DEFINING AND EXPLORING VIRTUAL REALITY:

A BURKEIAN AND HEURISTIC ANALYSIS

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my loving, caring girlfriend Amanda. I infinitely appreciate her unwavering support for me throughout my time working on this thesis.
Acknowledgements

I firstly need to acknowledge the indescribably invaluable guidance and advice of Dr. Chesebro with this thesis. His ideas and encouragement are what made this possible. Dr. Joseph Misiewicz and Dr. Michael Holmes also provided tremendous insight and valuable criticism throughout the writing process.
Abstract

Virtual reality has existed for many years, dating back to the 1940s but becoming popular on a larger scale in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It has been largely regarded as something of a plaything or hobby and, in general, as something that is on a lower echelon when compared to physical reality. In recent years, however, as our society becomes more interconnected via the Internet and as highly interactive web services, such as Facebook, Second Life, and Twitter, play a larger role in individuals’ lives, a reexamination of the status of virtual reality becomes necessary.

This study employs the work of a major twentieth century critic, Kenneth Burke, and from his conception of dramatism to demonstrate that 1) virtual reality, for many, is a significant reality that can often lead to the formation of meaningful relationships between individuals and 2) the significance of this reality is born out of users dramatizing their online experiences. Through heuristics and dramatistic analysis, I examine how the users of Facebook dramatize their actions and collectively contribute to the formation of a controlling narrative that can be seen across all of virtual reality. Further, the findings of this thesis provide a heuristic foundation for future research into virtual reality.
Chapter 1: The Problem

Virtual reality is not a new concept. The advent of the personal computer in the 1980s led a number of scholars to discuss the idea of simulated or artificial realities (Turkle, 1984, p. 82; Foley, 1987, p. 127; Chesebro, 1989, p. 172). Over the last 25 years, as computer adoption and worldwide Internet penetration and bandwidth speeds have increased, virtual reality has become a major topic of discussion among communication scholars and even the mainstream media (see chapter two). Indeed, if one takes into account how the computer, the Internet, and the cyber-world, affect the daily lives of millions of people as a tool for communication, commerce, entertainment and education, to name a few uses, it’s not unreasonable to think about the notion of virtual reality as a significant reality for many. My main contention throughout this thesis is to suggest that virtual reality is, in fact, a reality with the same types of ramifications and significance that one would find in other realities, such as the physical or scientific, and to demonstrate, using methods of dramatism developed by Kenneth Burke, that the users of virtual reality are dramatizing their online experiences.

By way of preview, this chapter is divided into three parts. In part one, the object of study of this thesis — virtual reality — is rationalized. Second, the specific research questions guiding the analysis are articulated and each
question is explicitly clarified. Third and finally, chapter one provides an organization of chapters for the remainder of the thesis.

Object of Study and Rationales for Analysis

Initially, virtual reality, requires definition. It is important to first understand that reality is a concept with a host of definitions. A simple browse of the Dictionary of Philosophy yields over 10 entries for real, realism, reality, and their numerous derivations. It defines real as “Actually existing apart from our perception… Having substantive or objective existence” (Angeles, 1981, p. 237). In contrast, the concept real is cast as wholly different than naïve realism, which is defined as the “belief that the world is as we perceive it” with there being “no distinction between what the world appears to be like (appearance) and what the world is really like (reality)” (Angeles, 1981, p. 237). The belief that reality and existence goes far beyond simply what we experience with our five senses has been the basis for scientific and philosophic inquiry for centuries, and it is easy to understand how many would dismiss someone if his/her concept of reality was based solely on sensory perceptions.

This section, discussing how the perception of reality is created, is somewhat lengthy and complicated, and thus, by way of preview, this section is divided into several sub-sections. The first discusses how the perception of reality is intersubjective and symbolically created. Second, the several dimensions that contribute to one’s perception of reality are briefly discussed,
and the three dimensions being addressed throughout this entire thesis are discussed in much greater detail. Finally, some of skepticism and doubt that surrounds virtual reality is also addressed.

*Intersubjective, Symbolic Construction of Reality*

Many scholars and philosophers have discussed the idea of reality as socially and symbolically constructed. As early as the late nineteenth century, William James (1950, pp. 292-293) argued that seven social and symbolic realities exist: the “world of sense” (physical reality, as we perceive it); the “world of science” (physical reality, as perceived by the “learned”); the world of “abstract truths,” which is comprised of the “logical, mathematical, [and] metaphysical;” the “world of idols of the tribe” (comprised of “illusions or prejudices”); the “various supernatural worlds,” which is where all myths and religions reside; the “various worlds of individual opinion, as numerous as men are;” and finally the “worlds of sheer madness and vagary.” James (1950, p. 291) believed that these seven “sub-universes” must be taken into account by all philosophers when discussing the “total world.”

Additionally, as the role of the mass media in individuals’ lives increased throughout the twentieth century, Chesebro (1984, pp. 112-115) argued for the existence of a “media reality” since the media have come to “include all variables connecting people into socially shared universes of understanding,” yet still offering only “one view of the truth which can be challenged and contradicted by
alternative perspectives of reality.” Indeed, Berger and Luckman (1966, p. 1) have stated quite explicitly that a reality is “socially constructed” and one can only be sure of what one knows about the external world “with different degrees of confidence.” In other words, perceptions of reality are dynamic, and there are no absolutes.

The over-arching idea behind James’ and Chesebro’s eight realities and the socially constructed reality of Berger and Luckman is that the concept of reality is independent of immediate sensory experience because of individuals’ education, level of understanding, and overall life experiences. The astrophysicist sees the world differently than the priest, who in turn perceives the world as entirely different than the average layperson. Reality is based on one’s experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs; or, in other words, it is symbolically constructed. James (1950, p. 293) has stated that everything an individual encounters, after some internal debate based on one’s own life experiences, is placed in one of eight (James’ seven plus Chesebro’s one) categories of reality. However, for humans to continue to be able to place all of their experiences into “one world or another,” a new reality that encompasses the experiences of the virtual world must be added to the list of worlds initially created by James and expanded by Chesebro.

Initially, one could argue that the experiences of virtual reality could fall into the category of media reality since much of the content of the Internet is similar to more traditional media, such as newspapers, periodicals, and
television. Some media research reports, such as Nielsen’s quarterly “Three Screen Report” (2009b), treat the Internet as simply another piece of media, akin to television or mobile phone. However, the Internet goes beyond traditional newspapers and television broadcasts in terms of its high levels of interactivity. Newspapers, radio, and television follow a one-to-many flow of information, in that one author or broadcaster communicates a single idea to a wide audience of many readers/listeners/viewers. The Internet differs since it follows a many-to-many model of content flow, giving all users the ability to produce and consume content.

This level of interactivity differentiates virtual reality from media reality, in that it allows virtual reality to more completely analyzed using dramatistic methods developed by Kenneth Burke. While explained in greater depth in chapter three, briefly stated, Kenneth Burke was an influential twentieth century critic and scholar that created the idea of *dramatism* (Lyons, 1993, p. 21). One component of Burke’s philosophy is the pentad of dramatism, first introduced in *A Grammar of Motives*, and is composed of five dramatic terms: *agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose* (Burke, 1945, p. xv). As is demonstrated in chapters two and four, the full range of Burke’s pentad of dramatism is available and readily applicable to virtual reality; something that can not be said about media reality. For example, in television, every viewer sees the same version of a program with the same storyline and point-of-view. In virtual reality though, participants are allowed multiple viewpoints; for example, in Second Life, a three-
dimensional virtual world, each user sees and experiences something different. What one experiences in virtual reality is wholly different than in media reality, and, thus, the need exists for a formally acknowledged virtual reality.

*Dimensions of Reality*

Before examining specifically what it is about virtual reality that qualifies it as a true reality, the dimensions that contribute to the perception of a reality must be examined. One commonality that can be seen across all eight realities is *time*. Time, for example, in physical reality, is external, uniform, and standardized (international consensus has given rise to the basic units of time: seconds, minutes, hours). When looking at scientific reality, where the immutable laws of physics reign, Einstein discovered that time is elastic and is directly related to gravity (Kaku, 2004, p. 98-99). However, in the case of the world of abstract truths, the notion of time according to Kant cannot be fully understood by science since if time is said to have begun when our universe formed, then there had to be a “very special moment” with very special circumstances to be able to give rise to an entire universe. The idea of *time* in the reality of abstract truths and philosophy is constantly debated and Kant is but one viewpoint among many (Scruton, 1995, pp. 4-5).

In the reality of “idols of the tribe,” which consists of illusions and prejudices, extremist racial dogmas view time as something that is running short; for example according to ideology of the white power movement, racial minorities
are destroying the heritage and culture of the proud, white Aryan and something must be done before all hope is lost (Bowles, 2009, blog post). In the various supernatural worlds, for example, with Judeo-Christian religions, the idea of time is based on the seven days of creation (Doggett, 1992, pp. 583-589). In the world of individual opinion, time is based only on the present; the human brain tends to distort one's perception of time in memories and in moments of high sensory stimulus (Carey, 2010, p. D6; Luthman, Bliesener, & Staude-Müller, 2009). The perception of time in the world of sheer madness and vagary is similar to that of the world of individual opinion except that in addition to a distorted sense of time in the past, the present is also distorted (Toplak, Rucklidge, Hetherington, John, & Tannock, 2003, pp. 24-26; Berlin & Rolls, 2004, pp. 368-370). Time in media reality, through repeated conditioning due to the predominant length of television and radio programming, has become based on half-hour and one-hour increments (Tullis & Albert, 2008, p. 7).

With this in mind, the perception of time in virtual reality can be approached. Time in virtual reality is perceived differently than in physical reality, in that, within virtual reality, time is more task-based and event-oriented; the passage of time is dependent on the specific activity in which one is engaged. Research into the human brain has shown that operating in a task-based frame of mind (such as in virtual reality) can alter how the brain perceives the passage of time (Carey, 2010, p. D6). Lee, Tan, and Hameed (2005) have discussed the idea of monochronicity and polychronicity as different modes of time use and
perception — the former denoting a linear method of thinking and the latter denoting a non-linear thought mode that is more conducive to multitasking. They found that a positive correlation exists between Internet use and polychronicity and that the correlation is stronger with heavier Internet users (Lee, Tan, & Hameed, 2005). Luthman, Bliesener, and Staude-Müller (2009) have similarly found that the perception of time among video game players can vary widely while immersed in gameplay. In virtual reality, like in previously established realities, the perception of time is unique to the reality in question.

In an exploratory survey of what factors contribute to the perception of a reality, Chesebro has suggested that eleven dimensions exist, which help to create the perception of reality. In addition to the previously discussed dimension of time, Chesebro preliminarily identified ten other factors: space, a feedback system, people, agency, ambient sound, smell, touch, purpose, an overall coherence of the system, and some type of rhetoric or storytelling. Table 1.1, “Exploring the Differences Between Everyday Reality and Virtual Reality: A Set of Heuristic Propositions,” defines the eleven dimensions, along with a brief example for physical reality and virtual reality:
Table 1.1.

*Exploring the Differences Between Everyday Reality and Virtual Reality: A Set of Heuristic Propositions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of Any System Cast as a Reality</th>
<th>Everyday Reality</th>
<th>Virtual Reality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>External, uniform and standardized agreement of time in internationally recognized units (e.g., second, minutes, hours, etc.)</td>
<td>Sense of time is determined by the sequence and activity involved within the process. “Fast” and “slow” in a video game, for example, depends on the conflict levels, number of players, and range of actions available to players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Sense of perspective and sense of three-dimensional object-background perception</td>
<td>Two-dimensional “flatland” can exist and manipulated to introduce figure-ground experience by increasing the size of the figure and reducing the size of background items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Synchronistic and immediate</td>
<td>Asynchronistic and delayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Image manipulation within the context established by physiology of the individual body</td>
<td>Avatars can reflect physiology of the individual human body or dramatically reconstruct the image, sense of the self, and become a reflection of identity rather than physiology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Agencies used are cast and treated as tools or extensions of the human senses, reflecting and designed to extend human goals and purposes</td>
<td>Agencies used are cast and treated as technologies that can process activities in ways that humans do not, and they can produce processes and outcomes that are unexpected by human designers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambient Sound</td>
<td>Soundscapes exist and are inherently created by non-human factors and human activities unrelated to immediate human interactions in every human environment</td>
<td>Sound tracks must be consciously and explicitly created and consciously and explicitly adjusted as “background” as ongoing human interactions change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions of Any System</td>
<td>Everyday Reality</td>
<td>Virtual Reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td>One of the basic human senses used to imposed social interpretations and meanings upon human interactions</td>
<td>Not clearly a feature of virtual realities although “guesses” about smell might be inferred from background and actions of central human actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>One of the basic human senses used to imposed social interpretations and meanings upon human interactions</td>
<td>Touch screen and computer keyboard entries can associate actions within virtual realities with the sense of human control through touch although the sense of touch among avatar or avatars and avatars’ environment is currently not that explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Competing human philosophies are an ongoing source of human intrigue and conflict, especially as they impact political systems and decisions</td>
<td>Specific purposes and objectives govern different types or genres of virtual realities exist, although interactions among interactive parallel processing is seldom of a feature of ongoing virtual realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence of the System</td>
<td>Closed system in which external inputs are integrated into existing patterns</td>
<td>Open system in which external inputs determine and control the internal dynamics of the procedures of a virtual reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Rhetoric or Storytelling</td>
<td>Its rhetorical framework casts everyday reality as the most basic and fundamental sense of what is</td>
<td>Cast as a supplement to existing everyday reality systems in much the way that Facebook maintains that it exist to reflect previous established friendships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since thoroughly discussing all eleven dimensions is greatly beyond the limits of this thesis, only three dimensions will be discussed here: agency, people, and storytelling. The purpose of this thesis is to suggest how conceptions of agency, people, and the stories told about a reality affect the degree of realism attributed to a system such as virtual reality. The decisions of which variable to discuss in this thesis were based on a number of reasons. Agency is concerned with the creation of tools to enhance an experience or the productivity of one’s existence; something that could be said to be present in all realities (see below). The dimension people was also chosen to be examined for this thesis, since people and the social experience inherent with the presence of people, is a major factor in the creation of a perception of reality. As previously discussed, Berger and Luckman (1966, p. 1) have established that realities are socially constructed, and without people, the social construction of reality would be impossible. Finally, storytelling is discussed in this thesis, since the stories told about a particular reality greatly impact how the reality is perceived. Additionally, there is the notion, as discussed by Goffman (1959, pp. 2-4), that human actions are inherently a theatrical performance designed to influence others’ perception about the self, and are, thus, a form of storytelling. The majority of the remainder of this chapter further discusses the three dimensions of reality examined in this thesis.

However, before exploring these three dimensions as they relate to virtual reality, a final note on two differing schools of thought is necessary.
*General semantics* is the philosophy of thought that an individual’s own perception of reality shapes the language the individual employs. For example, “art” is a completely subjective term that has different meanings for different people; what one deems fine art might be perceived as low-brow by another (Petkansas, 2001, p. 336-337). With this logic then, the definitions of many subjective terms, such as good, bad, or beautiful, that are found in a dictionary could be said to not even be valid, since they would simply be the average of all individually perceived definitions (Petkansas, 2001, pp. 331-334). Taken to extremes, this logic has the ability to destroy the progress of western Indo-European hard sciences, such as mathematics and thermodynamics, since in general semantics, all ideas and conclusions are open for debate and interpretation (Hilgartner, 2009, pp. 295-297). Indeed, the field of general semantics could be, in the eyes of James, placed in the world of individual opinion, as the entire field is largely based on the empirical observations of the individual (James, 1950, p. 293).

This thesis, on the other hand, operates within a Burkeian framework, that is, based on the works of Kenneth Burke and *dramatism* (see chapter three). As opposed to general semantics where one’s reality shapes the language and symbols employed, one of the basic tenets of dramatism is that the language and symbols employed by individual greatly influences and shapes the perceived reality (Burke, 1966, p. 16). The use of socially-constructed symbols is evident in everything from religion to science. In the field of physics, for example, socially-
constructed symbols have given rise to ideas such as the Big Bang Theory or the elasticity of time in relation to gravity. While the first moments of the universe or a black hole will never be observed by scientists, most academics believe these phenomena exist. As is rather evident, operating within a framework of general semantics in a discussion about multiple realities, identities, and perceptions, is rather difficult, if not impossible altogether. Within a Burkeian framework, however, the multiple intersubjective, socially-constructed viewpoints are welcomed and encouraged.

Agency/Technology

Of the three dimensions discussed in this thesis, agency deals with the tools created by humans designed to enhance one’s existence in a particular reality and adapt to the environment. Chesebro, in his exploration of the dimensions of reality, defined agency as “the tools or extensions of the human senses” and “technologies that can process activities;” in short, agency is based on technology (Chesebro, 2010). McLuhan has discussed at length how technologies, whether a simple alphabet or a mainframe computer, all shape and define one’s perception of culture and reality (McLuhan, 1967, p. 8). Since Chesebro’s notion of agency is based in technology, which McLuhan has demonstrated to shape individuals’ perceptions, it is, thus, more logical to refer to agency as technology for the purposes of this thesis. In physical reality, examples of technologies designed to extend human goals and purposes could include the primitive agricultural and carpentry tools of humankind’s ancestors or
more advanced technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as sterilization, refrigeration, or telecommunications. Within scientific reality, the tools and technologies that extend the senses could include advanced optics (telescopes or microscopes) or other sensing technologies (X-ray machines or Geiger counters), or even relatively primitive scientific tools, such as litmus paper or mercury thermometer. A technology within virtual reality could be the specific website or service (such as Facebook or Twitter) or even applications within a website (such as the picture upload feature in Facebook).

While technology is generally thought of as tools (be they primitive hand tools or complex computers), technology can also refer to the means through which one experiences their immediate environment. Toward this end, the work of Jonathan Steuer is an important point of departure. In his article “Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence,” Steuer (1992, p. 75) defined and described two key terms: presence and telepresence. When considering agency as a dimension contributing to the formation of a reality, the agency of the physical world would be presence, or the “perception of [one’s] surroundings as mediated by both automatic and controlled mental process.” In other words, presence is an aggregation of the information gathered by the five senses. Conversely yet quite similarly, Steuer (1992, p. 76) defined telepresence as “the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium.” This definition of telepresence is fundamental to his definition of virtual reality: “a real or simulated environment in which a perceiver experiences
telepresence” (Steuer, 1992, pp. 76-77). The significance of this definition lies in the fact that it is not tied to a particular hardware system, which, at the time of Steuer’s writing, consisted of head-mounted goggles and tactile reflexive gloves.

Steuer’s idea of telepresence contained two factors that determine the degree of telepresence experienced by the user: vividness and interactivity. Vividness is defined as “the ability of a technology to produce a sensorially rich mediated environment” (Steuer, 1992, p. 80). While it might not look like the traditional notion of “virtual reality” as a highly-graphical, three-dimensional worlds, websites such as Facebook or eBay, with their rich colors and animated menus, are quite vivid; especially when one considers the overall design and look of websites just fifteen years ago, not to mention the simple, monochromatic interfaces of early computers. The second factor of telepresence, interactivity is “the degree to which users of a medium can influence the form or content of the mediated environment” (Steuer, 1992, p. 80). Similar to the increased levels of vividness, today’s websites are quite interactive: content is created, posted, and commented upon, not by the website’s administrators, but by users; webpages are cross-linked to each other to draw in the user even more; users are able to meet, communicate and socialize with other users locally or from around the world. Participatory commerce websites, like eBay or Craigslist, are entirely dependent on users for both the selling and buying of products, and while not designed as platforms for communication between users, basic communication functions are present (and there are numerous social networking sites, Facebook
or MySpace, for example, that do serve primarily as tools for communication between users. Indeed, most highly interactive, user-driven websites and web services (termed *Web 2.0*) depend on their users for content, which many see as a “harnessing [of] collective intelligence” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 6).

**People**

The idea of a “collective intelligence” is useful when approaching the next dimension of reality discussed in this thesis: people. In examining the social aspect of the formation of a reality, referring to Chesebro’s reasoning behind the establishing of the media reality is quite useful. Among other determining factors, Chesebro (1984, p. 115) placed much of the focus on the social constructions that exist between humans and that these constructions involve symbol-creation and -manipulation. In physical reality, these social constructions are created in face-to-face, interpersonal communication, and individuals use impression management techniques in an attempt to control how others perceive oneself (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). In scientific reality, people exist to further and propagate their genetic code and their species, as a whole, which, over time, has given rise to civilization, industry, and technology. In media reality, the social constructions are *parasocial relationships*. Duck and McMahan define *parasocial relationships* as “relationships people form with media characters and personalities,” which have proven to be “just as real and meaningful as those within their physical social networks” (Duck & McMahan, 2010, p. 363). The notion of parasocial relationships is quite useful when examining the relationships users of the
Internet form with other users. They demonstrate, through their very existence, that humans yearn to socialize with those whom one has become familiar, even if the familiarity comes from an actor reading a script. Parasocial relationships are formed through a strictly one-way communication channel: the viewer can only receive scripted messages from the television personality without having the ability to reciprocate with a response. However, the relationships formed between Internet users, in a chat room, for example, while asynchronous in nature and not up to par with the standards of face-to-face communication, are nonetheless two-way interactions that involve feedback between the two parties involved and are, thus, much more capable of blossoming into interpersonal relationships.

If interpersonal relationships are arising as a result of users’ activity on the Internet then one is compelled to describe what is occurring in virtual reality as *interpersonal communication*. Simply stated, interpersonal communication is the “social interaction of people” (Berger, 2008, p. 2473). De Vito (1986, p. 163) described it as communication occurring between individuals that is distinct from public communication and mass communication). Public speaking is simply when a speaker, usually face-to-face, “addresses a... large audience with a relatively continuous discourse” (De Vito, 1986, p. 244). Mass communication is simply “communication mediated by some medium,” and could be said to be similar to what is occurring in virtual reality (De Vito, 1986, p. 199). However, this is not entirely accurate since, as previously discussed, in virtual reality, there is
not a mass audience that is receiving a one-way message; the sender and the receiver of the messages are often one and the same.

Interpersonal is further distinguished from mass communication in that, as Berger (2008, p. 2473) has stated, interpersonal communication involves the individuals’ uses of “verbal discourse and nonverbal actions, as well as written discourse, to achieve a variety of instrumental and communication goals.” He was quick to note that while interpersonal communication is traditionally conceived as face-to-face, it is increasingly “being accomplished through the use of such communication technologies as computers and mobile phones,” which brings “a new dimension” to the field of interpersonal communication (Berger, 2008, p. 2473). Borisoff, Hoel, and McMahan (2010, p. 225) have discussed that the interpersonal communication occurring on the Internet has greatly altered the traditional views of “self-disclosure, social value,… belonging,… civic engagement and community.” Thus, while the media reality is able to account for the experiences and parasocial relationships of media consumers, it is not sufficient for the experiences and interpersonal relationships that occur online; hence, the need for a formally acknowledged virtual reality.

