub-culture – video-conferencing, social media, virtual worlds- we continuously focus on the use of textual language. It is the original online culture to which everything else has evolved, therefore the teachings as related to online therapy must be taught. This is akin to learning the theoretical underpinnings of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis or learning the basis for motivation when becoming a therapist or a coach. We do not abandon early teachings,

but rather, we learn the historical value and integrate the knowledge into current practices even as methods of connectivity continually evolve. By the very nature of Cyberspace demanding – for the most part – a lack of physical presence, we will all be invisibly diverse. The implications of this and how we (and our clients) define ourselves within it will become, we believe, a central tenet of how mental health treatment is defined in the future.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DeeAnna Merz Nagel and **Kate Anthony** co-founders of the Online Therapy Institute and the Online Coach Institute. **Gretta Louw** is a multi-disciplinary artist working with a variety of mediums, exploring the potential of art as a means of investigating individual, cultural and psychological phenomena.

(Skype talk with RC during whilst in SL)

RC: Do not do anything. I have to get you dressed first.

GL: Yikes.

RC: **So what do you think about the way you look?**

GL: I can see [the avatar's] butt!

RC: (laughs) I know, well I guess that's my choice of things, sorry about that. That's one of my favourite outfits... I think you look great.

GL: I thought you didn't look at the avatar - that's what you said to me before.

RC: Well, I lied (laughs)... Let me show you a few things. We're going to dance. You click on the pink ball and allow it to animate your avatar...

(avatars dance)

RC: I think you look lovely... I'm just gonna go through a couple of the other dances so you can...

RC: So what kind of music do you like? Do you like jazz? What I'm going to do is take you to a jazz bar. I'm going to teleport you now. Did you accept it?

GL: Yes, I'm there now.

RC: Click on the pink ball in front of me... Ok, excellent. Now we are dancing.

GL: So basically people are going on here mostly to meet other people, right?

RC: Yes, it is a social place, a social medium. Some people call it a game, but serious people here shun that word.

GL: Do people get upset if someone just comes here to play?

RC: Not if they're just exploring, but... You know like married men come on here and date all these women, and say they're single and lie to them and stuff.

GL: **Would you classify this [SL] as a dating program?**

RC: **No. You're getting that impression because that's how I use it.**

GL: So I can also dance a single dance by myself?

RC: Yes. Did I make you uncomfortable?

GL: No I just want to try out other things.

RC: I'm going to put on a couple of other things that I like now... Ok here's something you might wear if you want to be a little more intimate... This is my tarzan look. Do you see my body now?