In this context, simply using a computer does not, however, qualify as computer-mediated communication or virtual reality. The computer must be connected to the Internet, allowing the user to interact with other users all over the world (or friends on the other side of town), and ultimately giving the user a sense of communicating with others, to be classified as “virtual reality.” As was
previously mentioned, Berger and Luckman’s definition of reality emphasizes social constructionism: if one is simply using a computer for word processing, it is not directly social and, therefore, not computer-mediated communication. However, if one’s computer is connected to the Internet and the user’s interactions becomes “personal” and individually meaningful and one truly feels he or she is socializing with another person, then it would be a socially constructed experience.

As was briefly mentioned earlier, Steuer’s work with virtual reality was ground-breaking in that it defined virtual reality in terms of the mediated experience, rather than in terms of the associated hardware, such as head-mounted goggles and tactile-reflexive gloves (Steuer, 1992, pp. 75-78). In the years since Steuer’s writings, the definition of virtual reality has expanded to include fully immersive, highly interactive, three-dimensional environments (Watte, 2009, p. 4). These three-dimensional virtual environments, which resemble, yet are distinct from, video games, have many labels: virtual community, massively multi-player online game, and collaborative virtual environment, are just a few examples. Even with the widely varying names, at its core, these virtual worlds consist of a three-dimensional representation of the user (referred to as an “avatar”) interacting with other users’ avatars, across temporal and spatial boundaries, in a fully immersive, three-dimensional environment. Within virtual communities, many of the same markers of culture in
physical reality can be found, such as socialization, collaboration, arts, and commerce.

However, to define virtual reality solely in terms of virtual communities leads to the same problems that Steuer established with others trying to define virtual reality in terms of head-mounted goggles and tactile-reflexive gloves. Watte has discussed how the level of interactivity, the simulation of being in a meeting place, the system of governing rules, and the “in-world persistence” contribute to the notion that two-dimensional social networks and other interactive 2D websites are as much a part of virtual reality as 3D virtual worlds (Watte, 2009, p. 4). Thus, virtual reality is larger than the online 3D virtual communities; virtual reality encompasses the whole of the highly interactive Internet: social networks, online commerce, webcasts, and, yes, 3D, interactive virtual worlds.

However, using computer games as a starting point is useful since games were a major contributor to the rate of adoption of personal computers in the home. Turkle (1984, p. 82) while discussing computers and gaming, reflected this idea, stating that “games are a microcosm of computation.” She continued: “Computers offer the the possibility of creating and working within artificial worlds, whether to simulate the behavior of economics, political systems, or imaginary subatomic particles” (Turkle, 1984, p. 82). Turkle made this statement in 1984, a full seven years before the launch of the World Wide Web, which, since it’s launch in 1991, has given rise to, as of July 2008, one trillion
webpages, completely surpassing Turkle’s predictions (Tanaka, 2008, Forbes.com).

However, while Turkle seems rather prescient in speculating what tasks computers could eventually perform for humans, she grossly misrepresents the people that use computers. In studying the users of the computer labs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she described them as “self-loathing,” “ostracized” “nerds, loners, and losers” (Turkle, 1984, pp. 198-200). Further, she discusses how in more traditional fields, engineering, for example, one can be an engineer and still live in the “real world;” computer programmers, however, seem to get “lost in the thing-in-itself” (or in other words, get lost in a virtual reality) (Turkle, 1984, p. 201). She acknowledged that there is essentially a world within computers that users occupy, and in her subsequent research into the ever growing influence of the Internet, Turkle (1995, p. 1) discussed how identities and conceptions of the self are being significantly shaped by the Internet. Despite all of this, Turkle nonetheless relegated virtual reality to an extreme subordinate status. Over 25 years after Turkle described MIT’s most proficient of computer users as the “ugliest” of men, it is time to recognize that many Internet users are realizing or self-conceiving of themselves as having an identity unique to or growing out of computer-mediated communication.
Storytelling

The people that inhabit a particular reality eventually create a framework which informs and induces their participation in the reality; this framework comes about through storytelling. In his exploration of the dimensions of a reality, Chesebro noted, in regards to storytelling and rhetoric, that “every reality must have a set of persuasive ‘god terms’ that invoke attention, human involvement, and human responses” in order to characterize the reality as “relevant and significant” to the extent that humans are convinced to participate (Chesebro, 2010). Physical reality casts itself as the absolute most necessary and indispensable of realities; akin to the “gold standard” of communication when comparing face-to-face interactions with other supposedly less personal modes of communication, such as telephony or email (Rhode, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1997, p. 1594; Nowak, Watt, & Walther, 2005). Within the various supernatural realities (i.e., myths and religions), the importance of storytelling is quite evident: in the case of Christianity, the stories of the Bible dictate how and why individuals should act and has been used as the basis for evangelism, ministry, inquisitions, and wars. The storytelling within virtual reality creates a framework that casts virtual reality as a supplement to physical reality; not something that is designed to fully substitute for it. For example, Facebook’s company overview states that its “mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” by “keep[ing] up with friends, upload[ing] an unlimited number of
photos, shar[ing] links and videos, and learn[ing] more about the people they meet” (Facebook, Facebook.com).

Of course, Facebook is just one of many social networks, and each social network, website and service has its own methods and procedures for learning, reaching decisions, and ultimately generating its own way of “knowing what is.” When a user interacts with other users through a real-time chat service, for example, he or she must invariably be selective in the information revealed to whomever the recipient is. They are, in a sense, engaging in a form of theatrical performance. Goffman (1959, pp. 2-4) has compared human actions to that of an actor in that actions are “performed for reasons other than the information conveyed” in an effort to create an impression on the message receiver that is in the best interests of the message sender. Liu (2007) investigated the social network profiles of 127,000 MySpace users and found four themes that dominated profiles: conveying of prestige, differentiation, authenticity, and theatrical persona. The social network profile, thus, serves as a tool for both exhibiting conformity with and individualizing oneself from one’s peers, while also allowing the user to act out his or her own personal, online dramatic narrative.

In the case of rhetoric, while the term has slightly varying definitions, for the purposes of this study, rhetoric is defined as “the human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols” (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990, p. 14). One does not have to look far on the Internet to find an individual or organization trying to coerce others of the superiority of whatever idea he/she/they are
professing (see chapter two). However, rhetoric goes beyond simple persuasion and has a great deal to do with symbols and the value individuals place in symbols. Symbols can range from words to money to religious icons; the value placed in each object varies with each individual or group. While many might not see the value in them, virtual goods hold great value and symbolism to some (this is discussed in greater detail in chapter two, as well). Castronova (2005, p. 148), for example, discussed how if a “glowing sword” is perceived as special by the inhabitants of a virtual world, then it truly becomes special and, thereby, “virtual things become real things.” Symbol making, symbol using, and rhetoric are needed for the creation of a sense of reality; it is present in physical reality, as well as present in virtual reality.

Something to bear in mind during this discussion of virtual reality is that there is not one all-encompassing Internet service or website, that any logical person would qualify as a reality. Instead, one must take into account the whole of the cyber world “inside” computers and on the Internet, where one can create art, manipulate media, communicate with friends and family, buy and sell nearly anything, and gain access to vast compendiums of knowledge. It is not the individual Facebook, Second Life, or Craigslist that constitutes a reality, rather, it is the combined aggregate of all websites and web services that has created a self-contained cyber world.
Skepticism

However, despite the prevalence of literature in mainstream, industry, and academic presses espousing the seemingly endless benefits provided by the Internet, there exists a vocal minority that does not buy into the hype surrounding the technological revolution. For example, Finlay (1987, pp. 1-2, 56) critically examined the discourse espoused about the “technocratic age” and laments a future dominated not by “procedures of knowledge” and problem solving but by the “procedures of how to do” and calling upon previously established, non-contextualized information. Nearly 20 years later, in a very similar fashion, Lanier (2006) objected to the emerging trend on the Internet of random pieces of information stripped of all context aggregated into one “wikified” page. He continued with the idea that many aggregation websites, be it Google News, Digg, or any similar service, yearn to expunge the human element from the Internet, through the use of ever more sophisticated search algorithms based on user preferences (Lanier, 2006). In The Dumbest Generation, Bauerlein (2008, pp. 137-138) seems to agree when speaking of Google News and Facebook that are designed only to keep teenagers apprised of the topics in which they are already interested or familiar; the problem, said Bauerlein, is that education is born out of diversity and studying subjects outside of one’s “sphere of interest.”

Clifford Stoll, a self-described technological heretic, is another vocal member of the anti-information and communication technology movement. In Silicon Snake Oil, Stoll (1995, pp. 10, 12) dismissed the Internet as
“overpromoted” and sweepingly generalized that “computers and online services frustrate virtually everyone.” The Internet critic also made numerous predictions about the web that, today, seem laughably inaccurate: more users online will only mean slower connections (even if the lines of transmission are upgraded), online shopping cannot and will never be able to compete with traditional bricks-and-mortar stores, and the information available on the Internet is perpetually stale and outdated (Stoll, 1995, pp. 16, 18-19, 36). While the ubiquity of the Internet almost makes it not worth mentioning, it should be noted that high-speed broadband connections have only increased while lower-speed dial-up connections have decreased (Horrigan, 2009, p. 11), online retail spending has increased greatly over the last ten years (Quarterly Retail E-Commerce Sales, 2009, p. 1), and real-time search (the searching and organization of the most recently created online content) has become a huge business for Google, Microsoft, and other search providers (Schonfeld, 2010, WashingtonPost.com).

In later work, despite citing numerous examples of individuals finding cancer support, life partners, and old friends and family online, Stoll (1999, pp. 197-198) continued to deride the Internet as a communication phenomenon that greatly diminishes interpersonal contact between individuals. Similarly, in Against the Machine, Siegel (2008, p. 17) maintained that the increasing prevalence of laptop computers in coffeehouses has created a world in which users “enter further and further into the illusion” they are creating their “own external reality out of [their] own internal desires.” In a Wall Street Journal article,
Helliker (2009, p. D1) echoed these very sentiments when wistfully discussing a brother that has a large, diverse coterie of friends due to the simple fact that he lives his life offline. While it might seem rather intuitive that these assertions are correct (more time spent online should logically lead to less time spent communicating face-to-face), Pew has established that users of Facebook tend to have a more diverse social network and are more engaged in local community activities, flying in the face of conventional wisdom (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009, p. 3).

Another common complaint leveraged against the Internet is the associated high levels of anonymity. In an early essay on cyberspace, Stone (1991, p. 82) told the story of Julie, who on the Internet, appeared to be a “totally disabled older woman” that was able to “push the keys of a computer with her headstick.” Julie developed friendships with numerous other women online, sharing many intimate secrets and details about each others’ lives. It was subsequently revealed that Julie was not a disabled woman but was, in fact, “a middle-aged male psychiatrist” (Stone, 1991, p. 83). While many of the women that had confided their most intimate secrets with Julie felt completely betrayed and taken advantage of, the computer programmers that created the virtual environments in which “Julie” thrived viewed the incident as inevitable, having known “from the beginning the radical changes in social conventions” that would be ushered in by the Internet (Stone, 1991, p. 83). However, while this example of “Julie” dates from the beginnings of the Internet, even before the World Wide
Web as it is known today, the issue of anonymity, whether it is a blogger, a user of Second Life, or a file-sharer (legal or otherwise), is still a very important issue today among Internet critics (Keen, 2007, pp. 23, 84-85; Siegel, 2008, pp. 157-160; Zittrain, 2008, pp. 32-33).

While many of these criticisms of the Internet are quite valid and should be topics of open debate, they do not justify complete dismissal of the Internet (as some critics, like Stoll, are quick to do). In fact, many of the complaints leveraged toward the Internet are not based on the technology itself, but rather, on the poor practices, habits, and behaviors, of the users. Many of these problems are addressed in The Future of the Internet, as Zittrain (2008, pp. 149-246) provided numerous suggestions of how to change these bad behaviors, become better “netizens,” and create a better Internet for the future. Despite the negative aspects associated with the Internet, it is very much a technological and cultural force worthy of acceptance.

The very fact that such contrarian opinions of the Internet exist demonstrate virtual reality does not affect all equally. It is important to realize that, because of varying opinions of information communication technology, namely computers and the Internet, there are large swaths of the population who are not presently nor likely in the future to be affected by virtual realities. Pew Internet and American Life Project has established multiple times that there are certain demographics that have access to high-speed Internet and certain demographics that do not. In a 2009 study on broadband use in the United
States, Pew found that a number of factors, such as low levels of education, living in rural areas, and being a senior citizen, contribute to not having a broadband connection in the home (Horrigan, 2009, p. 38). The study noted that many of the factors listed are closely associated with lower income levels. In a separate study, Pew has stated that, “those with low levels of income or education are less likely to be online in the first place” (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009, p. 48). However, simply having a low income is not enough to shut one out from virtual reality; attitude toward technology is also a significant factor.

In a 2007 study, Pew divided Americans into ten distinct categories based on technology attitudes and usage habits. Pew argued that different groups viewed their identities and productivity as more or less tied to computer use. Within this framework, some groups solely defined their identity and productivity in terms of information technology, while some were relatively neutral about an identity and productivity link to a computer system, and some groups rejected all together any identity or productivity link to computer systems. In this regard, Pew specifically found that 31% of Americans (which Pew dubbed “Elite Tech Users”) have positive views of technology and the Internet; most have broadband Internet in the home and many participate in Web 2.0 activities, such as blogging or social networking (Horrigan, 2007, p. 6).

In addition, it also established two other groups (dubbed “Middle-of-the-road Tech Users” and “Few Tech Assets”), which make up a total of 69% of the
American population. This large cross-section of the population has mixed opinions of technology, ranging from grudging tolerance to complete aversion (Horrigan, 2007, p. 6). It is this two-thirds of the American population that would largely be unaffected by the establishing of virtual as a reality; however, the other 31% of Americans that are actively engaged in the Internet and immersed in social networking and virtual worlds would be affected, and possibly validated, by the establishing of virtual as a true reality.

If virtual reality were to be added to James’ and Chesebro’s list of eight realities, it would likely affect other realities, possibly significantly. Like media reality, virtual reality would also offer but one perspective for individuals to perceive their definition of truth. And also like Chesebro’s and James’ realities, virtual reality is largely self-contained yet events in one’s virtual reality could easily have impacts on other realities. Boellstorff (2008, p. 21) has discussed how, “virtual worlds, increasingly have ‘real’ ramifications — a business, an educational course, an online partner becoming a ‘real’ spouse.” Similarly, Turkle (1984, pp. 46-47) has discussed how virtual reality affects children’s psychological development by assigning anthropomorphic qualities to computers. The different ways that virtual reality could affect other realities of its users are as numerous as the users themselves.

In all, three propositions begin to reveal and define the approach in this thesis. First, reality is not concrete, but intersubjective, as has been demonstrated by, among others, Berger and Luckman (1966, p. 22). Second,
many Americans are forming identities and creating and maintaining emotionally significant relationships solely through the various interactive websites and services found on the Internet. Third, and finally, the identities and relationships created within the virtual world can greatly affect identities and relationships in the physical, “real” world. The intersubjectivity and sociality, which bring with them conflict and collaboration, contribute to Kenneth Burke’s notion of dramatization across all realities, including virtual reality.

**Statement of Research Questions**

If one’s virtual reality could indeed affect another of one’s realities, the question then arises: are more realities needed? Should we be adding more realities? Conversely, is it naïve to think that by ignoring the existence of virtual as a reality that it will have any less of an impact on certain individuals’ lives? As will be thoroughly demonstrated in chapter two, for some, the experiences and time spent within virtual reality can be, for some, much more significant in one’s life than experiences from any of the other of eight established realities, such as realities of religion or logic. It’s precisely because of this: the fact that, for some, virtual reality is more important than spirituality or the opinions of others that it should be seriously considered by communication scholars, philosophers, and the general public as a reality just as significant and consequential as the physical, scientific, or spiritual realities.
Since Steuer’s work, much research into different areas of virtual reality has been done (see chapter two), and as it continues to grow and penetrate more lives, virtual reality as a subject to communication scholars will continue to grow, as well. Some might be quick to dismiss virtual reality from the realm of academic study, since, on the surface, much of the user-generated content that constitutes virtual reality appears to be inane and superficial: continuous Twitter updates, derivative YouTube videos, and the video game-like appearances of virtual worlds, like Second Life. However, when one considers what is happening within virtual reality: commerce, arts and culture, religion, and large amounts of interpersonal communication and collaboration, one must acknowledge that virtual reality is quickly becoming a true cultural force that warrants study, scrutinization, and acceptance by communication scholars and the public at large.

The Internet has become one of the most important cultural forces in the world today. Universities, businesses and governments depend on the Internet, and there are millions of private individuals that depend on the Internet as a tool to communicate, stay informed on current events, and to be entertained. For example, Chesbro (2000, p. 8) proclaimed that, “The Internet is the single most pervasive, involving, and global communication system ever created by human beings, with a host of untapped and unknown political, economic, and socio-cultural implications.” While there is no doubt still “huge potential” (Berners-Lee, 2009) in virtual reality, it has nonetheless already had enormous effects on

With this in mind, three research questions are addressed in this thesis:

RQ1: What are the conceptual and operational dimensions of virtual reality?

RQ2: How is virtual reality socially and symbolically constructed?

RQ3: What are some heuristic constructs that can be created for future research?

In regard to research question #1 (RQ1), virtual reality has been defined throughout chapter one; the remainder of this thesis focuses on the larger concepts of what occurs within virtual reality. When considering virtual reality as a significant reality for some, one must look at what is occurring in virtual reality. Interpersonal communication, collaboration, scrutinization: these are just a few of the many activities performed via computer. Facebook, for example, has become one of the largest communication platforms in the world in just five years time and has affected presidential politics, recruitment efforts for major corporations, and even inspiration for new computer operating systems (Hempel, 2009, CNNMoney.com). Facebook is just one of many Web 2.0 services and sites that have had and are still having profound impacts on society. Therefore, this thesis examines some of the myriad websites and web services in terms of what they are and how they operate and connect people; in doing so, the three
dimensions of a reality discussed in this thesis, agency, people, and rhetoric/storytelling, are examined.

In regard to research question #2 (RQ2), chapter one establishes the idea of reality as being socially constructed. James (1950, pp. 292-293) and Chesebro (1984, pp. 112-115) have separately established the existence of eight realities, and these realities are shaped by the thoughts and actions of the individual and those around him/her (Berger, Luckman, 1966, pp. 19-23). Thus, in demonstrating that virtual reality is a significant reality for some, the ways in which virtual reality is socially and symbolically constructed must be examined. These social and symbolic constructions can often lead to conflict, effectively dramatizing one’s online experience, which is also a phenomenon that must be examined.

In regard to research question #3 (RQ3), while discussed in greater detail in chapter three, a heuristic is essentially a previously defined paradigm or set of data used to help guide researchers (De Jong & Van Der Geest, 2000). The dramatistic analysis of this thesis, for example, uses various established paradigms when characterizing the online behavior of Facebook users. However, in terms of RQ3, the findings and subsequent discussion in chapters four and five demonstrate how this thesis can serve as a heuristic for future quantitative and qualitative research.
The Internet has shifted from simply linking people to “documents” to linking people to “people,… places,… products,… [and] events” (Berners-Lee, 2009). It has become more than a place for individuals to access data; it is now, quite literally, a virtual world where users can buy and sell nearly any product, learn anything from ancient history to current events, and, most importantly, connect to each other. By the end of this thesis, the above three research questions are answered. These answers provide a foundation for my main contention, which is that virtual reality is, for some, a significant reality with the same ramifications and significance that one would find in other realities and that users are dramatizing their online experiences.

Organization of Chapters

The data collected in demonstrating the significance of virtual reality is presented in the following four chapters. Chapter two reviews some of the many publications regarding virtual reality. Chapter three discusses the methods employed to address and determine the three questions guiding this study. Chapter four discusses the findings and conclusions that were reached in the dramatistic analysis of Facebook. Finally, chapter five summarizes and makes conclusions based on the data provided in the first four chapters. It also discusses the limitations of the study and provides various heuristic propositions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The field of virtual reality is a relatively new subject of academic study. Steuer’s “Defining Virtual Reality,” discussed in chapter one, was one of the first in-depth, scholarly looks at virtual reality, as we know it today; however the idea of interacting with an artificial reality on a large scale had been discussed some years prior (Hillis, 1999, p. 9). Since the initial proposals of immersive environments via head-mounted goggles in 1968, to the 1989 coining of the term “virtual reality,” through the re-appropriation of the term by Steuer in 1992 to the present, virtual reality, as a field of study for researchers and as a place of both work and recreation for users, has grown by leaps and bounds, in terms of immersive capability, interactivity, and range of possible activities and applications.

By way of preview, chapter two is divided into two parts. The first part provides a brief history of virtual reality and its more notable events. The second part examines the current state of virtual reality and the research surrounding it: those inhabiting it, what can be done in virtual reality, and the strategies and purposes behind it. The overall goal of chapter two is to demonstrate that 1) many Internet users have essentially dramatized their online activities, since for one reason or another, physical reality is unfulfilling and 2) that for the most part, none of the past research in the field of virtual reality acknowledges this.
Historical Perspective of Virtual Reality

While most conceptions of virtual reality only date back to the 1980s or early 1990s, virtual reality is a much older field of study. The history of virtual reality research, however, is too large and, for the most part, beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, only events of ultimate importance are discussed here.

Research into virtual reality began in the early 1940s during World War II as a means to develop a flight simulator to train pilots (Hillis, 1999, p. 2). It wasn’t until 1946 when the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) was developed at the University of Pennsylvania for studying ballistics that researchers realized the possibility of using computers to simulate flight (Hillis, 1999, p. 3). In 1968, Ivan Sutherland wrote a paper on the idea of a head-mounted three-dimensional display, laying the foundation for much of the virtual reality technologies that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Hillis, 1999, p. 9). Sutherland, sometimes referred to as the father of virtual reality, also developed Sketchpad, the precursor to today’s modern computer mouse; a huge step in human-computer interaction and integration (Hillis, 1999, pp. 11-12).

However, while these and other events (including the advent of personal home computing in the late 1970s and beyond) are no doubt significant milestones in the history of virtual reality, one of its biggest contributors came not from the realm of science but from the realm of science fiction. In 1984, William
Gibson published *Neuromancer*, a science-fiction novel about a dystopian future with a heavily policed virtual world through which users interface directly with their brains. In *Neuromancer*, Gibson (1984, p. 51) first coined the term “cyberspace,” which, as Gibson described, is a “consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions.” After Gibson’s novel appeared, it gave virtual reality researchers building on Sutherland’s prior work a better framework of what the virtual world should be (Hillis, p. 20, 1999).

Coinciding with the inspiration provided by Gibson’s novel was the increasing popularization of personal home computing and video games. In 1977, Apple Computer’s *Apple II* was released; this was the first preassembled desktop computer and since it’s release over 30 years ago, personal home computing has grown by leaps and bounds (Chesebro & Bonsall, p. 27, 1989). Similarly, in 1976, the *Atari*, the first home video game system, was released; this was followed by many other gaming systems, each with increasingly better graphics and more processing power (Kent, 2001, pp. 42-47). The large increases in the processing power and graphics capabilities of computers and video game consoles were pivotal in the creation of an immersive, interactive virtual reality.

The last major step leading to the creation of widely used virtual reality was the wide-spread adoption of the Internet that began in the mid-1990s. The Internet allowed the computers and some of the more advanced video game systems to connect to each other, thereby connecting the users and, in turn,
socializing the experience. However, it was the advent of high-speed Internet
close connections “and point-and-click interfaces [that] made the Internet a success as
a global electronic mall” and, in more recent years, a global electronic
symposium (Feenberg & Bakardjiva, 2004, p. 1). Exponentially increasing
computing power and wide-spread adoption of high-speed Internet connections
have culminated in the creation of a sensorially rich environment populated by a
culturally diverse community. This community and the relationships associated
with it are the foundation for the argument of the existence of a virtual reality that,
for many, is emotionally and cognitively significant.

**Current State of Virtual Reality**

While the history of virtual reality is certainly an important area of study,
it is not the focus of this chapter; rather, the main focus of this chapter is about
examining the current state of virtual reality. In analyzing the vast library of virtual
reality research, there arises a need for some sort of organizational method.
Thus, this thesis employs Kenneth Burke's pentad for discussing dramatism,
introduced in chapter one. While described in greater detail in chapter three,
b brief put, the pentad focuses on five critical terms: act (“what took place, in
thought or deed”), agent (“what person or kind of person... performed the act”),
agency (“what means or instruments he used”), scene (“the background of the
act, the situation in which it occurred”), and purpose (why the act was performed)
(Burke, 1945, p. xv). Burke (1945, p. xx) is quick to note that these labels are
somewhat amorphous: war, for example, can be classified as an agency, in that it
is “a mean’s to an end;” as an act, either “collective” or “subdivisible into many individual acts;” or as a purpose, “in schemes proclaiming a cult of war.” Thus, while virtual reality could be classified as an agent, in terms of a means of allowing individuals to form meaningful relationships and develop a self-identity, or as an act, in terms of the many activities and scenarios one can perform within virtual reality, this thesis focuses on applying the entire pentad of dramatism to virtual reality, as a whole.

In addition to analyzing many narrative works using the individual categories of the pentad of dramatism, Burke also uses his pentad to analyze various symbolically-constructed realities. Specifically, Burke discusses what he terms “the monetary reality.” The effect that capitalism and money has had on civilization, according to Burke, has created “not a mere agency” but a “rationalizing ground of action” (Burke, 1945, p. 113). Realizing the immense impact that capitalism has had on human civilization, Burke applies the entire pentad in its analysis; it is simply too large and significant to be classified in a single category. The remainder of this chapter demonstrates that virtual reality satisfies the criteria of Burke's entire pentad in terms of agent (the user or the user’s avatar or social network profile), act (the interactions and feedback loop experienced), agency (the individual websites or services used by the agent or even the over-arching concept of computer-mediated communication), scene (the two- or three-dimensional constructed environment or again even the larger idea of the entire globe as a stage for communication), and purpose (the
individual and organizational reasons for going online). Furthermore, in chapters four and five, Burke’s pentad is again employed in demonstrating the significance of virtual reality. In this chapter, then, Burke’s pentad of terms is used to organize understandings of virtual reality. We begin with the pentadic term agent.

**Agent**

The agent, in terms of Burke’s pentad, is defined as the “person or kind of person... perform[ing] the act” (Burke, 1945, p. xv). When discussing agent, Burke notes that the agent, the individual, has been paramount in the development of philosophy, thought, and literature, throughout human history, especially when considering the veritable compendium of terms to describe the individual (or parts of the individual): ego, self, super-ego, consciousness, will, mind, spirit, etc. (Burke, 1945, p. 171). Similarly, the agent is also extremely important in virtual reality; however, virtual reality is unique in that the agent is manifested in both physical reality (as the user) and in virtual reality (as the avatar or social network profile).

Before looking at the issues pertaining to the users of virtual reality, it might be useful to ask “who?” Who is going online to meet new people, reconnect with old friends, and in short, cultivate meaningful relationships with others mediated through computers? Pew Internet & American Life has reported that 79% of American adults are online in some capacity, up from 46% in 2000
and 14% in 1995. They have also reported in 2009 that 93% of teenagers use
the Internet, up from 73% in 2007 (Madden, 2009). Of the approximately 242
million American adults online, they span many generations, and while not
distributed exactly evenly, the age demographics are not skewed too heavily
toward any one age group: 25-34 year olds and 35-44 year olds each make up
20% of Internet users, 18-24 year olds make up 16%, 55-64 year olds make up
14%, and over 65 years old make up 9% (Lenhart, 2009b). While it is useful to
know that Americans are logging on to the Internet in droves (especially young
people), Pew does not provide any insight into the experiences and emotions felt
by the users.

Of the two-thirds of Americans that are accessing the Internet in some
capacity, it is the 31% of Americans that Pew has classified as “Elite Tech Users”
that take advantage of the highly interactive websites and services that would
characterize a reality (Horrigan, 2007, p. 6); of these approximately 96 million
Americans, many have higher than average incomes (over $75,000 annually),
have college degrees, or have children under 18 living in the home (Horrigan,
2009, p. 38). This one-third of the US population is actively consuming and
producing content for the Internet and, more importantly, engaging with other
individuals in a socially significant way. Again, as useful as this information is in
analyzing the demographics of Internet users, Pew’s research raises more
questions than it answers: for instance, why are those with more education and
money increasingly flocking to the Internet, seemingly “escaping” from reality?
Beyond basic demographics of users, however, much more in-depth analysis on who actively and socially engages with information communication technology has been undertaken. As discussed in chapter one, Turkle’s research of virtual reality in *The Second Self* focused on the possible effects on the “development of personality, of identity, and even of sexuality” that computers can have on children and adults. Turkle (1984, p. 16) also investigated children’s interaction with computers and how they affect the formation of concepts such as “animate and inanimate, conscious and not conscious.” Even in 1984, Turkle (1984, p. 32) expressed concern for a future in which computers occupy an increasing role in the lives of children and adults since there is the “danger of mindless play” and “infatuation with the challenges of simulated worlds” which can lead to some coming “to prefer them to the real” world. Turkle, however, failed to understand the magnitude of the experiences had within virtual reality. The simple fact that users could come to “prefer” virtual reality over physical reality, as Turkle said, should be more than enough evidence to prove that what the user experiences online is more than mere “mindless play.”

Turkle returned to the subject of how computers can affect the cognitive development of users, especially young users, eleven years later in *Life on the Screen*, right as the Internet was starting to gain inroads into the American home. In 1995, just as in 1984, Turkle (1995, p. 177) sounded almost prescient when speaking of the potential impact of the Internet on politics, commerce and industry. Turkle (1995, p. 60) also noted the inherent irony of individuals going
online to interact with others since the very act “evokes both physical isolation and intense interaction with other people.” The main thrust of Turkle’s research was that going online contributes to the idea of “multiplicity” in identity formation for the user since users can choose from many self-conceptions when interacting with others (Turkle, 1995, p. 178). Turkle has acknowledged that, while cycling through identities has always been done between different social circles, the ability to quickly change between such drastically different identities is a phenomenon unique to the Internet.

This ability to hide, alter, and change aspects of one’s outward appearance is termed “impression management.” Impression management is defined as the “conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). Schlenker has discussed how humans unconsciously use impression management in an attempt to alter others’ perceptions of themselves. Extended use of impression management, Schlenker (1980, p. 6) has noted, influences how one perceives him/herself since impression management “plays a key role in how we develop and maintain particular identities in social life” and “define[s] who we are.” The Internet allows a degree of impression management never before seen in human interaction; users are able to hide their ethnicity, age, and gender, among other physical features, that are apparent in face-to-face communication.
In Second Life, the highly interactive, graphically rich virtual environment, a user creates an on-screen self-representation (dubbed an “avatar”) and is able to fully customize their avatars' body-type, hair color, and clothing, some of which is officially licensed from brands like Adidas and Reebok (Tedeschi, 2007, NYTimes.com). Avatars are not bound to a specific gender or ethnicity, and users can buy different skins, faces and hairstyles in order to create the perfect self (La Ferla, 2009, p. E7). Cooper’s *Alter Ego: Avatars and their Creators* is devoted solely to images of avatars juxtaposed next to images of their creators. An obese young man’s avatar looks like a Nordic god while the avatar of another young man that wears a ventilator and confined to a wheelchair is a cyborg that bears a striking resemblance to its creator (Cooper, 2007, pp. 12-13, 18-19). Second Life and other virtual worlds offer individuals a level of control over one's physical appearance that is impossible in the physical world.

Online impression management is also evident in Hugo Liu’s research into social network profiles and their role in how individuals craft their online selves. Liu examined the profiles of over 127,000 MySpace users and drew conclusions about identity formation online. Liu (2007) identified *aesthetic conceptions* that “define motifs toward which one’s tastes might gravitate.” His major conclusions were that the social network profiles examined were not designed to compliment and coordinate with friends’ profiles or even to deceive others through false information; rather the profiles were cleverly constructed to convey the identity with which the user wished to be associated (Liu, 2007). This
identity with which users (especially teenage users) wish to be associated is important in both virtual reality, for establishing who one would like to be, and also important for physical reality, for reaffirming who one is and for solidifying relationships with peers.

When it comes to teenagers, almost nothing is as important as the opinions of peers. Studies have shown that over the somewhat short history of social networks, like MySpace and Facebook, socio-economic and educational castes have become as prevalent in virtual reality as they are in the physical. In personally conducted interviews with high school students, Boyd (2009) found that it is fairly common knowledge amongst high school students that Facebook and MySpace cater to two entirely different types of people: Facebook is for “honors kids,” MySpace is for the “not-so-honor kids.” Boyd believes this stems out of the social networks respective points of origin. MySpace, Facebook’s predecessor, first attracted “urban 20-somethings” and then spread to younger siblings and cousins; while Facebook originated in the Ivy League schools and similarly spread to their younger siblings and cousins, stealing them away from MySpace (Boyd, 2009). While the teenagers interviewed dismissed this as one simply being superior to the other, Boyd (2009) compares the mass exodus from MySpace to “urban white flight” since she also found that both users of Facebook and MySpace are condescending toward the other and their social networking habits. While this is just one incident of the class politics currently unfolding
online, it serves to show how preconceived attitudes in physical reality are making their impact in virtual reality.

It should come as no surprise that teenagers are flocking to social networks and bringing elements of the real world with them (even if they are some of the more reprehensible elements). However, it may be a shock to some to learn that children as young as five years old have profiles on social networking sites (Gross, 2009, CNN.com). Some of the children that have social networking profiles have simply lied about their age to circumvent Facebook’s and MySpace’s policy of being at least 13 years of age to join, while many have signed up for social networks aimed specifically at young children. These youth-oriented social networks, such as Webkinz and Disney’s Club Penguin, act as something of “a training ground” for future use of mainstream social networks” (Gross, 2009, CNN.com). Some parents might be reluctant to let their young children have access to social networks, much in the same way that some parents might be reluctant to let their young children watch television; however, the very fact that virtual outlets are catering to everyone from the young to the old stand as a testament to the current and future significance of virtual reality.

The amount of time users spend within virtual reality has reached truly mind boggling numbers. In September 2009, Linden Labs, creators of Second Life, reported that over one billion hours have been spent in the virtual world since it’s launch in 2003, and the average user spends about 100 minutes during each visit (Takahashi, 2009, VentureBeat.com). The total numbers for Facebook,
however, far outpace those of Second Life’s: in April 2009 alone, users spent over 230 million hours on the site (Nielsen Company, 2009a). So what is attracting millions of users for billions of hours? What is it that can draw this many people and keep them entertained for so long? The next section moves away from the agent and focuses on these very questions.

*Act*

Within Burke’s pentad of dramatism, *act* is simply “what took place, in thought and deed.” When one considers the possibilities of what activities can be performed in virtual reality, it can truly be overwhelming. Nonetheless, what can be done within virtual reality has become a favorite topic among scholars, with topics of study covering a wide range of subjects, such as scholarly collaboration within virtual environments (Ruhi, 2008, pp. 610-611), implications for teaching using various digital methods (Stout, 2008, p. 719), and virtual reality’s applications to medicine (Arvanitis, 2008, p. 846). The conversation has even migrated to the mainstream media, with newspaper and magazine articles discussing topics such as the virtual economy that has emerged in virtual worlds (Corbett, 2009, p. 24) and the relationships formed between people that have met each other in virtual reality (Heffernan, 2009, pp. 14-15). Discussing everything that can be done in virtual reality is far beyond the scope of this thesis, if not impossible altogether; however, this section seeks to discuss some of the more prevalent and widespread activities and opportunities available to users.
One of the biggest providers of virtual activities is Second Life, the aforementioned highly interactive, three-dimensional environment. As mentioned earlier, users are able to completely customize their avatar and then interact with other users’ avatars through text and voice chat. Beyond social interaction and the complete customization of one’s physical appearance, the possibilities for users are nearly endless in Second Life: property ownership, romance, religious experiences, arts and culture, and even flying, are all within the realm of possibility. And since content in Second Life is created by users, even the idea of what is possible is limited only by the user’s imagination and willingness to create and contribute.

Given the hundreds of thousands of individuals using Second Life and the fact that users are encouraged to create content, the vast options available to users should not be surprising. In addition to the interpersonal communication, Second Life allows its users to create nearly “any object desired” for personal use or to sell to other users (Castronova, 2005, p. 105). In addition to creating virtual objects, users are also capable of creating poses and gestures, such as laughing, clapping, or dancing, which are used for interacting with others (Pendragon, 2006, SecondLifeInsider.com). Users are then able to sell the their goods and wares to other users, which has led to the creation of a “robust mini-economy” (Corbett, 2009, p. 24). While the individual mini-economies of Second Life or Facebook (discussed below) are not huge, they aggregate to form an
increasingly lucrative financial system that contributes to the notion of virtual reality as a socially significant reality.

As more people migrate to virtual communities, various organizations and corporations have taken notice, and many have created virtual presences beyond the basic corporate website. Many multi-national corporations, such as IBM and Coca-Cola, now have presences in Second Life and Facebook as a new means of connecting to customers (Corbett, 2009, p. 26). Several schools and universities, including Harvard, Pepperdine, and New York University, have taken advantage of Second Life as a means to connect students, alumni, and the world at large. In 2007, Ball State University, for example, held an English writing course entirely in Second Life, where students explored identity issues of the self and others inhabiting the virtual community, which, as instructor Sara Robbins described, helped her and her students “break out of real-world learning” (Lagorio, 2007, NYTimes.com).

As with nearly every medium of expression preceding it, sex has become a major activity of Second Life. Sexual activity and nudity are strictly forbidden in non-approved areas, however, there are many locations within Second Life that users can experiment with their sexuality in many ways, from homosexuality to multiple partners to even pretending to be of the opposite sex. Many disparage the presence of sex slaves and prostitutes in Second Life, but Phillip Rosedale, CEO and founder of Linden Labs, the company that created Second Life, disagrees. He says that sex within Second Life is a sign of “doing
something right” because it is proof-positive that “people are engaging with the community and with each other, and connecting with each other as human beings” (Wagner, 2007, InformationWeek.com). While some would find the idea of sex mediated through a virtual self ludicrous or even repulsive, many Second Life users engage in experimental sexual activity because they are unable, unwilling, or ashamed to try it in physical reality; it becomes a form of escapism and fantasy role-play.

Not all activity taking place within Second Life is sexually oriented; far from it. Many users in both virtual environments, such as Second Life, and their low-tech, 2D equivalents, such as eHarmony or even Facebook, have found true love via the Internet. As previously discussed, some use the Internet for purely lustful reasons; however, many feel that by removing the physical body from the relationship, it becomes “less animal,” and the communication between those involved becomes “more intellectual, more spiritual” (Heffernan, 2009, p. 15). In an article titled “Love in 2-D,” Katayama (2009, pp. 19-21) discusses Japanese citizens that have developed meaningful relationships and even fallen in love with characters from Japanese cartoons. While not specifically discussing how this relates to the Internet, it is not difficult to make the connection. The two-dimensional representations of humans in cartoons are much more primitive than the two- or three-dimensional avatars encountered in Second Life or elsewhere on the Internet. When one considers that, in Second Life, men have fallen in love with a woman because she would listen to and sympathize with them as
they poured their hearts out to her, despite the fact that she’s a virtual prostitute, it’s not hard to imagine how many can fall in love via the Internet when chatting with a genuine human being (Wagner, 2007, InformationWeek.com).

While the possibilities of true love or a lustful fling are enough to draw many users to the Second Life, some users desire spiritual fulfillment over sexual pleasure. Accordingly, many religious organizations have established presences in Second Life in order to reach out to congregants, potential converts, and even users that are simply interested in religion and spirituality. Second Life has churches and synagogues that hold weekly services and feature special events for holidays like Easter and Passover (Grossman, 2007, USA Today.com). Users are even capable of going on a virtual Hajj, and some Muslim organizations hold events for Ramadan in Second Life (Yahia, 2007, IslamOnline.net). Many other faiths, such as Buddhism, Wiccan, and Rastafarian, have presences in Second Life, and they all offer users, whether they are a current follower or just spiritually inquisitive, a chance to encounter new beliefs and customs they might not experience in the physical world.

However, Second Life, in addition to the many other highly immersive 3D worlds, use a lot of bandwidth, and they require a high-speed Internet connection to be fully enjoyed by the user. There are lower-tech equivalents, however, that have had even greater success than Second Life and other similar services: social-networking sites. Similar to three-dimensional worlds social-networking sites, like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, offer users the ability to communicate
with others, play games, and buy and sell goods, all within a virtual environment. The virtual environment of social-network sites is not nearly as immersive or graphically rich as in three-dimensional virtual communities; however, millions of users daily use pictures, video clips, and simple text entries to communicate and collaborate with others.

The number of people that have created accounts on social networking sites is truly mind boggling. Facebook has over 400 million active users worldwide, 50% of which log in everyday (Dybwad, 2010, Mashable.com; Statistics, Facebook.com). In October 2009, Pew reported that nearly one-fifth of all US American Internet users post updates to Twitter or other online status update service (Fox, Zickhur, & Smith, 2009, p. 4). However, these millions of users are not just posting simple text updates about their day-to-day activities; Facebook's users, for instance, upload over two billion pictures and fourteen million videos each and every month (Statistics, Facebook.com). It's important to remember that these figures only pertain to two of the many social network sites that can be found on the Internet; in addition to Facebook and Twitter, there are millions of users in the US and around the world posting their lives on MySpace, Orkut, LinkedIn, Friendster, and many others.

Even though social network sites like Facebook use much less broadband than their three-dimensional counterparts, they nonetheless offer many of the same means of entertainment but with a decidedly more social element to it. Games and quizzes are a very popular feature of Facebook. For
instance, FarmVille, a Facebook game where users create and tend to a virtual farm, has about 63 million players, and these players can share their progress with other users in their networks, popularizing the game even further (Simon, 2009, NPR.org). FarmVille is just one of many games, applications, and quizzes, in which users can participate and share with friends, in the hopes that the friends will also participate in the same activity.

Just as the buying and selling of virtual goods in Second Life has become a big business, so too has it caught on in Facebook and other social networks. Users are able to purchase a myriad of virtual goods, from gifts for other friends to power-ups for the aforementioned FarmVille game. The total sales of these goods is near one billion dollars in the United States and approximately five billion dollars worldwide (Miller & Stone, 2009, p. A1). However, the term virtual good has a somewhat disparaging meaning: “a product or service that has perceived value to a user online but no tangible value in the outside world” (Segal & Hay, 2009, p. B2). When thinking of the different realities as defined by James and Chesebro, one could make a parallel statement: a religious icon, the Shroud of Turin, for example, holds immense value to the Christian operating within the supernatural reality, however, in the eyes of the chemical engineer operating within the scientific reality, it is simply a stained piece of cloth.

Castronova makes a similar point when discussing the idea of a “glowing sword” in Synthetic Worlds. When the glowing sword (or any virtual object, for
that matter) is judged to be of a certain value in a virtual world, “that judgment is not only impossible to deny within the [virtual reality], but it starts to affect judgments outside the [virtual reality],” and thus, “virtual things become real things” (Castronova, 2005, p. 148). Just because an individual operating within one reality finds no value in an object does not mean that it cannot hold value to someone that operates within a separate reality. This sentiment can be applied to all that occurs within virtual reality: while some disregard the significance of the acts that can be performed in virtual reality, they still hold special ramifications and implications to those individuals performing said acts.

**Agency**

Related closely to act is agency. In Burke's pentad, agency is defined as the “means or instruments” employed in the performance of the act, and in terms of virtual reality, it focuses on how users are able to connect with each other (Burke, 1945, p. xv). In the case of virtual reality, the agency consists of the computers, networks, and the various web services and sites that allow individuals to connect to others, form meaningful relationships, and create a sense of self-identity. In other words, the agency of virtual reality is the medium of computers itself.

When discussing any medium of technology, the work of Marshall McLuhan offers the perfect starting point. McLuhan's widely acclaimed mantra of “the medium is the message” is based on the idea that the medium through
which a message is conveyed is more important than the message itself (McLuhan, 1967, p. 8). The phonetic alphabet and the printed word, for example, not only changed the basis of human perception from auditory to visual, but more importantly, advanced the habit of perceiving all sensory stimulation as part of an unending continuum of time and space (McLuhan, 1967, pp. 44-48). However, electronic communication, because of its tendency to continuously “pour” information on the user, has rendered the “visual,” “block-by-block” method of thinking into an antiquated notion (McLuhan, 1967, p. 63).

The future, says McLuhan, lies in being able to understand and recognize patterns in the non-stop deluge of information, and eventually, for the individuated, fragmentary-minded public to give way to a more inter-connected “global village” (McLuhan, 1967, pp. 67-69). Similar to the global village, McLuhan coined a somewhat related term, “post-electric tribal man;” a phrase, which, in the words of Theall (2006, p. 68), has its value “primarily in what it suggests rather than what it specifies.” When considering how individuals congregate on the Internet, where one can have circles of online friends that one knows in real life and circles of friends known only in virtual reality, where the relationship is based purely on similar interests, the phrase takes on new importance. The formation of a global village and legions of post-electric tribal members is precisely what’s happening in virtual reality today, and as more and more of people’s lives take place on the Internet, virtual reality as an agency
takes an increasing role in the development of individual identities and community.

Further, McLuhan’s simply stated idea of the “medium is the message” contains a number of somewhat hidden meanings. In *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Heim (1993, p. 66) discussed another understanding of “the medium is the message” in that all new technologies create new environments. While no doubt intended in a more metaphorical sense, as in the type of environment that gives rise to the “TV generation,” for example, in the case of virtual reality, the medium has given rise to a literal environment, as well. The medium of computers and Internet connections have created an environment in, not only the McLuhanistic sense, but also in a more literal sense of users interacting with each other via some sort of computer interface, as can be seen in Facebook or Second Life.

The development of an online identity does not happen simply because one logs on to the Internet, nor does a community suddenly spring into being once a certain quota of users log on to a website or service. Instead, certain variables have been established that determine to what extent the user perceives that he/she is in a separate environment. In his work with virtual reality, Steuer (1992, p. 75) discussed the idea of *presence*, which he defines as “the sense of being in an environment.” By extension, Steuer (1992, p. 76) then defined *telepresence* as the “experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium.” *Telepresence* is central to Steuer’s definition of *virtual*...
reality, which, as mentioned in chapter one, is “a real or simulated environment in which a perceiver experiences telepresence” (Steuer, 1992, pp. 78-79). In defining telepresence, Steuer (1992, p. 80) also defined the two variables that determine the level of telepresence (and in turn, immersion) in a virtual reality: vividness, “the ability of a technology to produce a sensorially rich mediated environment,” and interactivity, “the degree to which users of a medium can influence the form or content of the mediated environment.” However, when Steuer makes these claims, he is focusing solely on the agency, or medium of the technology; like many early virtual reality researchers (Turkle’s exclusive focus on the agent, for example), Steuer ignores the experiences had by the user.

As the field of virtual reality research has matured, researchers in recent years began to realize and understand that users place a lot of stock in the agency of virtual reality. Boellstorff (2008, p. 21) has stated that, “what happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants.” What’s more is that the “ramifications” and implications of what happens online “do not blur or close” the gap between the online, virtual world and the offline, physical world since the existence of both “depends upon the gap itself” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 21). Boellstorff (2008, p. 21) has even stated that he does not oppose “virtual” and “real,” and instead, refers to what occurs outside of virtual worlds as the “actual world.” Similarly, Castronova (2005, pp. 287, 294) has made a distinction about the term “virtual,” in that it simply means “rendered by a computer,” rather
than its more traditional definition, which relegates virtual reality and virtual worlds to something that is “fake, an illusion.” These distinctions made between what is deemed “real” or “virtual” is important when considering virtual reality as being of equal significance for some as physical reality because it takes away the idea of what happens in the physical world is real, significant, important and what happens in the virtual world is fake, insignificant, irrelevant.

What happens in virtual reality, however, is far from insignificant. Interpersonal (albeit computer-mediated) communication has become one of the largest uses of the Internet. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter, to name a few, have come to dominate the lives of many Internet users and allow their users to make meaningful connections with others. Facebook, in particular, is a marvel of human communication. From its launch in 2004 to January 2009, Facebook grew to 150 million users (Hempel, 2009, CNNMoney.com). It then doubled that figure to 300 million users by November 2009; the fastest rate of saturation of any method of communication in human history (Sivan, 2009, p. 4). In 2007, Pew reported that 55% of teens have a profile on a social networking site, of which, most (91%) use it to connect with current friends and many (49%) use it to meet new people (Lenhart, 2007, p. 2). While its numbers do not come close to Facebook’s, Twitter has had astounding growth rates throughout 2009 as well: in February 2009, Twitter’s rate of growth from the previous February was an astonishing 1,382% (Ostrow, 2009, Mashable.com). Many other social networking websites are used in large
numbers: Orkut, LinkedIn, Xanga, too many to list here, and while none are quite as popular as Facebook, they all offer their users the opportunity to form significant, meaningful relationships with others.

In addition to social networking sites, virtual worlds, such as Second Life or World of Warcraft, are important aspects of Internet users’ lives. While Second Life is certainly not growing at the rate of Twitter or Facebook, it has grown steadily since its launch in 2005. Approximately 65,000 users are logged on to Second Life at any given time (Corbett, 2009, p. 24). In March 2009, over 88,000 users were logged on to Second Life simultaneously, the highest number ever for Second Life, and in October 2009, Second Life surpassed seventeen million total users (Voyager, 2009, blog post). While Second Life boasts modest numbers, many virtual worlds dwarf Second Life. Chinese virtual world Fantasy Westward Journey, for example, has over 22 million total users and has on average 400,000 users logged in at any given moment (Cha, 2006, blog post). In 2006, Fantasy Westward Journey recorded nearly 1.3 million concurrent users logged on at one time (Woodcock, 2008, MMOGChart.com).

Second Life, when viewed as the agency, gives its millions of users (agents) the opportunity to engage in a wide variety of experiences (acts). Second Life, as the agency, also provides its users with an environment with which to interact. As with the environment of the physical world, the environment in Second Life is made of a finite amount of land (or at least, a three-dimensional representation of land) for its users to inhabit. A 2007 estimation of the total land
area of Second Life was 100 square miles (Lagorio, 2007), and on any given day, over 22 million square meters of land are for sale to Second Life’s millions of users (Land for Sale Today, SecondLife.com). This virtual real estate is part of what comprises the next category of Burke’s pentad: scene.

Scene

When considering scene in virtual reality, it is important to think of scene as a larger concept than just a physical place. Indeed, Burke (1945, p. xv) defines scene as “the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred.” However, discussion of scene as a physical space is still useful since Burke (1945, p. 3) also describes scene in terms of the more traditional idea of scene in dramatic narratives as the physical “setting, or background” of where an act occurs. While the existence of a physical setting in a virtual reality is simply impossible by definition, the aforementioned concept of telepresence demonstrates that one can experience an environment through a communication medium. While the environment experienced is not a physical space, through the proper programming, the environment can be made to represent anything from simple text interfaces to three-dimensional emulations of physical space.

Second Life is a perfect example of a three-dimensional representation of a physical space. It is composed of islands, which are zoned either commercial or residential; additionally, users are able to buy property to build their virtual dream houses (Learmouth, 2004, USAToday.com). In Coming of Age
Boellstorff (2008, pp. 89-91) discusses a rising epidemic in Second Life of urban blight, whereby virtual businesses with gaudy signs and flashy lights set up shop in quaint, “romantic” neighborhoods, bringing down the perceived value of adjacent properties and houses. Users that have become victims of this virtual urban blight are quite upset that the area surrounding their lavish dream houses has become sullied by other users that are only out to make money and don’t care about the community. Many Second Life users take their community very seriously and any sort of intrusion or disruption of their community is viewed with the same hostility as if it occurred in physical reality.

The idea of location and space in virtual reality presents unique challenges. Beyond the basic fact that users are very possessive of their virtual spaces, as observed in the anecdote above; even the names of the services themselves convey a strong sense of individuality and ownership (e.g., MySpace or YouTube). Boellstorff (2008, p. 92) has put forth that the “key” to creating a sense of place within virtual reality is the perceived “simultaneous presence of more than one person.” Holmes (1995, pp. 214-218) has discussed similar ideas when examining users’ perceived locations in chat rooms and found that the individuals being observed would use location-based deictic terms, such as “here” or “there,” interchangeably to at times refer to the physical of the individual and at other times to refer to the virtual shared space of the chat room. This idea of a perceived presence of others started with the simple text-based interfaces of MUDs (multi-user dungeon) and still applies today in Facebook, Second Life, or
even eBay and Craigslist in which users interact with others in a virtual marketplace.

While Boellstorff identified the one aspect that he believes helps to create a sense of "place" in virtual reality, similarly Castronova (2005, p. 80) has identified three features of the sense of place that originated in physical reality and can now be said to apply to virtual reality with varying degrees. First, there is the fact that a place is "persistent," in that "if I go to sleep, when I wake up, the Earth is still there where I left it." Second, there is the fact that physical reality (like virtual reality) imposes "certain laws of motion on us" by which, for the most part, we must abide. Third and finally, there's the aspect of interactivity by which individuals are able to affect change and perceive changes made by others. These three features help to create a sense of place in that they all three "alienate [the world] from any one user's control" in either physical reality or virtual reality (Castronova, 2005, p. 80).

The provided sense of place, the idea that no one individual is in command of the dynamics of the environment, and the simple fact that an always-on, perpetually connected virtual environment accessible by a few clicks is a wholly new phenomenon, all coalesce to create what many commentators term the "new frontier" (Chesher, 1994, p. 17; Castronova, 2005, p. 73). Many users are drawn to Second Life, for example, not to create, buy and sell virtual goods or to acquire real estate, but to explore the highly-detailed, interactive virtual space (Castronova, 2005, p. 72). In discussing the role of the frontier in
United States history, Nardoff (1962, p. 128) has stated that, when thinking in terms of the frontier as a place, the frontier’s two defining qualities are that it is “free” (both in terms of price and liberties) and that it is “cheap” (as in “less dear than in non-frontier groups”).

Following Nardoff’s definition of a frontier, virtual reality certainly qualifies, in that in most instances of virtual reality, it is free to join (simply create an account) and one is free to act as he or she chooses; indeed, the anonymity of the Internet and of web services such as Second Life is a major selling point for some users (Boellstorff, 2005, p. 148). The question of whether virtual reality is thought of as cheap, in that it is “less dear” than areas that are not frontiers has a fairly obvious answer. As discussed earlier, approximately 31% of Americans are categorized as elite tech users; however, fully 49% of Americans have “few tech assets” and another 20% of Americans are completely ambivalent about new information communication technologies (Horrigan, 2007, p. ii). In other words, more than two-thirds of Americans consider virtual reality to be “less dear” than “non-frontier” areas (i.e., physical reality). Viewing virtual reality as a new frontier is interesting because, unlike other instances of virtual reality research that don’t account for the users’ experiences, the term “frontier” contains implications of exploration and discovery, which, in turn, contain implications of personal growth, self-improvement, etc.

Thus far, the discussion of scene in virtual reality has moved from talking about specific locations within websites and services to talking about larger
conceptual aspects of place and scene, such as the new frontier. This is one of the challenges that arises when attempting to discuss a concept, such as *scene*, that is so heavily tied to physical reality. Many question whether or not space can be said to exist in a purely virtual sense. Some believe that “space” and “virtual” are antithetical, some believe they can only co-exist metaphorically, and yet, some believe that “space” and “virtual” do not have to necessarily contradict each other (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 91). However, these opposing viewpoints are almost rendered moot as Boellstorff (2008, p. 91) has asserted that the online virtual reality is just one of many examples of “globalization making [the idea of] place irrelevant.” One must wonder whether it is worthwhile to discuss location, space, or any other aspects of the physical scene when operating within a purely virtual reality.

With this in mind, perhaps *scene*, when discussing virtual reality, should be viewed in the more Burkeian sense of the word: “the background” or “situation in which [the act] occurred” (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Perhaps, *scene* can be boiled down to simply why people go online. Pew has performed plenty of research into basic reasons as to why individuals use the Internet. While many individuals initially log on to the Internet because of work or school, Pew has consistently found since 2000 that personal reasons for going online have always outweighed reasons related to work or school (Wells, 2008, p. 2). Social networking, while not necessarily a new use of the Internet (electronic bulletin board systems and chat rooms are the early predecessors to today’s MySpace and Facebook), has,
in recent years, exploded in popularity and has become a major reason for why many go online. Pew has reported over one-third of American adults have profiles on social networking websites, and nearly two-thirds of teenagers have social network profiles (Lenhart, 2009, p. 3). However, the lure of social media goes deeper than a passing trend (it must, for so many to participate), and it is possible that social networking websites actually provide psychological gratification to some of our most basic human needs.

In his 1943 essay, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow (1943, pp. 376-382) outlines five basic “needs” of all human beings: physiological, safety, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Virtual reality can obviously not satisfy the physiological and safety needs of humans, since there are purely physical; however the “constant connectivity and exhibitionism” characterized by virtual reality has the ability to satisfy “three of [Maslow’s] five needs by providing a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and, potentially a road to self-actualization” (King, 2009, p. 23). The very notion that virtual reality can satisfy some of our most basic needs as human beings is quite powerful; however, it is far removed from the idea of *scene* in virtual reality.

It is interesting how this discussion of scene in virtual reality has evolved from talking in terms of a virtual environment mimicking a physical space to a more conceptual look at scene and space to, finally, the issues and reasons behind why an individual decides to enter virtual reality, seemingly leaving behind the discussion of *scene* entirely. As was mentioned earlier in this section,
globalization has made the world smaller: the technology (brought to the individual via globalized trade) has connected anyone to potentially everyone. If individuals from all over the world are congregated in one virtual space, where should it be said that they are? What is the scene? More important, how is a discussion of scene necessary or even relevant? Whether or not scene is a relevant topic when discussing virtual reality is is somewhat outside the scope of this thesis; however, for the purposes of this thesis, scene has provided a useful platform for launching into the fifth and final Burkeian category that is no doubt useful to the study of virtual reality: purpose.

Purpose

In terms of Burke's pentad, purpose is simply the “why” behind the motives of an action (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Why do individuals go online and reveal some of their deepest, darkest secrets in a open forum that is accessible by all? What agendas, from the personal level to the large scale, exist on the Internet, in order to further a cause, be it based in physical reality or virtual reality? The reasons behind why individuals use the Internet are as wide and varied as the users themselves, and when considering the simplicity of the question – why? – the answers derived tend to be infinitely more complex.

Human interaction with computers has, for years, led to unorthodox relationships developed between the human user and the user-perceived “personality” of the computer. In The Second Self, Turkle (1984, p. 39) discussed
that this phenomenon is not a recent trend, but rather, something that has been around since computers achieved the minimum processing power necessary to carry on conversations with the user. Specifically, Turkle discussed the ELIZA project, which was a simple computer program developed in the 1970s that could provide basic psychoanalytic answers to users’ questions, in a sort of computer-mediated therapy session. The interesting part, according to Turkle, is that the researchers and technicians programming ELIZA, while having a great knowledge as to the limitations of the program, developed a personal relationship with ELIZA, “as though it did understand, as though it were a person.” This theme of developing relationships with computers continues throughout *The Second Self*, and in *Life on the Screen*, Turkle expanded this theme to include the growing influence of the Internet, which no longer connects humans to computers, but connects humans to other humans via a computer intermediary. The sheer magnitude of people logging on to the Internet and, in turn, connecting to each other has created a multitude of personal and group-oriented causes and purposes on the Internet.

While Pew largely doesn’t offer the answers to specific questions about these various causes and purposes, they have categorized information communication technology users on their attitude toward and usage habits; essentially, broadly defining users by their purpose. In the previously mentioned study that classified 31% of Americans as “Elite Tech Users,” Pew further categorizes them into various groups, such as “Omnivores” and “Connectors.”
These users embrace technology and use them to “voraciously… participate in cyberspace” through various highly interactive web services, such as social networking and blogging (Horrigan, 2007, p. ii). Pew’s elite tech users are linking to and celebrating technology, and their tech usage habits have, in essence, become a lifestyle. While the elite technology users of America are linking to and, in some cases, defining themselves by their technology, they are more importantly linking to and interacting with others.

It is this ever-growing trend of users interacting with other users via computers that forms the basis for virtual reality. These computer-mediated interactions, if significant enough for the user, leads to identifying with, not only the person with which the user was interacting, but also the identity created by the user for the purposes of interacting with others online. The study of identity formation has made a large impact on computer-mediated communication. Conventional studies of identity formation discuss the idea of having multiple identities: the manner in which one acts in front of friends is different than when in the workplace, both of which are different from the manner in which one acts in front of one’s parents (Woodward, 2000, p. 7). However, the Internet has greatly expanded the number of identities one can possess. Since the computer-mediated interactions, by definition, involve no face-to-face communication, users are free to display or hide whatever aspect of their personalities they desire. Whereas in face-to-face communication, the participants inadvertently take cues and make assumptions about other participants based on the context
of the face-to-face situation, in computer-mediated communication, participants are additionally able to hide, alter, or completely change who they are.

Thus far, this discussion for the purpose of use of the Internet has focused mostly on the individual and the individual’s formation of self-identity. The Internet, however, is much larger than the individual; it is a global network, thus many purposes on the Internet focus, not on the individual rather, but on larger ideals for the benefit of society. Some see the Internet as the key to economic development and want to spur economic growth in the third world using technology, for example Nicholas Negroponte’s One Laptop Per Child initiative (Rawsthorn, 2009, NYTimes.com). Many see the Internet as a force for democracy, as is evidenced by Twitter’s role in Iran’s presidential elections during the summer of 2009 (Grossman, 2009, Time.com). Regardless of the specific intentions of the individual or group, many view the Internet as being a technological and cultural force for communicating their purposes and causes to the masses.

The number of purposes championed by individuals and groups are as wide and varied as the personalities of the Internet users themselves. In The American Internet Advantage, Hart (2000, p. 18) has stated that the United States has dominated technology innovation in large part through the cooperation of “industries, the universities, and the government.” The book is concluded with ten specific criteria that led the United States to dominate the Internet and other technological sectors and Hart (2000, pp. 86-87) suggested
that continuing with these criteria will solidify and perpetuate the United States’ continued cyber-dominance. In the years since *The American Internet Advantage* was first published, however, the United States has fallen from dominance of the Internet in numerous respects: total Internet use (the US having fallen from 10th worldwide in 2002 to 16th worldwide in 2007), access to the Internet (from 16th worldwide in 2002 to 22nd in 2007) and overall Internet infrastructure development (having fallen from 11th worldwide in 2002 to 17th in 2007) (International Telecommunication Union, 2009, pp. 22, 36, 38). The United States has also relinquished some its control on the Internet, when, in October 2009, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, approved the use of non-Latin characters in Web domain names; a significant move toward the “internationalization of the Internet” (Choe, 2009, NYTimes.com).

However, not all of the causes and purposes championed on the Internet are as business oriented as Hart, and many views espoused on the purpose of the Internet are quite antithetical to Hart’s unabashed praise of capitalism. The Open Source movement and the Free Software movement are two separate movements that have taken hold on the Internet in an attempt to take software creation and distribution away from centralized corporate power. Open Source, as described by Stallman (2002b, p. 57), is the notion that the code behind all software should be freely available for others to copy and edit; similarly, yet quite differently, the Free Software movement seeks to make software completely free of charge to acquire and use. Stallman is quick to note that both movements (the
Free Software movement, especially) are about the ethics, not the economics, associated with “free” and “open.” The Free Software movement is about teaching users to “value the freedom free software gives [the user], for its own sake” and imparting the more overarching values of freedom and community (Stallman, 2002b, p. 59). The end goal of community-building on the Internet is the same as with many social-networking services, message board forums, and 3D virtual worlds; all of which operate through different means.

This practice of sharing software with others, as Stallman (2002a, p. 17) has stated, is “as old as computers, just as sharing of recipes is as old as cooking,” and the software was created, modified and shared by hackers. The definition of “hacker,” Stallman (2002a, p. 17) has asserted, has been twisted in recent years into having a negative connotation as a “security breaker,” and in hacker communities, the term simply means “someone who loves to program and enjoys being clever about it.” In *A Hacker Manifesto*, Wark (2004, pp. 12-13) has compared hackers to the farming class of feudal times ruled by pastoralists and discusses how software developers will become increasingly reliant on “the hacker class” as society, as a whole, becomes more reliant upon information technology. Wark’s main thrust throughout the entire book is that hackers, those that modify and program code for software, are greatly undervalued on the Internet and should be appreciated for what they do for users.

While *A Hacker’s Manifesto* has a very Marxist undertone, there are Internet manifestos that extol the empowerment of the individual and virtual
community building while respecting the important role of business and commerce in US American society. *The Cluetrain Manifesto* is a book, website, and overall movement based on the idea that the Internet, because of the connections between customers that it provides, has changed the way business needs to be done. The authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* proclaim that the Internet “undermines [the] unthinking respect for centralized authority” that was inherent with the television, newspapers, and other mass media of the past (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000, p. 8). What this means for companies is that they will have to adapt to a changing business landscape since “companies can’t stop customers from speaking up,” and they will inevitably have to “empower” their customers by listening to the concerns and communicating with them (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000, p. 72). The authors maintain that this will be the only way to maintain customer loyalty in a quickly changing world. *The Cluetrain Manifesto* operates on the assumption that a virtual community has already formed on the Internet and is already affecting traditional ways of doing business.

*Adbusters*, a journal focused on reclaiming the “mental environment” from advertising, devoted their entire November/December 2009 issue to the growing schism between “the natural world” and “the virtual world.” In one article, the editors asked many influential Internet minds, including the aforementioned Richard Stallman and Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, about their thoughts on Google and its business practices. The answers range from
hacktivism (“build-[ing] something better” than Google) to cracktivism (illegally “access[ing] core algorithms and distribut[ing]” them freely) (White, 2009, pp. 36, 38). Similar to the purpose of hackers indirectly building a free society through the modification and distribution of software, the opinions about what to do about Google’s business tactics are intended to enlighten readers to the larger ideas of privacy, corporate control, and advertising, rather than to actually destroy Google through illegal means.

Similar to the aforementioned One Laptop Per Child initiative that seeks to provide $200 educational laptops for some of the world’s most economically depressed countries, many see the Internet and other computing technologies as the key to future economic success in the US and abroad (Rawsthorn, 2009, NYTimes.com). In *Leonardo’s Laptop*, Shneiderman discusses how the Internet and other computing technologies are still very difficult for many to use, and how the future will require that nearly everyone have the skills to properly use information communication technologies. Shneiderman (2002, p. 36) calls for computer software and hardware companies to design interfaces that are more accessible to people of all skill levels and for “universal usability,” which he defines as “more than 90 percent of all households being successful users of information and communication technologies at least once a week.” Similar to how the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* believe the individual’s use of Internet has forever changed the way business is done, Shneiderman approaches the problem from the other side: technology is changing business so
quickly that those that are not technophiles are falling behind. The Internet and other computing technology interfaces need be made simpler so that those that have fallen behind can be functional, productive members of society in the 21st century.

As has been made evident, social movements, causes, and purposes abound on the Internet. While there are many that use the Internet as a platform to launch a movement (or in some cases, the Internet is the movement), there is an increasing number of individuals that heavily criticize the Internet for the adverse affects it is having on society. In *The Cult of the Amateur*, Internet critic Andrew Keen has vented his many grievances of the Internet including many leveled against search giant Google; for example, Keen (2007, p. 93) has discussed how the search results returned by Google are biased toward more popular websites, which essentially leads to, as Keen believes, Google telling its users what they already know.

Another Internet critic, Geert Lovink, is not quite as hyperbolically negative in his criticism as Keen is. In *Dark Fiber*, Lovink raises many issues about the Internet; however, his criticisms are more designed to raise awareness of the issues at hand. For example, Lovink (2002, pp. 147-148) discusses the issue of time on the Internet. During the industrial revolution, says Lovink, there grew a need for the Earth to be divided into 24 time zones; however, the Internet has changed things drastically as “new global networks entwine the planet, and more corporations globalize their scale of operation.” Thus, XTime was created,
an open-source, base-10 method of telling time that has no ties to a specific seat
of global power; the goal being to “unite the world in a non-Eurocentric
postcolonial version of a global ‘now.’” Whether or not one agrees with the idea
of time zones having become antiquated, Lovink’s objective is to coax the reader,
especially the Internet-using reader, to consider a few of the many implications of
a constantly connected world; a constantly connected world that has had, is
having, and will continue to have enormous impact on societies.

The vast cyber landscape of the Internet has become home to many
campaigns, causes, and purposes, virtual or otherwise. From the individual
struggling with issues of identity formation to the organization that wishes to
reclaim the Internet from what it perceives as corporate control, the causes and
purposes championed by Internet users and Internet-based organizations are, to
say the least, wide-ranging and plentiful; too plentiful to include them all here.
Regardless of the specific purpose, the fact is that many users of the Internet
have found purposes with which to align themselves. This is a major factor when
considering the virtual as a reality and will be explored further in chapters three
and four.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, much research into the field
of virtual reality has been conducted, and with few exceptions, most of which
have emerged in the last five years or so, the research has focused too narrowly
on one aspect of virtual reality, the user or the activities available to the user, for example, while ignoring the overall experiences. This chapter has also demonstrated the usefulness of Kenneth Burke’s pentad of dramatism in acting as a method of organization for past virtual reality research. Most importantly, by using Burke’s pentad to analyze what’s happening within virtual reality, this chapter has demonstrated that users have effectively dramatized their online habits. In the coming chapters, Burke’s pentad is further employed in demonstrating the significance of virtual reality.
Chapter 3: Method

In discussing how to qualify something as a wholly new reality, a broad based method is required. Characterizing a new reality is not a small task, and researchers must be certain to take proper precautions before rushing to any conclusions. The analysis provided in chapters one and two, establishes a foundation for the next steps of establishing virtual reality as a reality equal in power and meaning to other systems recognized as realities. The method discussed in this chapter, criticism, differs from the majority of the research into virtual reality, which is largely quantitative or qualitative based.

By way of preview, chapter three is divided into four parts. In part one, the choice of a critical method over a quantitative or qualitative method is provided. In part two, Burkeian methods, especially dramatism, are outlined and rationalized as an appropriate method for the task specified in chapter one. In part three, the specific object of analysis, Facebook, is rationalized as an appropriate object of study. In part four, with the object of study established and justified, heuristics is briefly discussed as further clarification of how the analysis of Facebook is performed.

Critical vs. Quantitative and Qualitative

As stated in chapter one, the main objective of this is study is to demonstrate that virtual reality is a reality with the same types of ramifications
and significance that one would find in other realities such as the physical or scientific. Further, in chapter two, it has been demonstrated that most of the research in the field of virtual reality has been largely quantitative or qualitative. In terms of quantitative analyses, for example, Pew Internet and American Life Project has conducted considerable statistical research into the demographics of users and why these users go online; Pew’s quantitative analyses generally utilize a random sample of adults that are asked questions with a limited number of answer possibilities (e.g., Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009, p. 60). Conversely, qualitative research involves ethnographic methods of data collection, such as the researcher immersing him/herself in the culture or group under examination and asking broad, open-ended questions, all while remaining an “unmoved,” “neutral observer” (Bruyn, 1966, p. 14). Qualitative analyses of virtual reality include Boellstorff’s (2008, p. 6) examination of Second Life in which he immersed himself in the virtual world as a way to understand the experience of being a frequent, actively engaged user of Second Life.

While both the quantitative and qualitative methods of research are useful in studying virtual reality, this examination of virtual reality utilizes the critical method of research. At its most basic, critical research is a process of evaluating the “specific drives, desires, and motivations” behind human actions (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990, p. 12). The criticism stems from the idea that the more information available about a particular human venture or endeavor, the “more likely [one is] to feel the critical impulse” (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990,
Criticism, it should be noted, is more substantial than a mere “statement of taste or preference” and must provide the reasoning and explanation behind the judgment; it must also be “directed towards some social objective or end” in that it seeks to alter the status quo perception about some sort of human enterprise (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990, p. 13). This thesis is critical in that it provides significant explanation in its evaluation of virtual reality and also seeks to change the current perception of virtual reality as a subordinate system.

This changing of the current perception of virtual reality is related to rhetoric. Brock, Scott, and Chesebro (1990, p. 14) have defined rhetoric as the “human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols.” Its purpose of rhetoric is to convince an individual or group of the merits of one’s point of view through the manipulation of words and other symbols and is not something that is necessarily constrained to face-to-face communication. Criticism and rhetoric are intrinsically related in that in order to properly evaluate or judge upon a human enterprise with sufficient explanation (criticism), one must invoke the proper symbols (rhetoric). Brock, Scott, and Chesebro (1990, p. 16) have also identified several dimensions and purposes of rhetorical criticism, including the notion that the symbols and events chosen by the critic in his/her attempt at “inducing cooperation” can have varying meanings; thus the critic must be careful in deciding which symbols to employ. Similar to this is the idea that rhetorical criticism is interpretive: the person(s) reading/listening to the criticism can interpret it in many different ways.
To further define rhetorical criticism for the purposes of this thesis, the work of Chesebro and Bertelsen in *Analyzing Media* is quite useful in that it establishes eleven key features of critical research. While it is unnecessary and somewhat redundant to address all eleven features, of particular note is that 1) “criticism is persuasion,” 2) “criticism assesses the effectiveness of communicative acts,” and 3) “criticism involves an appreciation of form” (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996, pp. 64-65). This thesis qualifies as rhetorical criticism insofar as it seeks to persuade the reader that virtual reality is, for some, as significant a reality as other realities. This criticism also assesses the effectiveness of the act of communicating with others in virtual environments through a computer intermediary. Finally, this thesis carries with it an intense appreciation of virtual reality as a method of communication.

**Dramatism**

As is evident in chapter two, the work of Kenneth Burke is instrumental to this thesis. Burke was an instrumental twentieth-century philosopher, writer, and creator of “new criticism,” whose work had immense impact on many critics and writers (Lyons, 1993, p. 21). In addition to creating the pentad of dramatistic terms, which provides the framework for chapter two, Burke’s extensive body of work also provides much insight into the field of rhetorical criticism, as discussed by Brock (1990, pp. 183-195). While each of Burke’s major works (*Counter-Statement* (1931), *Permanence and Change* (1935), *Attitudes Toward History* (1936), *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *A
Rhetoric of Motives (1950), Rhetoric of Religion (1961), and Language as Symbolic Action (1966)) individually gives the reader a sense of Burke’s philosophy of rhetorical criticism, one must examine the whole of Burke’s writings to fully grasp the Burkeian philosophy (Brock, 1990, pp. 183). Many of these works are addressed below in the discussion of rhetorical criticism and its role in this thesis.

In discussing rhetorical criticism, Burke begins with rhetoric, the verbal symbols that allow one to persuade another. Burke asserts that rhetoric is an “essential function of language,” and in so doing, temporarily shifts the focus to language (Burke, 1950, p. 43). In a short poem found in Language as Symbolic Action, Burke describes humankind as a “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal” (Burke, 1966, p. 16). While somewhat cryptic, Burke was essentially saying that the act of choosing a verbal symbol is a “meaningful act from which human motives can be derived” (Brock, 1990, p. 184). The idea that human motives can be attained through the act of choosing words (symbols) is one of two components that form Burke’s philosophy of rhetoric.

The second component of Burke’s rhetorical philosophy focuses more on society than on language. In Permanence and Change, Burke argued that “human conduct” should be discussed in “dramatistic” terms, meaning that the whole of human society can be said to exhibit the elements of a drama (Burke, 1984, p. 274). Brock succinctly demonstrated how Burke argued that three major factors contribute to the dramatistic nature of society: the hierarchical social,
economic, and political stratification common to all civilizations; the idea of acceptance and rejection (since the concept of negative does not exist in nature and is a construction of human language); and finally, the “concepts of guilt, purification, and redemption” (Brock, 1990, p. 185). Brock has further simplified this concept into a dramatistic process of society as being made of “the stages of order [hierarchy], pollution [rejection], guilt, purification, and redemption (Brock, 1990, p. 186). This dramatistic process combined with the idea that human motives can be derived from the usage of verbal symbols, Brock has asserted, forms the “philosophic foundation of Burke’s system of rhetoric” (Brock, 1990, p. 186).

However, while the foundations of a philosophy of rhetoric have been laid, some sort of structure or framework is still needed for the rhetorical critic. The framework structure that Burke provides is the pentad of dramatism that was employed in chapter two. To reiterate, the pentad is composed of five terms (act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose), all of which relate to one another based on the rhetoric employed by the speaker. Burke has identified ten ratios between the five pentadic terms (i.e., any one of the five terms can be combined with any of the other four remaining terms to create a ratio). For example, Burke has discussed how Carlyle in Heroes and Hero-Worship described Arab Muslims (agent) in terms of the environment and habitat found in the Arab peninsula (scene), which Burke, thus, labels a “scene-agent ratio” in that the two pentadic terms have a “synecdochic relation[ship]” (Burke, 1945, p. 7). The ratios
between the dramatistic terms is very important to the pentad because they demonstrate the intrinsic relationships present between each of the terms. Burke has likened the idea of the ratios to the five fingers: all five are separate and individually important, but they all “merge into unity” at the hand (Brock, 1990, p. 190). In addition to employing the whole of Burke’s pentad to demonstrate storytelling and rhetoric in virtual reality, this thesis, with its focus on the dimensions that contribute to the formation of a reality, would, in Burkeian terms, be described as an agent-agency relationship in that it focuses on the people that inhabit the virtual world (agent) and the means through which they interact with said virtual reality (agency).

**Object of Study**

Attempting to dramatistically analyze the Internet can be difficult given the sheer enormity of it: over one trillion unique web addresses and growing daily (Tanaka, 2008, Forbes.com). Thus, with consideration to the magnitude of the Internet, this thesis focuses on one web service in particular — Facebook — for analysis. Individuals have utilized Facebook in many different ways: during the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama recognized how important Facebook is amongst eighteen- to 29-year-olds and used the social network to his advantage (Dalsgaard, 2008, pp. 11-12). Others have approached Facebook as an economic endeavor and have made money through the sale of virtual goods (Miller & Stone, 2009, p. A1). These are very legitimate uses of Facebook, and they provide a foundation for labeling Facebook a virtual reality. Not all would
agree that Facebook constitutes a virtual reality, and definite limitations do exist. However, in the case of this thesis, I approach Facebook as a critic, framing Facebook as a virtual reality.

Facebook is but one of many websites and services that could be analyzed in attempting to demonstrate the magnitude and importance of virtual reality, and before proceeding further in the examination of why Facebook constitutes a virtual reality, other potential subjects of the dramatistic analysis should be briefly addressed. Many other social networking sites, such as MySpace, Twitter, or LinkedIn, could just as readily be analyzed as representations of virtual reality. MySpace, however, has been steadily declining in users and user traffic in recent years, and some even predict that the complete demise of MySpace is nearing (Cashmore, 2009, Mashable.com). In the case of Twitter, while a regular topic of discussion in the mainstream media, it is still relatively small to Facebook in terms of numbers of users. Twitter also lacks many of the applications and features that Facebook has to enhance the user experience, such as automatically finding potential friends. LinkedIn is hampered in a different way than Twitter, in that LinkedIn is aimed only at professional networking and lacks the vibrant user-base of other less formalized social networks.

Similar to there being numerous social networks that could be analyzed for this analysis, several three-dimensional virtual worlds, such as Second Life, There, or Fantasy Westward Journey, could also be examined, given that the
dramatistic constructs, like scene and acts, are already present. However, like MySpace, three-dimensional virtual worlds seem to be in decline; some even joke that using Second Life is one of the “uncoolest thing you can do on the Internet” (Carr, 2010, blog post). In all seriousness, though, Second Life has seemingly been in decline in recent years. While Second Life was the focus of the mainstream media in late 2006 and 2007, in the years since it has dropped precipitously in terms of popularity, although it still has a strong user-base and a thriving economy (Collins, 2010, PCPro.co.uk). Collins has found that despite this, Second Life still feels like a “ghost town” due to new policies that require segregation of Second Life’s general, all-ages content from the mature content, such as gambling and sexually explicit activities (Collins, 2010, PCPro.co.uk). These policies have essentially shut down much of Second Life since, as Collins has noted, sex and gambling are two of the most popular activities on Second Life, so most people spend all of their Second Life time in the “adults only” areas (Collins, 2010, PCPro.co.uk). While these new policies have not stopped Second Life’s growth, it will likely retard its growth in the near future given that many new users could be scared away by the notion of an all-ages area and a separate adults-only area, where nearly any prurient desire can be satisfied.

Additionally, while Second Life is a fascinating system of communication and human interaction, the fact that it is a three-dimensional interface means that it consumes more computer processing power and Internet bandwidth than it’s two-dimensional counterpart; this and other factors have thus limited Second Life
to 17 million users worldwide (Voyager, 2009, blog post). Conversely, Facebook is much simpler technically and in terms of accessibility — the user does not need to download and install a separate application nor does the user need to spend long stretches of time customizing their avatar before interacting with others.

As a final option of what could be the focus of this analysis, one could examine some of the many media representations of virtual reality that have inundated movie theaters and cable television networks in recent years. Many recent movies, such as Surrogates, Avatar, and Gamer, and television shows, such as the Syfy channel’s Caprica, feature various interpretations of a virtual reality or synthetic existences. These movies also address some of the concerns often raised in discussions of virtual reality, such as identity issues, user anonymity, and the ethics of mediated experiences. They are especially useful in the case of a Burkeian analysis because the films offer a dramatistic construction of the possibilities of virtual reality. However, while these films would no doubt serve as interesting objects of study for a dramatistic analysis, they are too recent and not enough related literature exists for a proper study to be performed. Thus, while other social networks, three-dimensional virtual worlds, and media representations of virtual reality were all considered, the final decision as to the object of the analysis for this thesis is Facebook.

As was briefly discussed above, Facebook is not necessarily the most perfect example of a virtual reality. Little consensus exists in terms of conceiving
Facebook as a virtual reality, and most traditional literature frames virtual reality as only consisting of three-dimensional, synthetic worlds (Watte, 2009, p. 4). However, I believe that restricting one’s view of virtual reality to only three-dimensional virtual worlds results in the same restricted mode of thought that Steuer (1992, pp. 74-78) lamented when discussing how the established paradigm of virtual reality in 1992 consisted only of head-mounted goggles and tactile-reflexive gloves. This analysis of Facebook requires a re-examination of how both websites and virtual realities are conceived. It seems that the current paradigm of virtual reality dictates that the virtual mimic the physical in terms of visuality: a three-dimensional representation of the self interacting with a three-dimensional landscape. I propose that the degree to which a website or service is judged to be a virtual reality should be based not on what is seen, but rather, the type of emotional and interpersonal bonds created and promoted. While this re-conception certainly blurs the line between what is classified as a social network and what is classified as a virtual reality, this re-conception of virtual reality is necessary to further the field of virtual reality research. In this thesis, as a critic, I approach Facebook with this emotional-interpersonal framework of virtual reality in mind.

While the object of study for the analysis is defined as Facebook, it could also be defined as three different, yet very related, objects of study that fall under the umbrella of “Facebook.” The first object of study could be said to be the entirety of Facebook. In addition to calling into question the labeling of Facebook
as either a “social network” or a “virtual reality,” Facebook is also examined in its entirety in consideration of its overarching, controlling narrative. A second object of study is the various programs of Facebook, such as the programs with which users frequently engage. While these programs are simply just applications and games, their interactive and interpersonal aspects make them valuable objects of study in terms of the dramatization of one’s Facebook experiences. The third and final object of study are the profiles of various users, which are used, in part, for the discussion of the dramatization of Facebook. This study utilizes a convenient sample of 22 Facebook profiles (explained in greater detail below) when analyzing individuals’ actions and habits on the social network. Liu (2007) has demonstrated in his analysis of MySpace how individuals’ social network profiles can provide great insight into the behavior, habits, and projected persona, of users. Thus, while the overall object of study for the analysis is Facebook, certain dimensions (i.e., programs and profiles) of Facebook, in addition to the entirety of Facebook (as a social network/virtual reality), are specifically what is examined.

In justifying Facebook as a virtual reality and object of study for a dramatistic analysis, recall from chapter one the eleven dimensions of virtual reality, specifically, the three dimensions addressed in this thesis: people, technology, and storytelling. All three of these dimensions are present in Facebook and contribute to the idea of Facebook qualifying as a reality. People, the first dimension to be discussed here, is possibly the greatest factor in how
Facebook was chosen for this case study over other possible candidates, such as Second Life or MySpace. Facebook is one of the largest concentrations of online community on the Internet; a community of 400 million users that grows by 5 million users worldwide each week (Dybwad, 2010, Mashable.com; Hempel, 2009, CNNMoney.com). In just the United States, Facebook has over 108 million users and added five million new users in January 2010 alone (Walsh, 2010, MediaPost.com).

However, it is not simply the sheer numbers of people that make Facebook a social and communal phenomenon. In addition to easily being able to look up family, co-workers, and long-lost friends from high school, Facebook further encourages socialization amongst its members by easily allowing users to view, post, and share content. Everyday on Facebook over 35 million users update their status with simple text entries, and in any given month, the average Facebook user leaves 25 comments on the status updates of his or her friends, of which the average user has around 130 (Statistics, Facebook.com). Facebook also allows the uploading and sharing of pictures, videos, and other content. Over 2 billion photographs and over 3 billion pieces of other content, such as web links, news stories, and blog posts, are added to Facebook each month (Statistics, Facebook.com). In addition to further strengthening the bonds between friends, these shared pictures and content also serve as a means to manipulate how other users view oneself.
The social network profile is the external representation of the self for online social network services, such as Facebook and MySpace. A user must be discriminating in the content he or she makes available for others to see, and during this selection process, the user consciously or unconsciously creates a persona that is carefully crafted and projected for friends to view. The customization of an avatar in Second Life is fundamentally different than that of the social network profile in Facebook. The avatar is customizable in a way that resembles the physical body; the changes made only affect the three-dimensional representation of the self. However, the social network profile, since all of the content posted is perpetually available for others to view, creates not a representation of the idealized physical self but instead more of an idealized personality.

A second dimension of reality being discussed in this thesis is *technology*. As it relates to the creation of a perceived reality, technology deals with the tools created and utilized to further enhance one’s experience. Facebook has over 500,000 games and applications designed to entertain users and further socialize them with others (Statistics, Facebook.com). One of those applications, FarmVille, a game where players plant and tend to a virtual farm, has approximately 62 million players across Facebook (Simon, 2009, NPR.org). These users are then encouraged to post their progress in the game to their profile, which further popularizes the game but also, more importantly, socializes the experience of the game amongst friends.
Facebook also utilizes a tool called the News Feed. The News Feed is designed to aggregate, organize, and neatly display all of the posts made by friends so it is easily available to the user (Zuckerberg, 2006, blog post). Another tool available for users of Facebook is Facebook Connect. It allows Facebook users to easily and quickly share content from other websites, such as news stories or online videos. In December 2009, a year after Facebook Connect was launched, Facebook reported that over 80,000 websites and 60 million users have taken advantage of the tool (Reisinger, 2009, CNET.com). Again, these tools are designed to further inter-connect the users of Facebook by keeping users updated of what friends are doing, feeling, and thinking, and thus, enhancing the overall experience had within Facebook.

The third and final dimension that contributes to the conception of a reality discussed in this thesis is storytelling. The aforementioned News Feed, as Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg has described, is a form of storytelling. Zuckerberg (2006, blog post) has written in the official Facebook blog that his social network service is about the “real connections to actual friends.” The communication taking place consists of significant, interesting stories for both sender and receiver, and given that many user’s posts are commented upon multiple times, it becomes a sort of communal storytelling.

However, in terms of contributing to the perception of a reality, storytelling also deals with how the dominant rhetoric and storytelling characterize a particular reality. The storytelling in physical reality, for example,
characterizes itself as the “gold standard” of existence (Rhode, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1997, p. 1594; Nowak, Watt, & Walther, 2005). Virtual reality, instead, characterizes itself as a supplement to physical reality (Chesbro, 2010). While Facebook has become one of the largest websites on the Internet, it does not pose as something intended to fully substitute or take the place of interactions in the physical world. As previously discussed, the sharing of pictures and video is a major component of the interactions occurring on Facebook, and they reflect what is happening in physical reality. Thus, they also serve to reinforce the notion that Facebook and virtual reality as a whole are designed to enhance and supplement one’s experience in physical reality.

**Heuristics**

With rationalization of the dramatistic analysis of Facebook in mind, a brief note on heuristics is needed. A *heuristic* is simply a “discovery aid” designed to help a researcher “identify a problem” and “make sensible choices” about possible solutions (De Jong & Van Der Geest, 2000). Heuristics are essentially paradigms previously defined by others that a researcher then uses to qualify an observation, and they play a large, overall role in this thesis, being utilized on different levels. When looking at the individual profiles or other content of Facebook to determine what kind of dramatizing effect it has, established paradigms are used as a guide or reference. Liu’s (2007) examination of 127,000 MySpace profiles, for example, ended with Liu exploring the notion of four aesthetic conceptions that can be seen in individuals’ profiles.
These four aesthetic conceptions provide for this analysis a heuristic framework for analyzing the role of profiles on Facebook. Similarly, Tapscott (2009, pp. 34-36) has found eight norms that characterize “cluster[s] of attitudes and behaviors” of the Net Generation, and these eight norms are used as a framework for analyzing the activities of Facebook users. Other previously established theories such as uses and gratification theory are also used as paradigms for this analysis.

Heuristics play an even larger role in this thesis since the notion of Burkeian dramatism and the pentad could also be viewed as a heuristic. Sifting through the myriad of status updates, photographs, and applications on Facebook can be quite daunting, and thus, much in the way Burke’s pentad of dramatism was employed in chapter two to characterize the literature surrounding virtual reality, the pentad is also utilized in the analysis of Facebook. Each of the five pentadic terms, agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose, is demonstrated to be found within the content created and posted to the profiles of Facebook’s millions of users. The pentad is used as a lens with which to view the whole of Facebook and is, thus, a heuristic.

Finally, taken as a whole, this thesis serves as a heuristic for future research, however, before this can be properly discussed, a quick examination of the sample of the examined profiles is necessary. The analysis found within this thesis, in part, utilizes a convenient sample of 22 anonymous Facebook profiles in examining the dramatization of Facebook. Considering that this thesis is partly
designed to create generalizations for future research, a small number of profiles is all that is needed to demonstrate how the different aspects and features of the social network profiles, games and applications, and even the site as a whole, illustrate a given paradigm. Additionally, the 22 profiles examined were all people that I personally know. This was done intentionally so I could be confident in how each profile characterized the paradigm and pentadic term in question. Additionally, all characteristics that could be used to identify the owners of the profiles examined, such as names or physical descriptions, have been discarded, and only data that is relevant to this analysis are reported.

With the convenient sample in mind, it becomes more evident as to how the findings in chapter four could serve as a foundation for future research. No researcher could say with any sort of confidence that the rather informal sample of 22 Facebook profiles examined in this thesis are representative of all of Facebook users, and this thesis makes no such claim. However, the results in chapter four do provide generalizations about Facebook users habits, attitudes, and behaviors and, thus, raise several heuristic propositions (articulated in chapter five) that could be researched at a later time.

The different research methods employed in this thesis have been established and rationalized, as well as the specific object of study for the analysis. Facebook clearly exhibits the three dimensions of reality that are discussed in this thesis: people, technology, and storytelling. The social network has hundreds of millions of users utilizing various technologies to construct an
overall, cohesive narrative, and various dramatistic concepts are readily observable in the users’ collected actions and attitudes. In chapter four, the results of the dramatistic analysis are reviewed and discussed.
Chapter 4: The Controlling Drama of Facebook as a Virtual Reality

The website Facebook allows us to pass through the symbolic presentation of some 400 million people, each of who provides a distinctive, if not unique, self-conception. In this chapter, these self-conceptions are viewed and cast as stories. Employing an array of critical constructs, these stories can be understood as linked and ultimately constituting a community when we view Facebook as a virtual reality. As a virtual reality, each Facebook member presents or offers a sense of the self as dramatized, as a persona, and even as an avatar, presumed to function and exist within a particular scene or context, governed by specific purposes and means that are ultimately constructed and intended to represent certain personalized and social actions.

Specifically, in this chapter, the website Facebook is critically described, interpreted, and evaluated in two ways. First, Kenneth Burke’s mode of analysis is invoked which allows us to view virtually all of the profiles on Facebook as dramatistic constructions and more precisely as dramatic reconstructions of the self. Within this context, a rich variety of constructs developed by other critics are especially useful in recasting these profiles dramatistically. Burke’s pentad has been an especially useful mechanism for organizing these constructs and reflecting the dramatistic reconstruction of these Facebook profiles. Table 4.1, “A Dramatistic Construction of Virtual Reality,” provides a convenient summary
and overview of the ways in which these previously developed critical constructs are employed here.

Table 4.1.

*A Dramatistic Construction of Virtual Reality*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pentad</th>
<th>Dimension of Reality</th>
<th>Constructs within virtual reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>Liu’s four aesthetic conceptions: prestige, differentiation, authenticity, and theatrical personas (Liu, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene</td>
<td>Time and Space</td>
<td>Economic, political, cultural, entertainment, and interpersonal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Purpose: Media uses and Media gratification</td>
<td>Uses and gratification theory: escapism, reality exploration, character reference, and incidental learning (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Tapscott’s eight norms: freedom, customization, scrutinization, corporate integrity/openness, mixing of work and play, collaboration and relationship, speed, and innovation (Tapscott, 2009, pp. 34-36). The unifying theme of different acts is creation of a social community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, and simultaneously, the Facebook profiles examined here are also cast and understood as parts or elements contributing to the creation and recognition of Facebook as a virtual reality. This virtual reality provides a foundation for viewing the millions of profiles on Facebook as constituting a social, symbolic, and dramatistic community that functions as one of the most profound communication systems — if not the most profound communication system in terms of size and complexity — created within the last ten years.
By way of preview, this chapter is divided into five major parts, and each of the five pentadic terms, *agent, scene, purpose, agency, and act*, are separately addressed. Additionally, the analysis of each pentadic term employs a critical construct to aid in identifying and labeling various aspects of Facebook as dramatistic. The final section, in addition to discussing *act*, also identifies the controlling narrative of Facebook which is born out of the various acts available to its users.

**Agent**

In the case of Facebook, *agent* deals with the profiles of its many users and how they function as representations of the self. With Facebook (and other social networks, such as MySpace and LinkedIn), the social network profile serves as the external presentation of oneself for others to see and can be comprised of photographs, tastes and interests, and any previously posted content, such as status updates, links, and comments from others. Over time, as more and more content is added to one’s profile, the aggregated content begins to take shape and an online persona emerges. An online persona that, as Donath and Boyd (2004, p. 73) have found, many believe is quite dissimilar from one’s persona in physical reality, since the level of anonymity on the Internet and the opportunity to be whomever one desires is so prevalent.¹

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¹ While cyber deception is certainly an issue concerning virtual reality that deserves attention and study, it is not the focus of this thesis. Rather, this thesis focuses on the persona or dramatization of each person on Facebook.
In a study greatly contradicting the work of Donath and Boyd, Gosling has found that when comparing a stranger’s first impression of an individual based solely on the individual’s Facebook profile, the judgments made aligned closely with that of the individual's own self-perception, as well as the judgments made by close friends of the individual (Kramer, 2010, blog post). Comparing the rather contradictory work of Donath and Boyd against the work of Gosling, an interesting notion arises that must be addressed. When considering the amount of freedom one is given when creating a social network profile, one must acknowledge that are several meanings that could be behind each profile: (1) to reflect the image one projects in a face-to-face setting, (2) to reflect a desired future self, (3) to reflect an idealized self, or (4) to reflect a fantasized self. This list is not exhaustive, and one could easily argue for the existence of more meanings behind individual social network profiles. In terms of dramatism, Burke would likely welcome this, as dramatism encourages the different views of agent and even fosters the notion of dramatism.

The judgments of personality passed by strangers when looking only at one’s social network profile are based on several different dimensions of the profile, including one’s network of friends and one’s stated preferences of music, literature, film, and television. Boyd (2006) has discussed how the publicly-viewable network of friends can influence others’ perceptions of an individual, contribute to the creation of individual identity, and contribute to the development of community within the website as a whole. Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, and
Gosling (2009, pp. 1661-1671) have performed somewhat similar research involving how strangers’ perceive the personalities of individuals based solely on two head-to-toe photographs (one staring at the camera with a neutral facial expression and the other in a spontaneous pose and facial expression), and they found that judgments passed were highly correlated with the posture of the photograph. The researchers concluded that one’s physical appearance acts “as a channel through which personality is manifested” and, more importantly, that others “discover many aspects of personality” through one’s physical appearance (Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009, p. 1669). While the study did not focus specifically on the use of photographs in social network profiles, the results are nonetheless relevant as photographs play such a heavy role an individual’s profile (this, again, hearkens back to the idea that a profile can have many meanings). Liu (2007), however, has found that, while one’s network of friends or profile picture does indeed contribute to the formation of an online persona, one’s stated taste preferences are possibly the greatest factor of how one is perceived online.

As discussed in previous chapters, Liu has performed much research into the field of social network profiles. After examining the profiles of over 127,000 MySpace users, Liu (2007) identified four aesthetic conceptions of the self created by users when crafting their social network profiles: “those conveying prestige, differentiation, authenticity, and theatrical personas.” Liu notes that the examined aesthetic conceptions can be either primary or secondary traits of
one’s profile; indeed they could easily be tertiary or quaternary traits. This internal conflict of an individual’s profile further demonstrates how a social network profile can have several meanings and is, again, part of what creates drama in the online world. Additionally, while Liu’s study is focused on MySpace, it can readily and easily be applied to Facebook; indeed many of Facebook’s first users migrated over from MySpace (Boyd, 2009). Thus, examples of Liu’s four types of aesthetic conceptions can be found in the profiles of Facebook users, as well.

Liu’s different aesthetic conceptions were partially based on the coherence between any two stated taste preferences of an individual (including personal preferences in music, literature, or film and television). Liu found that the level of coherence between taste preference pairs and the coherence of one’s overall profile was highly correlated with profiles that convey prestige and those that convey differentiation, the two most commonly found aesthetic conceptions. This is important to Liu because he believes this to be a “Goffmanian indicator of taste performance,” or in other words, the correlation between one’s individual taste preferences and one’s overall aesthetic conceptions is directly related to the extent that one is crafting an online persona (Liu, 2007). The most prevalent taste preferences and aesthetic conceptions found by Liu are those that convey an air of prestige.

Aesthetic conceptions conveying prestige are more complex than an individual simply claiming to be superior in relation to others. Rather, Liu notes
that aesthetic conceptions conveying prestige, in addition to possibly identifying the sender as a part of popular culture, could also attempt to identify the sender as being part of an alternative subculture. In examining Facebook for specific instances, the profiles of two individuals\(^2\) stand out as exemplars of prestige. The first individual lists his favorite music and television programs in his profile in alphabetical order, and while some of his selections come from rather disparate genres, they all have a popular culture orientation. This combined with the alphabetical presentation serves, as Liu has stated, to convey prestige to the reader. Similarly, the second individual's profile exhibiting prestige presents all of her information in lowercase and alphabetical order. Additionally, her tastes in music, such as Jason Mraz and The Decemberists, are very coherent, and largely fall into the genre of college rock or indie rock. The overall coherence of her tastes combined with her method of presentation, as noted by Liu, also very much convey a sense of prestige.

However, conveying prestige is certainly not the only aesthetic conception that can be found within Facebook. Profiles conveying an air of differentiation are also quite prevalent. Profiles that convey differentiation, according to Liu (2007), are somewhat incoherent and are marked by dissent from the tastes of an individual’s friends. One profile examined lists the owner’s interests simply as “guitar sounds” and for musical tastes provides only a link to a

\(^2\) As stated in chapter three, for the purposes of this dramatistic analysis, all information pertaining to the identity of the 22 users examined has been discarded, and only the data pertinent to this study is reported.
video of a pianist performing Schubert. Equally cryptic is the same person’s tastes in movies, which is again listed quite succinctly as “too many.” Conversely, instead of providing minimal information, a different user inundates readers with a diverse set of tastes and preferences. For instance, in musical tastes, she first lists very different genres, from electronic to rock, and then continues to provide an extensive, varying list of artists, bands, and groups. She concludes her list of musical tastes by encouraging users to visit her profile on LastFM, a streaming music website where users create personally tailored radio stations. Both of these profiles provide very incoherent, disparate tastes for others to read about, and both profiles serve to send message that these individuals, as Liu (2007) has described, “defy characterization.”

Liu’s third category of aesthetic conceptions is for those that convey authenticity. Profiles that convey authenticity generally break the norm when it comes to describing one’s tastes, for example, giving specific song titles, all in an attempt to convey to others that the user is “real / unpretentious” and “easygoing / relaxed” (Liu, 2007). On Facebook, one of the examined users preempts his tastes in music by noting to the world that he has just lost 22 gigabytes of music. Then, after listing bands in the traditional Facebook fashion of individual bands separated by commas, he discusses his affinity for jazz and his preference of Chicago blues over Delta blues. He also includes special notes within his profile directed at an individual that somehow acquired his password and changed some of his preferences and tastes. Similarly, a second individual
also presents himself on Facebook in a rather unique way: short paragraphs describing a particular habit or aspect of his personality each separated by a set of backslashes (e.g., //). Both the profiles are designed, through careful planning, to convey to the reader that they are unpretentious and relaxed but most of all that they are authentic and worthy of others’ trust.

The final category of aesthetic conceptions established by Liu is the theatrical persona. These are profiles that seem to be “intent on creating and inhabiting a caricature or theatrical persona” and come about when one’s stated taste preferences are given non-traditional treatments (such as, answering questions about musical tastes with simple, vague yes/no replies) or when descriptions of oneself begin to incorporate semantic cues and phrases that hold certain significance on the Internet (such as typing in all capital letters or “lol” [laugh out loud]) (Liu, 2007). One Facebook profile, for instance, helps to characterize the owner as a young, flirtatious college student by being peppered throughout with small heart emoticons (simple pictorial icons used in text chat to help convey emotion) and by having many words and phrases either preceded or followed by a set of ellipses. Another user’s profile, on the other hand, casts himself as more of a stereotypical college-aged, macho party-goer. He lists a handful of classic rock, heavy metal, and country bands as his favorite musical preferences and proclaims that “METALLICA IS KING (sic).” Instead of listing any favorite books, he responds with a wry “ha,” and throughout the rest of his profile, discusses his affinity for being with friends and getting drunk. Both
profiles serve as means of creating something of a theatrical caricature of themselves in virtual reality, which may or may not align with who they are in physical reality.

As was often noted throughout this section, contradictions within an individual’s social network profile are quite prevalent. Even the profiles cited as an example of a particular aesthetic conception often had other conceptions present, as well. This is not a unique phenomenon since it is rare that an individual in physical reality has a completely homogenous, black-and-white personality. This internal conflict, again, is part of what dramatizes the experience of being a member of Facebook.

Scene

In Synthetic Worlds, when introducing the basic concept of virtual worlds, such as Second Life, Castronova made the comparison of what’s occurring online to classical Greek theater. Castronova (2005 pp. 10-11) has discussed the evolution of scenery and stage and its role in further enhancing the experience of the viewer. Castronova has asserted that in terms of the online stage, the user is constantly being given more and more ability to interact with and manipulate his/her surroundings; so much that it begins to mimic “ordinary life.” Castronova has further compared online happenings to theater, coining the term hyperstage, which is comparable to the higher levels of interactivity of hypertext versus traditional text. The hyperstage is a venue with “a huge number
of players,” an “unscripted plot,” and an indistinguishable, blurred line between “actor and audience.”

In terms of Burke’s pentad, scene consists of “the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred” (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Castronova’s notion of the hyperstage helps to provide this sense of scene for users of virtual reality in that each hyperstage contains its own scene with certain norms and codes of conduct by which the players are expected to abide. Castronova does not define the specific scenes, however, one can infer what some of these scenes could be: economic, political, cultural, entertainment, and interpersonal. The five scenes discussed here can encompass much of what occurs in virtual reality, and examples of each can be found on Facebook. It must be recognized, however, that other scenes can also exist, given that the “right” to create new scenes is part of the Facebook community.

In looking at the economic scene of Facebook, virtual goods are the ideal exemplar. Virtual goods are small items that can be purchased in a virtual environment for personal use or to give as a gift, and they can be as substantial as a completely new, brand name wardrobe for one’s Second Life avatar or as simple as “a $1 illustration of a Champagne bottle on Facebook” (Miller & Stone, 2009, p. A1). While selling simple illustrations for a dollar each might not sound like a grand money-making venture, in 2009, in the United States alone, sales of virtual goods were an estimated billion dollars and over five billion dollars worldwide (Miller & Stone, 2009, p. A1). Specifically looking at Facebook, one
user examined has received ten virtual gifts from various friends, ranging from a “Happy Birthday” balloon to a shot glass and a slice of lime. Further more, some of Facebook’s games allow users to purchase items for themselves and others that help with the progress of the game. FishVille, for example, a Facebook game where users populate and maintain a virtual fish tank, users are encouraged to buy fish feeders and tank cleaners with Facebook Credits, currency bought within Facebook designed to be used for purchasing virtual goods and gifts (Parr, 2009, Mashable.com).

The political scene of the United States has been greatly influenced by the Internet, and political debate and attempts at furthering one’s political career have become big business on the Internet (Nagourney, 2006, NYTimes.com; Smith, 2009, pp. 3-16). For example, when President Barack Obama was running for office in 2008, he successfully harnessed the political potential of the Internet through his own personal website and pages of various social networks, including Facebook (Dalsgaard, 2008, pp. 11-12). During the campaign, President Obama used Facebook as a platform to spread campaign rhetoric to over two million Facebook friends (Dalsgaard, 2008, p. 11). President Obama still uses Facebook to update the American people on various public policies and projects, and as of February 2010, he had nearly eight million fans (Barack Obama, Facebook.com). Other politicians use Facebook to varying degrees of success, as well; Sarah Palin, for example, has over one million Facebook fans and uses the site as an easily accessible platform to spread her political views,
respond to her many critics, and create an overall positive public image (Sarah Palin, Facebook.com). Facebook has also been utilized for political means internationally, and as long as Facebook continues to be used by hundreds of millions of people worldwide, it will likely continue to be a presence in the political arena (Dalsgaard, 2008, p. 12).

In terms of a cultural scene, with over one billion people accessing the Internet worldwide, it should come as no surprise that the cyber world has become to various cultures for congregating, socializing, and sharing, regardless whether the culture is based on ethnicity, religion, or any number of other factors. For instance, one patriotic American has created a fan page for the United States of America; it has over 700,000 fans and serves as a debate hall for political discourse, a soapbox for espousing various opinions for or against the United States and its policies, and as a forum for discussion of non-politicized current events. Not all cultural affiliations are as generalized as a United States fan page; for instance, one Facebook group is aimed specifically at Iraqis that immigrated to Michigan, and it serves as a centralized communication hub for a small minority group that might have remained dispersed and unconnected without the assistance of a virtual aid, such as Facebook. On an individual level, users’ profiles and the content posted are often quite indicative of a certain culture. One of the users examined is a self-described “post-conservative” Christian, and the content of his profile, such as his progressive views on Christianity, place him within a scene of individuals and organizations centered
around an evolving, forward-thinking Christianity. In another instance of a
cultural scene, a musician who performs at gay nightclubs in San Francisco uses
his Facebook profile as a way to keep friends and fans up to date on upcoming
performances, as well as a means of sharing personally relevant content.

The fourth scene analyzed here is one of entertainment and games.
Using the Internet as a means of entertainment is one of the largest uses of the
Internet; Pew has found that 83% of Internet users have utilized the Internet to
find information about or other users interested in particular hobbies and leisure
activities (Griffith & Fox, 2007, p. 5). Among its users, Facebook, too, is a
destination for entertainment and games. As previously discussed, one particular
Facebook game, FarmVille, has over 62 million players that tend to virtual farms
and are able to help or hinder friends’ progress on their own farms (Simon, 2009,
NPR.org). FarmVille, however, is certainly not the only game on Facebook. For
example, one particular Facebook user uses Facebook almost exclusively for the
purpose of playing games. In addition to FarmVille (and an uninspired derivative
called Farm Country), she plays a variety of games including other avatar/
fantasy-based games (such as YoVille, FishVille, and Café World), card and dice
games (such as Farkle), and arcade games (such as Bejeweled Blitz). All of
these games allow their players to then post their progress publicly, in an attempt
to lure more players and further socialize the gaming experience.

The final scene examined here is the scene of the interpersonal. As
discussed in chapter one, Berger (2008, p. 2473) has defined interpersonal
communication simply as the “social interaction of people,” be it face-to-face or computer-mediated, and some have asserted that the interpersonal communication taking place on the Internet is essentially no different than face-to-face communication or telephony, given that each mode of communication presents their own “unique benefits and challenges” (Duck & McMahan, 2010, p. 336). Interpersonal communication on Facebook is available to its users in many iterations. Beyond the basic technologies that foster interpersonal communication amongst Facebook users, such as real-time chat, private messaging, and wall postings, Facebook has many groups and applications that are oriented, not toward a particular interest, but toward connecting users to other users for social or romantic reasons. Many dating and singles groups exist on Facebook; some targeted toward specific demographics or geographic locations. One application in particular, Datepad, resembles a traditional dating website, such as eHarmony or Match.com, however, Datepad resides completely within Facebook, and similar to other online dating websites, users are able to search for other users that have also joined. However, since Datepad is based in Facebook, it also has a wall, to which users can post content and chat with other users. Datepad is just one of many applications and groups that encourage interpersonal communication between Facebook’s millions of users, and interpersonal communication will likely continue to be a major scene of Facebook into the future.
In all, five scenes have been examined in the discussion of scene: economic, political, cultural, entertainment, and interpersonal. However, it is important to bear in mind that more scenes could be said to exist. For example, one could argue that there exists a professional scene, since many individuals make professional contacts through Facebook that can eventually turn into new jobs and career changes (Epstein, 2009, Mashable.com). Regardless of the specific breakdown of scenes within Facebook and on the Internet as a whole, it is quite evident that multiple scenes do exist that play host to the activities of many millions of users.

Purpose

The fourth term of Burke’s pentad is purpose, and it simply answers the question of “why” behind a particular act (Burke, 1945, p. xv). In attempting to determine the purpose behind an individual’s actions involving media, the uses and gratifications theory provides a useful paradigm. The uses and gratifications theory was developed in the 1940s as a means of examining the motives of audiences of soap operas and quiz shows (McQuail & Windahl, 1993, p. 133). Interestingly (or perhaps ironically) enough, early uses and gratification research discovered that the female audiences perceived soap operas as quite significant; until then, radio soaps were “often dismissed as superficial and mindless stories” (McQuail, 2005, p. 424). The early descriptions of soap operas sound vaguely similar to Stoll’s (1995, pp. 38, 47-49) descriptions of online forum postings during the Internet’s infancy.
Uses and gratification came into prominence throughout the 1950s and 1960s after other ineffective methods of media research fell out of favor with researchers (Blumer, 1980, p. 202). Researchers have found many possible reasons as to why an individual consumes a particular type of media, and little consensus has been reached: McQuail has identified four broad reasons (diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance); McGuire has identified several more psychological reasons (such as, “active vs. passive initiation” and “orientation to growth or to stability”); and audience self-reporting has found several possible reasons (such as, social contact, sexual arousal, and identity formation and confirmation) (McQuail, 2005, pp. 425, 428). In consideration of the number of interpretations available for uses and gratification theory, Chesebro (1987, p. 5) has synthesized the research of past audience reports of uses and gratification into four broad reasons for media use: (1) escapism (to escape from reality); (2) reality exploration (to better understand one’s own world); (3) character reference (to find a better way to live based on other’s lives); and, (4) incidental learning (a miscellaneous category for unique, personal reasons for media usage). All four reasons established by the uses and gratifications theory can be found in Facebook.

The first potential reason for media use, as established by the uses and gratification theory, is escapism, whereby an individual consumes a particular media in order to escape from reality (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5). In Facebook, the best example of this would be in its games. Many of Facebook’s games place
the user in some sort of fantasy or role play scenario, whether it is tending to a virtual farmstead in FarmVille, or running a virtual coffee shop in Café World. In FarmVille, beyond planting, harvesting, and selling virtual crops, users also choose an avatar farmer and are able to customize their farm by deciding what types of crops, livestock, tractors, and even hired help, on which they should spend money. Similarly on Café World, users decide which foods to prepare for their virtual customers, and as an added element of socialization, users must hire their Facebook friends to act as a virtual waitstaff. As a final broad example of escapism within Facebook, Mafia Wars is a game where players take on the role of a thug-for-hire; the player then ascends through the ranks of the mafia, performing various nefarious tasks for drug dealers and crime lords. Similar to the socialization element of Café World, the game encourages players to recruit their Facebook friends into their gang by making it increasingly difficult to accomplish missions alone. For several users, these games are the main reason behind their Facebook use and serve as a means to escape from their everyday lives, as is evidenced by the aforementioned user that plays a variety of fantasy-based games and updates her friends on her progress.

Another reason behind media use, as provided by uses and gratifications theory, is reality exploration. Reality exploration consists of individuals “secur[ing] basic information and... understand[ing] the world in which they exist” (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5). Within a social network like Facebook, reality exploration consists of a number of things, including interacting with peers,
colleagues, and shared content. Using Facebook to share content is one of the largest uses of the social network, especially sharing content with peers, as is evident when looking at individuals’ profiles. For example, one particular user’s Facebook postings often reference the activities from the previous night with friends, with many friends giving their own input, as well. Additionally, he shares a wide variety of content (such as links, pictures, and videos) that deals with what is occurring beyond his immediate, personal world; however, while the content deals with happenings and current events from around the world, it is still relevant to his personal interests. The user’s activity largely centers around his own personal tastes and interests, whether it is relating an event that happened first hand or simply passing on a link to a news story that is personally interesting. In other words, his Facebook activity is an exploration of his own reality. This individual, along with many other Facebook users, utilize Facebook for purposes of discovering more about their own reality by interacting with familiar peers and colleagues, posting and reacting to personally relevant links and other content, and overall, learning more about their immediate world and the world as a whole.

Character reference is the third reason for media usage, as provided by the uses and gratification theory, and it deals with individuals attempting to “find suitable models for their own lives” (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5). Evaluating how much of a factor character reference is with a given media, including Facebook, can be difficult without utilizing a quantitative questionnaire that directly asks users their
purposes for using a particular media, since when one follows the examples set by role models, it is more of an attitudinal and behavioral concept that can be difficult to capture using a heuristic method, as this thesis does. However, one can infer from a user’s friends list who he/she might perceive as a role model by the friend’s relationship to the user in question, such as a teacher, pastor, or other mentor figure. For example, one of the examined Facebook users is a professor of journalism at a midwestern university who often acts as a role model to his current and former students, many of which have friended him on Facebook.

One particular example of how this user fills the role of a character reference is in his “90 posts in 90 days” challenge. He created the challenge for himself, which consists of writing and posting 90 blog posts in 90 days. While writing his blog posts for his own personal website, he has convinced some of his students (and even friends of his students) to participate in the 90 posts in 90 days challenge, which will get his students in the habit of writing daily; a good habit for future journalists. Another example of how he positively influences his students in how one current student interacts with his professor on Facebook. Since enrolling in the professor’s class, the student has interacted with his instructor in many different ways, including directly posting to his teacher’s wall, re-posting content originally posted by his teacher, and mentioning him in blog posts and notes. It is quite possible that the professor is unaware of the very positive influence that he is having and has had on current and former students;
however, regardless of whether he is aware of his positive influence or not, his
students have nonetheless found within their professor a model of how to
behave, act, and, in general, become a better person.

The final reason provided by the uses and gratification theory as to the
purposes behind a particular media use is incidental learning. Incidental learning
is something of a “miscellaneous category” for media usage that does not fall into
the previous three categories and exists because those that have created and
refined uses and gratification theory recognize that “each individual may use or
be gratified by media systems for very different, personal, and unique
reasons” (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5). It would be nearly impossible to discuss even
the majority of unique reasons behind an individual’s use of Facebook, given that
Facebook has over 400 million users (and, potentially, 400 million unique
reasons to use Facebook). However, one could examine Facebook’s various
memes, as examples of broad-based, unpredictable uses of the social network.

One instance of incidental learning includes the phenomenon known as
“doppelgänger week,” where users were instructed to change their profile picture
to that of a celebrity the user has been said to resemble (Parr, 2010,
Mashable.com). In another example of incidental learning within, numerous
groups have emerged questioning whether an arbitrary object or some other non
sequitur can accumulate more Facebook friends than a polarizing figure of
popular culture (Ehrlich, 2010, Mashable.com). Some of the instances incidental
learning on Facebook may seem rather vacuous and juvenile at times, however,
it does serve an important function, in that it creates interesting topics of
discussion amongst users, further socializing the experience of and solidifying
the relationships formed in Facebook.

**Agency**

In *Grown Up Digital*, one chapter in particular opens with a short
anecdote about Facebook’s founder Mark Zuckerberg when he was still just an
undergraduate at Harvard tinkering with his newly created Facebook. Tapscott
(2009, p. 39) described how Zuckerberg had been skipping class in order to
spend more time working on Facebook (known then as “The Facebook”), and he
found himself the day before a major exam without any notes or study material.
So Zuckerberg posted all of the class topics to Facebook, hoping that his
classmates would help him, if possible; within 24 hours, a complete study guide
was created by Zuckerberg’s classmates, providing not only Zuckerberg but his
entire class with a study guide that helped everyone. The professor did not view
what happened as cheating, rather he saw it as an amazing example of class
collaboration. It is this collaboration that comprises the fifth element of Burke’s
pentad: *agency*.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke defines *agency* as the “means or
instruments” used in a given act (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Facebook, itself, could be
thought of as an agency. A Facebook user (*agent*) engages in various activities
(*act*) in different situations (*scene*) and for varying reasons (*purpose*); given that
Facebook is the means by which all of this is possible, it serves to reason that Facebook is the *agency*. Indeed the individual social network, three-dimensional virtual world, or real-time chat service could all be perceived, in Burkeian terms, as an *agency*, given that each are the means by which individuals are able to connect and communicate with others. However, while all virtual realities begin with the technology itself as the agency, some of the larger, more socially active Internet services, including Facebook, have grown beyond the technology, and an over-arching mindset or strategy amongst users, has assumed the role of *agency*.

Chesebro, Kim, and Lee (2007, p. 10) have explored the notion of eight strategies of managing conflict, each with different levels of cooperation and assertiveness and overall approach to a given system. Collaboration, one of the eight strategies, is defined as “finding of common goals and strategies,” and requires highly involved individuals committed to maximizing the experience of all users and reaching the full potential of the system (Chesebro, Kim, & Lee, 2007, p. 10). In the case of Facebook, its users, while likely unconscious or unaware of their actions, are highly devoted to the success of Facebook, as evidenced in their continual production, contribution, and consumption of content that spans many media and formats, from still pictures to games. Collaboration is the means by which all of Facebook operates, and many examples can be found within the social network.
Thinking of collaboration from a purely business stand-point, Facebook offers all of the tools for successful collaboration. Brogan (2007, LifeHack.org) has discussed how the tools and applications available to Facebook users are very similar to the tools needed by a small business or non-profit organization; tools such as email, calendar for planning events, group pages, RSS feeds, real-time chat service, and even applications that connect to other social networks, such as Twitter and Flickr. Plus, as Brogan has noted, an organization can acquire all of these tools without the need of an information-technology specialist for installation, upkeep, and maintenance. In a 2008 blog post, Jantsch (2008, blog post) identified a wide variety of Facebook applications that are helpful for small business owners, ranging from company blogs to testimonial applications for use by a business’s customers, all of which rely on collaboration of both the business owner and the customers. In response to the blog post were several small business owners attesting to the power of Facebook to connect to employees, communicate to customers, and receive customer feedback, in return (Jantsch, 2008, blog post).

However, while several businesses do take advantage of Facebook, the majority of collaboration taking place within the social network is by small groups or individual users driven by varying personal reasons. Given that Facebook was originally aimed at college students, it is no surprise to see that college students use the social network to coordinate and collaborate with classmates on group projects, however, many users utilize Facebook for more altruistic purposes.
One of the examined individuals uses Facebook, in addition to online classified services, such as CraigsList, and various like-minded blogging networks, to rescue abused and neglected animals. Through Facebook she is able to connect animals in shelters to new owners, solicit donations for veterinary treatment, and share updates on the health conditions of the various animals rescued. Collaboration is the means by this is possible, and it is the collaboration occurring at the level of individual users is one of the greatest drivers of Facebook’s success.

Not all of the collaboration that occurs between users is through text-based communication; indeed, much of it is non-written. Facebook has long prided itself in having unlimited uploads for photographs, and the sharing and tagging of photos continues to be one of the largest activities on Facebook (Yadav, 2006, Mashable.com). Facebook also allows its users to upload and share videos, and while not all users take advantage of the feature, many of Facebook’s younger users in their teens and twenties regularly contribute their own videos (Taylor & Keeter, 2010, p. 30). While sharing pictures with others might not match one’s traditional notion of collaboration, it becomes evident when looking at the defining characteristics of collaboration as established by Chesebro, Kim, and Lee. They have demonstrated that collaboration consists of high levels of concern for self and others, as well as high levels of prosociality, assertiveness, and involvement, and an overall desire to “maximize the power of the system” (Chesebro, Kim, & Lee, 2007, p. 10). Millions of photos are
uploaded to Facebook each month and many of them are tagged so that a user’s profile is automatically linked with the photo of themselves, even if someone else uploaded it. This can often be a rather arduous task, and Facebook’s users are highly committed to creating the best possible experience for all users, themselves included; a commitment that is prosocial, proactive (assertive), involving, and thus, a form of collaboration.

However, the collaboration aspect of Facebook goes beyond the written and non-written interaction of the users; it is also a major factor common to many of the broader trends of Facebook previously discussed in this chapter. For example, the five scenes identified above all rely heavily upon collaboration for their very existence. Facebook’s political scene, such as Barack Obama’s large following and grassroots fundraisers during the 2008 presidential election, would have been impossible with broad based collaboration of thousands of committed users (Dalsgaard, 2008, p. 11). The interpersonal scene is also a result of the collaboration of users; the previously discussed Datepad, a Facebook application used to find potential partners, provides merely the means to connect to others, and it is the collaboration of its users in utilizing the tools they are given to turn the dating application into a success. In the case of purpose, uses and gratification theory was used as the controlling construct. Uses, such as reality exploration, require the collaboration of users, since without the input and help of others, it would not be reality exploration but rather the exploration of one’s own
mind. Collaboration is an essential underpinning of all of Facebook and is the means by which it has become a global communication phenomenon.

**Act**

Thus far, the discussion related to the analysis of Facebook has addressed two of the three dimensions of reality (and their corresponding pentadic terms): people (*agent*) and technology (*agency*). Storytelling, the final dimension to be addressed in the analysis, falls into the Burkeian category of *act*, or “what took place, in thought or deed” (Burke, 1945, p. xv). The combined efforts of the millions of individual acts undertaken daily by Facebook’s users come together to create an overarching, controlling narrative for virtual reality. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray (1997) has discussed the immense potential of storytelling in cyberspace and how it is largely a result of virtual reality being able to integrate the listener and incorporate his/her feedback into the narrative. However, in terms of being a defining dimension of a reality, storytelling is concerned, not with the individual narrative of each user, but rather, with the overarching, controlling story that characterizes the reality.

As discussed in chapter one, the controlling narrative of virtual reality casts itself as a supplement, not a substitute, to physical reality, and no one could logically argue that the virtual world could substitute for the physical world, as virtual reality cannot provide a human being’s physical needs: air, food, water, and even the physical touch of another human. Facebook has no delusions
about this fact, and in its company mission statement maintains that Facebook’s “mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” and to allow its users to “learn more about the people they meet” (Facebook, Facebook.com). However, this controlling narrative of virtual reality as a supplement to physical reality isn’t complete.

There exists a growing body of evidence to suggest that what is occurring online is partially a result of a larger trend in American society. As is explored in greater detail below, much evidence exists showing that Americans are increasingly timid when it comes to talking to strangers and dating (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991, p. 60; Rainie & Madden, 2006, p. 3). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that the American notion of community is deteriorating and that society has been become increasingly isolated since the 1950s due to many factors, including suburbanization and television (Putnam, 2000). However, the Internet, and Facebook specifically, has brought hundreds of millions of people together worldwide, a majority of which are daily communicating with others, sharing content, fostering relationships, and in general, creating a sense of community. Thus, the controlling narrative of Facebook as a virtual reality could be that while, in many respects, virtual reality cannot substitute for physical reality, the lost sense of community within the physical world can be remedied and fulfilled by the community forming in the ever-growing virtual world.
This narrative is evident in the actions of Facebook’s users, and Tapscott has identified eight norms and activities through which this narrative is played out daily. While discussed in greater detail later, briefly, Tapscott’s (2009, pp. 34-36) eight norms of the Millennial generation are 1) celebration of freedom, 2) customization, 3) scrutinization, 4) a desire for “corporate integrity and openness,” 5) the mixing of work and play, 6) collaboration, 7) a need for speed, and 8) innovation. The following addresses how this controlling narrative of virtual reality originated, and later in this section, Tapscott’s eight norms and activities (and their role in creating Facebook’s controlling narrative) are discussed in greater depth.

Over the past 50 years, the types of media available to the average consumer have increased dramatically. The last twenty years, especially, have seen a great rise in different types of electronic media: home video game systems, personal computers, the Internet, iPods, DVD players, and DVR recorders, to name a few. However, the people using these devices still only have 24 hours in a single day with which to consume media, in addition to performing the day-to-day life activities. Given the “hydraulic nature of time” (time spent with one thing means less time spent with something else), more media options for consuming media leads to less time spent on other activities and, more importantly, with other people (Nie & Hillygus, 2002, p. 2). In Bowling Alone, Putnam (2000, pp. 216-246) has discussed in great detail how technology and mass media have undermined Americans (especially young
Americans) participation in civic engagement, community organizations, and religion. Television, according to Putnam (2000, p. 237), is especially to blame since it “competes for scarce time,” “has psychological effects that inhibit social participation,” and the content of television programming “undermines civic motivations.” This has led to Americans being increasingly isolated and alone, which many feel has had an adverse impact on the socializing habits and tendencies of Americans (Putnam, 2000, p. 217).

There has been much research into the face-to-face and interpersonal communication practices of Americans, and much of it seems to confirm Putnam’s assertions that, while not being directly attributed to television viewing, the social skills and habits of Americans are decreasing. McCroskey and Richmond (1990, p. 19) have examined the level of communication apprehension among individuals and found that while interpersonal communication is highly regarded in American culture, many Americans are quite reluctant to speak to strangers or in front of groups. In a study comparing communication habits of American citizens to Finnish citizens, it was found that nearly two-thirds of Americans were unwilling to talk to strangers and nearly twenty percent were even apprehensive about talking to friends (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991, p. 60). In a Pew Internet and American Life study examining of the dating habits of Americans, it was found that only sixteen percent of single Americans (seven percent of the total American population) were currently searching for a “romantic partner” and that over 55% of single Americans had “no
active interest” in finding a significant other (Rainie & Madden, 2006, p. 3).

Again, these studies confirm Putnam’s notion of a deteriorating social fabric in America, since the evidence suggests that Americans are increasingly anti-social and even unwilling to find new friends or romantic partners.

However, recent research suggests that this tide of anti-sociality among Americans could be receding. A study released by the Kaiser Family Foundation that examined the media habits of eight- to eighteen-year-olds found that total media usage from 1999 to 2009 increased by nearly one hour and twenty minutes to seven hours and 38 minutes of total media use in 2009 (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010, p. 2). The study also found that when one looked at concurrent media exposure (being exposed to, but not necessarily engaged with, two or more media), total media exposure time increased from roughly seven and one-half hours in 1999 to ten and three-quarters hours in 2009 (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010, p. 2). Papper, Holmes, and Popovich (2004, p. 25) have similarly studied media multitasking and observed that concurrent media exposure accounted for nearly a quarter of research participants’ media day. Taken at face value, these figures don’t seem to very much counter Putnam’s assertion of a disintegrating community; in fact, one could say it even enforces Putnam’s claims. However, when one examines what these young people are doing with media, it becomes evident as to how Putnam might be wrong.

The pre-teens and teenagers examined in the Kaiser Family Foundation study, along with many young adults in their twenties not examined in Kaiser
study, are using the media for reasons that are largely social. It was found that when these eight- to eighteen-year-olds use the Internet, 25% of their online time is spent at social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010, p. 21). In a recent study on eighteen- to 29-year-olds, the Pew Research Center found that 75% of them have social network profiles and about a third of them use an online social network at least once a day (Taylor & Keeter, 2010, p. 29). Even when looking at older Americans, over 35% of all American adults have some sort of online social networking presence (Lenhart, 2009a, p. 1).

The percentages of Americans (especially young Americans) with social networking profiles and the time spent engaged with them are somewhat mind-boggling numbers. However, when one considers how a majority of Americans have become uncomfortable with, and in some cases opposed to, face-to-face conversation, it seems natural that they would seek out some sort of social release somewhere, even it is not in the physical world. Putnam’s trend of an eroding sense of community in America was likely a very real, very alarming trend in 2000, when *Bowling Alone* was originally published. In the time since, however, media habits have changed greatly, and while total media use is rising across many demographics, it is not the traditional one-to-many media formats that, as Putnam has asserted, have eroded away America’s sense of community. Instead, what is occurring with social media is actually reversing the trends Putnam so direly predicted and is actually increasing the sociality of Americans.
Pew Internet and American Life has found that civic engagement through social networking, especially among young people, is on the rise, regardless of socio-economic status (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009, pp. 49-59). Additionally, Pew has found that users of Facebook tend to be more engaged in local community activities (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009, p. 3).

Thus, the controlling narrative of Facebook, and of virtual reality as a whole, tells the story of while physical reality provides innumerable aspects that cannot be provided through technology alone, virtual reality can nonetheless fill the void that has been created by the lost sense of community in physical reality. However, while we have examined the origins of this controlling narrative and how it came into existence in a broad sense, we have not addressed what specific actions and habits of Facebook’s users contributed to the creation of this controlling narrative. Towards this end, Tapscott’s work examining Millennials is a useful starting block. In Grown Up Digital, Tapscott (2009, pp. 34-36) identified eight norms in which the Net Generation actively and regularly participates: 1) celebration of freedom, 2) customization, 3) scrutinization, 4) desire for “corporate integrity and openness,” 5) mixing of work and play, 6) collaboration, 7) a need for speed, and 8) innovation. Tapscott (2009, p. 34) has noted that each of these eight norms represent “cluster[s] of attitudes and behaviors” that define the Millennial generation. Each of these norms is examined as a Burkeian act and as a contributor to Facebook’s controlling narrative.
The first of Tapscott’s eight norms, *freedom*, is quite overarching in that it includes everything from “freedom of choice to freedom of expression” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 34). Tapscott (2009, p. 34) has specified a few of the types of freedoms that help to characterize the Net Generation; one of them is the freedom to “find the marketing message that fits their needs.” This is a freedom that is easily observable on Facebook in that each user is capable and even encouraged to find their favorite products, stores, and brands on Facebook and become fans of them, thereby custom tailoring the marketing experience for each user. When users are presented with certain advertisements, they are given the option to interact with or rate the advertisement in some way, again personalizing how each individual consumes advertising and other corporate messages. Facebook on mobile devices allows further freedom for users by no longer constraining them to a traditional desktop or laptop computer and allowing them to live their lives in physical reality while maintaining the freedom to enter virtual reality at any time. Additionally, Facebook, as a whole, represents to millions of users an outlet for complete freedom of expression as is evidenced by the myriad of status updates and shared content, such as links, pictures, and videos.

In terms of storytelling, freedom plays a very large role in the controlling narrative of Facebook. In Tapscott’s (2009, p. 34) description of the freedom valued by the Net Generation, he has noted that it is all inclusive; the Net Generation wants total freedom in all that they do, including the “freedom to take their own path.” The freedom to take one’s own path means no constraints and
allows individuals to live the online life they choose. The drama, and in turn, the story, comes from when an individual’s online narrative come into conflict with someone else’s differing online narrative. Bollow (2007, blog post) has asserted quite explicitly that “all drama is conflict” since in all narratives, the drama or story comes about from some sort of conflict. Part of the dramatization of Facebook comes from the conflict over differing individual narratives. The conflict is generally not contentious or quarrelsome and is simply a result of millions of people gathering in a single online forum; differences in opinion are inevitable. These differences in opinion are what dramatize the online experience, and the idea of all drama being conflict is a common theme of the role of many of Tapscott’s norms in the controlling narrative of Facebook.

Tapscott’s second norm involves the ability to customize and personalize one’s experience in all forms of media (Tapscott, 2009, p. 34). The ability to customize one’s online experience is nearly synonymous with the Internet, especially when considering the names of some online services (e.g., MySpace, YouTube). The ability to customize is present in Facebook, as well. One of the first things new users are encouraged to do on Facebook is to customize their profiles by providing interests, tastes, and pictures. Additionally, users customize the content they view through the ability to choose their friends and also by being able to hide posts from individuals they no longer wish to follow. The ability to contribute content to Facebook, such as photos and videos, not only customizes
one’s own experience but also further customizes the experience of one’s friends by providing new content for them to view.

Similar to the way the desire for freedom affects the controlling narrative of Facebook, the desire for customization plays a large role in online storytelling. At the core of the desire for customization is the notion that one’s surroundings should conform to one’s desires, rather than letting one’s surroundings shape how one thinks, feels, and lives. However, simply conforming one’s surroundings to how one sees fit does not create drama; similar to the desire for freedom, it is when an individual’s customization comes into conflict with someone else’s differing ideal customization that drama is created. For example, in Facebook, uploading photos is a major aspect of how an individual customizes his/her experience. Facebook encourages its users to tag their friends in photos and make the photos publicly available, which can very easily lead to conflict (and thus, drama) if an individual does not want a photographic record of whatever took place to be publicly accessible.

The ability to scrutinize the information and inner-workings, especially that of businesses and political organizations, is the third norm and is another feature that has become nearly ubiquitous with Facebook and the Internet as a whole (Tapscott, 2009, p. 35). Specific instances of such intense scrutinization occurring on Facebook were quite prevalent during the debate in the United States over health care in the early autumn of 2009. One particular Facebook user seemed to delight in his ability to fan the flames of debate amongst his
friends, while scrutinizing numerous aspects of the American health care system, from corporate control to government intervention. One post concerning the controversial “death panels” in the proposed health care bill received 22 comments, many of them lengthy, impassioned diatribes. Twenty-two comments for one post is quite impressive given that in the month of January 2010, the same user posted fourteen status updates or other pieces of content, receiving an average of 6.7 comments per post. This could easily be misinterpreted though because 51 of the 94 total comments received came from a single post about Pat Robertson’s controversial comments about Haiti following the devastating earthquake in early 2010 (although this also serves as another example of the intense scrutinization prevalent on Facebook).

In terms of storytelling, scrutinization is somewhat similar to freedom and customization, in that the drama is born out of conflict. Scrutinization, however, is different in terms of scale. The conflict over freedom and customization is of a smaller scale since it is generally concerned with personal conflict between individuals that has no real impact on the larger public, while the conflict resulting from scrutinization is often centered around matters of public concern. As is evidenced in the examples of scrutinization of proposed health care bills and comments made by religious figures, the scrutinization of different issues can often lead to intense conflict and divisiveness between users. This conflict, and the resulting drama, revolves around issues important to the public and community, and it helps to foster the notion of virtual community.
The fourth norm of the Net Generation that Tapscott has discovered is the affinity for “corporate integrity and openness” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 35). Again, numerous examples of this corporate integrity can be found across the Internet, from the numerous corporate blogs designed to enhance corporate transparency to Google’s corporate motto of “Don’t be evil” (Google Code of Conduct, 2009, Investor.Google.com). On Facebook, this is observable in the many corporate pages owned by businesses. Companies from Microsoft to Coca-Cola have pages on Facebook that act as forum for posting company news and as a means of collecting feedback from customers. Even Facebook has its own Facebook page where it announces updates and changes to its service and receives feedback from users.

This desire for corporate openness and integrity is very closely related to scrutinization in terms of its role in the controlling narrative of Facebook. In the eyes of the Net Generation, corporations are to be open and publicly accessible by nature, since they are very much matters of public concern, as the actions of corporations generally have a wide, public impact. The similarity between scrutinization and corporate openness lies in the fact that the conflict that results from corporations that are not open or are displaying a lack of integrity is often relevant to the larger public. This all helps contribute to the notion of a virtual community since both personal conflicts (resulting from freedom and customization) and public conflicts (resulting from scrutinization and corporate openness) are freely and regularly discussed.
The fifth norm as established by Tapscott is the mixing of “entertainment and play” with “work, education, and social life” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 35). Siegel (2008, p. 35) derisively refers to this as the “transvaluation of values,” however, for many youths today the mixing of work and play or entertainment and social life is the norm. The mixing of work and education with play on Facebook is evident when considering that very often employee and boss or student and professor are friends on Facebook (Balderrama, 2009, CNN.com; Parry, 2009, Chronicle.com). Facebook, itself, is also a perfect exemplification of the mixing of entertainment with social life, as it provides a means for individuals to connect with various online content, all while socializing the experience by including one’s closest friends.

In terms of storytelling, the previous four norms have dealt with different types of conflict and their dramatizing effects. The two types of conflict discussed have been interpersonal (as is the case with freedom and customization) and public (as is the case with scrutinization and corporate openness); the mixing of work and play creates a third type of conflict: internal. The internal conflict is a result of an individual performing two completely different tasks at one time; regardless of how great of a multi-tasker someone claims to be, there is inevitably internal conflict when he/she must decide how to spend the next five-minute block of time, either working or playing. These three different types of conflict, interpersonal, public, and internal, all contribute to the notion of a virtual community since individuals are pulled in conflicting directions by different forces,
both internal and external, similar to the way an individual experiences community in physical reality.

Tapscott has also identified collaboration and the formation of relationships as the sixth norm of the Net Generation. It has become an important tool in “school, work, or just for fun,” and input from friends greatly influences what products individuals are likely to purchase (Tapscott, 2009, p. 35). Collaboration has been previously discussed in this chapter in terms of agency, and on Facebook, it appears in many forms. On the individual level, in addition to the previous example of the Facebook user that uses her connections on the social network to rescue abused dogs, another user examined for this analysis, a student movie-maker, has used Facebook simply as a means of contacting group partners to set up production schedules and even as a forum to create entire stories from scratch, using feedback from and ideas suggested by friends. In terms of how Facebook can influence the purchasing decisions of individuals, beyond discussions between friends about particular products, Facebook also employs interactive advertisements. These interactive ads, pitching everything from Toyota automobiles to bluegrass bands, encourage users to become a fan of a particular product. When the same product is then advertised to another user, that user would then see that his/her friend likes the products, thereby socializing and incorporating one’s personal relationships into viewing advertisements, something that would otherwise be devoid of such interpersonal connections.
While the previous five norms of the Net Generation have relied upon conflict to create drama, collaboration does not. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The conflict that results from the previous five norms is absolutely crucial to dramatizing the experience of being a member of Facebook and, thus, to the creation of a controlling narrative centered around the notion of community. However, communities are not built solely around conflict, and some level of collaboration between community-members is vital. Collaboration is necessary to help create bonds and cohesiveness between Facebook users; bonds that contribute to the perception of community among Facebook users.

A seventh norm identified by Tapscott is a need for speed, exemplified by real-time chat services and instantly updated news services and RSS feeds (Tapscott, 2009, p. 35). Looking at Facebook specifically, it should be considered as a whole in terms of speed. Facebook prides itself on allowing its users to update their statuses almost instantly no matter where, when, or why, and increasingly, users are finding out about current events on Facebook before seeing it on a more traditional outlet such as a news website or television broadcast. The ability for Facebook’s users to post and comment through mobile applications further increases the notion of speed and instantaneous updates. Additionally, Facebook employs a real-time chat feature so users can engage in private one-to-one conversations. These features and more all contribute to providing fast social networking service that allows users to post content as it happens.
Speed is an extremely important dimension in the controlling narrative of Facebook. While not bringing a dimension that directly contributes to the narrative, such as conflict or collaboration, speed is a controlling factor in how one experiences conflict and collaboration. If the controlling narrative of Facebook is that it provides a sense of community lost in the physical world, then the virtual community needs to move fast enough to be a viable supplement to the physical world. Physical reality does not have load times or lag, and the Net Generation’s desire for ever-faster processors and data connections is based on the larger desire to interact with and contribute to the social network (and in turn, the community and controlling narrative) ever faster, to the point of interacting and contributing in real-time.

The eighth and final norm that characterizes the Net Generation is innovation, in the sense that technology, entertainment, school, and work are constantly evolving and changing (Tapscott, 2009, p. 36). The Internet and the tools through which the Internet is accessed are constantly improving, and Facebook is no different. Facebook’s interface has evolved significantly since its 2005 launch, adding new features such as blogging capabilities, news feeds, and overall changes in the design and usability (Yadav, 2006, Mashable.com; Geminder, 2007, blog post; Wilson, 2008, blog post; McDougall, 2010, InformationWeek.com). Facebook is also an innovator in terms of branching beyond the Facebook domain and incorporating more of the Internet’s offerings into its user experience. In May 2008, Facebook launched Facebook Connect
which allows users browsing content on third party websites to easily and seamlessly post the content to Facebook (McCarthy, 2008, CNET.com). Additionally, many applications and services have been created, mostly by impassioned users, that allow individuals on Facebook to integrate content posted to other social networking sites, such as Twitter (Van Grove, 2009, Mashable.com). These are just a few of the many ways Facebook and its users are innovating on Facebook and the Internet at large.

Innovation is the eighth of Tapscott’s norms and is the eighth component contributing to the controlling narrative of Facebook. Like speed, innovation is a dimension of the narrative that facilitates the further propagation of the narrative itself. The innovation within Facebook, such as internal improvements to the user interface, and Facebook’s innovation across the Internet, such as Facebook Connect, are all designed to simplify the users’ experience of posting and interacting with content on Facebook contributes to the dramatization of users’ experiences and helps to create the narrative of community. Facebook’s ability to interact with other websites, such as Twitter and YouTube, attempts to extend this narrative across the Internet to create an over-arching narrative of community across the whole of virtual reality.

When examined individually, each of Tapscott’s eight norms constitutes a Burkeian act, as each norm is able to describe what can be done on Facebook in “thought or deed” (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Taken together, however, Tapscott’s eight norms act as the variables that create and contribute to the controlling
narrative of Facebook. They constitute the eight parts of an eight-part story that makes Facebook a community and makes Facebook what it is.

Conclusion

Facebook and the entirety of the Internet offer its users seemingly endless possibilities for finding and interacting with friends, meeting new people from around the globe, experiencing new ideas, and engaging with one’s community in the physical world. Facebook, one of the largest websites in the world, is so massive that what is occurring within the social network is expansive enough to fulfill Burke’s pentad of dramatism, thus demonstrating that users of virtual reality are dramatizing their experience online. The idea of the overarching, controlling narrative is also present in Facebook, as well as the Internet as a whole; Facebook is but one web service amongst millions, and many other socially engaging websites are likely to have a similar controlling narrative, as well. Virtual reality does not affect all equally, although this can also be said about the other eight realities established by James and Chesebro, and many questions still exist about virtual reality that need to be answered. The next chapter, in addition to addressing other matters, discusses some of these questions and possible future research into the subject.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Limitations, and Heuristic Propositions

This final chapter is divided into three sections. The first section summarizes and draws conclusions about the dramatistic and critical research performed in the completing of this thesis. The second section discusses the limitations of the current study. The third and final section provides some heuristic propositions as starting points for further research related to the field of virtual reality.

Conclusions

Chapter one of this thesis provided the foundation on which the rest of this research was built. In addition to establishing the eleven dimensions that have been suggested to be necessary for the perception of a reality, chapter one also discussed how virtual reality fulfills the three dimensions examined in this thesis. Chapter one also demonstrated the skepticism inherent in virtual reality and how many believe virtual reality to be nothing more than a passing fad or an outlet for boredom. The problem is then evident: millions of people from all over the world spend a significant amount of time within a virtual reality, however, their actions are largely written off as frivolous or unnecessary. Chapter one concluded with the idea that for a significant portion of the United States population (approximately one-third of total Americans), their contributions of online content and forming of real (albeit computer-mediated) relationships and
emotional bonds with other users are derided by the majority population as being of lesser value or significance than what occurs in physical reality. The problem lies in the fact that the world is becoming ever more connected, and the Internet is playing an increasingly larger role in the lives of most Americans than in recent years past. The major conclusion reached at the end of chapter one is that what is occurring within virtual reality has major significance and ramifications for those involved: the relationship with someone met online moves beyond platonic friendship or the online persona one has carefully crafted begins to collide with one’s persona in the physical world. The overall significance and importance of virtual reality is growing daily, and while some might never fully comprehend how an individual can form meaningful relationships through a computer, millions of Americans are doing it daily on multiple platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Second Life, through multiple formats and media, such as simple text, photos, and video.

The literature review in chapter two addressed two issues that are very important to this thesis. First, the evidence provided throughout chapter two demonstrated some of the significance of virtual reality, from identity issues concerning users to the overall goals and purposes of users’ online activities. While there are undoubtedly significant activities and uses that were overlooked, chapter two discussed many issues that span a number of topics in virtual reality, further demonstrating the need for this thesis. Second, the literature review was presented using Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic pentad found in A Grammar of
Motives. This not only helped to demonstrate that the users of virtual reality are in a sense dramatizing their experiences, but it also laid the Burkeian framework utilized in subsequent chapters.

The methods described in chapter three helped to guide the analysis of Facebook that was eventually discussed in chapter four. A critical method was used as the overall method of analysis in that this thesis seeks to change the status quo perception of virtual reality as subpar in comparison to other realities. Furthermore, other methods of criticism that are more specific, such as the rhetorical method, dramatism, and heuristics, were also utilized in the case-study of Facebook. The rhetorical and dramatistic methods were vital to this study as it helped to demonstrate that virtual reality is symbolically constructed and that its inhabitants are dramatizing their experience. Chapter three also discussed how heuristics plays a larger role in this thesis in that the findings can serve as a foundation for future research into virtual reality. The specific propositions derived from the findings are discussed later in this chapter.

The findings discussed in chapter four were presented within a framework based around Burke’s pentad of dramatism. In addition to discussing how each of the five pentadic terms contributes to the construction of a virtual reality, the findings also addressed how the pentadic terms correspond to the three (of eleven) dimensions of reality analyzed in this thesis. Table 5.1, “A Dramatistic Construction of Virtual Reality,” most easily illustrates the findings of chapter four:
Table 5.1

A Dramatistic Construction of Virtual Reality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pentad</th>
<th>Dimension of Reality</th>
<th>Constructs within virtual reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>Liu’s four aesthetic conceptions: prestige, differentiation, authenticity, and theatrical personas (Liu, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene</td>
<td>Time and Space</td>
<td>Economic, political, cultural, entertainment, and interpersonal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Purpose: Media uses and Media gratification</td>
<td>Uses and gratification theory: escapism, reality exploration, character reference, and incidental learning (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Tapscott’s eight norms: freedom, customization, scrutinization, corporate integrity/openness, mixing of work and play, collaboration and relationship, speed, and innovation (Tapscott, 2009, pp. 34-36). The unifying theme of different acts is creation of a social community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings in chapter four answer two of the three research questions posed in chapter one in that they identify and define the operational dimensions of virtual reality. In addition to discussing Burke’s pentad of dramatism as it relates to virtual reality, the findings also demonstrate that virtual reality is socially and symbolically constructed in that it is the aggregated, symbolic contributions of its users that create the perception of a reality for its many inhabitants. The third and final research question dealing with heuristic propositions based on the findings of this thesis is addressed later in this chapter.
Limitations

As with all studies, this examination of virtual reality is not perfect. Virtual reality is a vast network of computers and users that is growing daily, and in the case of looking solely at Facebook, it is extremely difficult trying to characterize the actions or motives of over 400 million people from widely varying backgrounds, cultures, and socio-economic statuses. The findings from chapter four would likely be very different had the case-study focused on a three-dimensional synthetic world, like Second Life, or a social network that caters to different demographics and countries, such as Webkinz, a social network aimed at children, or Xiaonei, a Chinese social network that mimics Facebook. Nonetheless, attempting to generalize about so many diverse individuals’ online habits is difficult, and while numerous heuristics were employed to ensure accuracy of the data collected, it is impossible to account for the actions of all.

One of the most glaring limitations of the analysis performed for this thesis is that little consensus exists as to Facebook constituting a virtual reality. Watte (2009, p. 4) has discussed how thriving two-dimensional social networks, such as Facebook, could constitute a virtual reality, although he is very much in the minority with his position. However, as was mentioned in chapter three, this thesis calls for a re-conceiving of what a website could potentially be. Given the results discussed in chapter four, though, I do believe that this thesis has shown that virtual reality can be present on two-dimensional websites and is not
confined to the three-dimensional synthetic worlds of Second Life or Project Entropia.

Another limitation that must be addressed is the convenient sample employed during the analysis of Facebook. While examining 22 profiles of individuals I personally know was the best way to illustrate the various paradigms employed, this method of choosing what profiles to examine is not ideal and is not without its faults. My list of Facebook friends is rather diverse, with different ages, ethnicities, religious and political views, education levels, and sexual orientations, however, they do all have one commonality: having me as a Facebook friend. A similar limitation that needs to be kept in mind is that all of the owners of the profiles examined come from a Western cultural mindset, valuing individualism, equality, and freedom of speech, among other cultural values (Chesebro, 2009). A more desirable method of collecting profiles to be examined would have been to randomly choose profiles from across Facebook, disregarding all demographic information (similar to Liu’s automated computer program that scoured MySpace for profiles). Doing this would change the findings, as it would most likely incorporate more cultural diversity and, with it, different cultural values, such as Eastern cultures valuing collectivism compared to Western cultures valuing individualism (Chesebro, 2009).

The final limitations that need to be addressed are the biases that invariably accompany critical and heuristic research methods. All research methods have certain biases inherent in their methodological structures: the
questionnaires utilized in quantitative studies are hampered by the fact that the researcher must develop the possible answer choices and therefore limit participants’ responses; while qualitative studies, such as being a participant-observer, can yield biased results since the presence of the researcher can influence the actions of the individual being observed. Critical research is no different in that it also has certain biases inherent in its basic structure. The most obvious bias of critical research is the intense involvement of the researcher. In critical studies, the researcher gathers various data from a range of sources, synthesizes and analyzes it, and draw his/her own inferences and conclusions. Thus, the conclusions reached are literally infused with the opinions and preconceived notions of the researcher.

Similar to the critical method, the heuristic method also has some inherent biases. The most obvious comes from its very design; as noted by De Jong and Van Der Geest (2000), since heuristics employs a pre-established paradigm through which a researcher views a particular phenomena, the researcher has already narrowed his/her range of observation by focusing on the pre-defined ways, as established by others. With this in mind, heuristics is still a very useful research tool, and the following section provides various frameworks for further study.
Heuristic propositions

As was discussed in chapter three, the findings of this thesis are able to serve as frameworks for future research into virtual reality. The findings themselves are based on a convenient sample of 22 Facebook profiles and should not be regarded as proven facts since the entire of population (or at least a more representative sample) has not been thoroughly examined. In light of this, Table 5.2, a modification of “A Dramatistic Construction of Virtual Reality,” suggests five heuristic propositions for future quantitative and qualitative research:
### A Dramatistic Construction of Virtual Reality with Heuristic Propositions for Future Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pentad</th>
<th>Dimension of Reality</th>
<th>Constructs within virtual reality</th>
<th>Heuristic proposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>Liu’s four aesthetic conceptions: prestige, differentiation, authenticity, and theatrical personas (Liu, 2007).</td>
<td>Quantitative study of a larger, more systematic sample of Facebook profiles examining one particular dimension of a profile (profile picture, affiliated groups, etc.) and how that dimension shows persona and contributes to the overall construction of virtual reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene</td>
<td>Economic, political, cultural, entertainment, and interpersonal.</td>
<td>Action-based research that is actively engaged in a political campaign that utilizes social media heavily to better understand political scene.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Uses and gratification theory: escapism, reality exploration, character reference, and incidental learning (Chesebro, 1987, p. 5).</td>
<td>Quantitative, systematic examination of Facebook profiles into how the four dimensions of uses and gratification theory are present.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Collaboration (Chesebro, Kim, &amp; Lee, 2007, p. 10).</td>
<td>Qualitative study involving a larger, more systematic sample of users with open-ended interviews geared toward the question of collaboration. Possibly better suited for Second Life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Virtual reality provides a sense of community that has been lost in the physical world. This story is created by users’ implementation of Tapscott’s eight norms of Net Generation: freedom, customization, scrutinization, corporate integrity/openness, mixing of work and play, collaboration and relationship, speed, and innovation (Tapscott, 2009, pp. 34-36).</td>
<td>Quantitative, systematic examination of Facebook profiles into how Tapscott’s eight norms are present and how they contribute to the construction of virtual reality. Qualitative study of a systematic sample of users with open-ended interviews geared toward individuals’ perceptions of a virtual community, a controlling narrative, and how they both contribute to the construction of a virtual reality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first heuristic proposition deals with the agent. Based on his observations of 127,000 MySpace profiles, Liu (2007) created a set of four aesthetic conceptions that can be observed within social networks, and he derived these aesthetic conceptions from observing only stated taste preferences. In the case of my analysis, however, I used Liu’s aesthetic conceptions while examining the entire user profile, which in addition to stated taste preferences, included profile pictures, group membership, and users’ networks. My first research proposition, thus, is a quantitative study which employs a larger, more systematic sample of profiles (similar to Liu’s method, although not necessarily in terms of numbers of profiles) and examines one particular dimension of the social network profile, such as profile picture, to find how the dimension exhibits the user’s persona and contributes to the construction of a virtual reality. Liu’s work with taste statements yielded very useful results, in the form of the four aesthetic conceptions, and a more systematic examination of other dimensions of social network profiles, such as profile pictures or affiliated groups, could also provide similarly useful data.

The second heuristic proposition addresses scene. While the other propositions suggested here are quantitative or qualitative in nature, this proposition is for action research. Obama’s use of Facebook in the 2008 presidential elections where he essentially created a wholly different campaign on Facebook aimed specifically at eighteen- to 29-year-olds demonstrates the potential of the political scene of Facebook. My second heuristic proposition is
an action-based study that closely and intimately follows a campaign and how it uses social media to communicate its message. Ideally, the researcher would actually work on the campaign and could, thus, have first-hand accounts of what does and does not work for candidates on a social network and then be able to immediately implement any needed changes to the campaign strategy. Such a study would be provide unique insight into the political scene of social networks through first-hand experience.

The third proposition for future research addresses purpose. The findings of this thesis have demonstrated how the uses and gratification theory is evident in Facebook. However, given the small, convenient sample of 22 profiles examined in the thesis, the findings are not definitive. I propose that a larger, more systematic sample of profiles be gathered and quantitatively examined in terms of uses and gratification theory. Considering how uses and gratification theory has evolved since its inception, being applied to radio and then television, the next obvious application of uses and gratification theory is in cyberspace. There is no doubt that Facebook’s users get some sort of gratification out of their use of the social network, and a systematic, quantitative analysis of Facebook could uncover how and why users are gratified as they are.

The fourth heuristic proposition based on the findings of this thesis deals with the pentadic term agency. Collaboration has been demonstrated to be at the heart of Facebook. Indeed, collaboration is vital part of most, if not all, constructions of virtual reality. My fourth heuristic proposition is for a qualitative
study involving open-ended participant interviews, which seeks to establish user perceptions of collaboration and how they contribute to the construction of a virtual reality. Given the nature of Facebook, in that it is used more to interact with previously established friends rather than meeting new friends, a study like this would possibly be better suited for Second Life. Since Second Life consists of avatars interacting with others in a three-dimensional representation of physical reality, approaching anonymous users as just another inquisitive Second Life user (instead of a researcher) would be much easier.

Finally, for the fifth and final pentadic term, act, two heuristic propositions are suggested, one quantitative and one qualitative. The findings in chapter four demonstrate how Tapscott’s eight norms of the Net Generation contribute to the controlling narrative of Facebook. Thus, the first proposition is for a systematic, quantitative study of Facebook user profiles, examining how Tapscott’s eight norms of the Net Generation are made evident, contribute to the proposed controlling narrative of virtual reality, and contribute to the overall construction of virtual reality. The second proposition is similar to the first but qualitative in nature. I propose a qualitative study involving open-ended participant interviews focused on users’ perceptions of a virtual community, the proposed controlling narrative, and how each contributes to the notion of a virtual reality. Both quantitative and qualitative studies could provide insight into the behavior and habits of Facebook users, as well as how community is perceived within social networks.
Conclusion

Virtual reality is nothing, if not an extremely complex system. In addition to its massive complexity, it is relatively young. While its foundations date back to the 1940s with simple, analogue flight simulators, a true virtual reality where users are able to interact and form meaningful relationships with other users is a phenomenon that is less than twenty years old. Given the relatively young age of virtual reality, there still exists much research that must be made into the topic. This thesis seeks to further the research that has already been performed in the field and ideally to validate the millions of virtual reality users that are derided and wrote off as wasting their time. Millions of people from all over the world log on to some sort of a virtual reality daily, consuming and posting content, making new friends and catching up with old friends. Cyberspace will play an increasingly larger role in individuals’ lives as more devices are connected to and more individuals log on to the Internet, and only time will tell if virtual reality is accepted as the meaningful, significant, and consequential reality that it truly is.
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