



## Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds

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### Introduction

**EVAN O'NEIL:** I'm Evan O'Neil, Managing Editor of the Carnegie Council's online magazine, [Policy Innovations](#).



[Rita J. King](#)

We are very happy here tonight to have two of our in-house innovators to join us. Rita J. King and Joshua Fouts are going to be presenting on their year-long project that they conducted with us, [Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds](#). They conducted this project here as Senior Fellows of the Carnegie Council with support from the [Richard Lounsbury Foundation](#).

Just a little background on us, the Carnegie Council. Our mission here is to take equal parts of idealism and realism, mix them together, and see what shakes out.

Our President, [Joel Rosenthal](#), expressed this recently in the introduction to the policy recommendations that Rita and Josh wrote for us. He described it as "igniting the moral imagination," which from our perspective is really a philosophy of optimism, because a lot of the problems that we see throughout the world and throughout our work here—we've been here for about 95 years—there are a lot of perennial problems and conflicts that just don't seem to go away. So optimism is a constant in that picture, and that's why we choose that path.



[Evan O'Neil](#)

Few people have ignited our moral imaginations more than Rita and Josh have. A year ago, most of us here hardly knew of the existence of virtual worlds, let alone contemplated their role in intercultural dialogue, or even imagined some of the expressions of Muslim cultural aspects that are going on in those worlds right now.

These two are pretty much on-target here. I think they are at the intersection of two very timely topics.

The first is the increasing of public diplomacy, especially vis-à-vis the Muslim world, that we are seeing with the new [Obama](#) Administration. Just this week, many of you may have noticed that Obama went and gave an exclusive interview to [Al Arabiya](#). And there has also been a lot of outreach toward Obama from the Muslim world from various leaders, and from the [Organization of the Islamic Conference](#).

But, of course, all these positive overtures on both sides are playing out against a lot of very persistent conflicts—obviously, Gaza, foremost in a lot of people's minds these days; Iraq, still a very large series of issues that we have to deal with there; and Sri Lanka. The list goes on.

The other area where these two are very much on-target right now is that they are tapping into this expanding sense of digital politics that is developing around the world, especially toward youth. We see with Obama the first Internet president, essentially, here in the United States, who tapped into both the Internet and the youth aspects of the political scene these days. This is really, I think, reflective of a broad hunger for participation, which, at least perhaps in American culture, had been lost for a long time.

For example, on *Policy Innovations* this year, our number-one article was an article called "[Why Vote?](#)"—which seems somewhat like something that should be obvious in a democracy that has been around for a little bit. But maybe not. Maybe this is something that people were seriously curious about.

It was not an article that we ran specifically in relation to the election. It was actually an older article from late 2007. It was by [Peter Singer](#), the Australian ethicist. He was describing how in his home country of Australia they have a compulsory voting law, which seems antithetical to how we view things here in the United States.

But I think the combination of the fact that people were searching for this article, because that's how they found it on our Web site—we didn't run it on November 3 to encourage people to vote; it was just there— but people were looking for this idea of "Why?" So when you find that certain systems, like in Australia, have a structure for forcing you to do things, I think it calls into question the systems that we are in, in general, and it makes you come up with creative approaches to them.

So a lot of this new dialogue on freedom and activism is going on on the ground. But how will that translate into real life? I think Obama exemplifies that. Will the revolution be transistorized, as I have been saying? We'll see.

In Egypt, [FaceBook](#) has been a very important aspect of their emerging political freedom. But the openness of the medium, while it may defend you because you develop a sort of Internet celebrity so that your friends can campaign for your release from prison if you get captured for free speech or something, at the same time, if the government is watching the Web sites, then perhaps they'll show up at the protest with their police before you even get there, right?

Fortunately, some of these online mediums, like FaceBook, benefit from what [Ethan Zuckerman](#) at Harvard calls the "[cute cat](#)" effect, which is that these Web sites have everything—they have pictures of cute cats and they have really volatile, extremist chatrooms on them. So you can't really shut down one without then shutting down the other. So pretty much everybody loves cute cats—it's one of the greatest features of the Internet, right?

Then, the other side of this is that governments themselves are using the new media to shape receptivity to various policies. The U.S. State Department is maintaining their own social network already. They also monitor blogs, specifically blogs that have to do with terrorism. They have people employed in these spaces who are identified as State Department employees, and they correct what they view to be misperceptions of U.S. policy in various fashions. So the U.S. government and a lot of other governments are getting very active in the digital frontier.

Especially in the recent Gaza conflict, we see also this kind of cyber-warfare in fact, both informational and technical, developing on both sides, including an Israeli press conference, which I think Rita and Josh tuned into on [Twitter](#). So there are a lot of experimentations in these spaces.

So with that kind of framework, I'm going to turn it over to these two and let them explain the Understanding Islam Through Virtual Worlds project to you.

Rita J. King is the CEO and Creative Director of [Dancing Ink Productions](#), which is a research-and-strategy and content-creation company dedicated to the emergence of a new global culture in the Imagination Age. I'm sure she'll be explaining a little bit more about what that means to her along the way here.

She has also been a Senior Fellow with us here at the Carnegie Council.

Very early in her career, she worked as a censor at AOL, which she documented in a cover story for the [Village Voice](#). It was called "[Terms of Service: Sweaty Scenes from the Life of an AOL Censor](#)," and hopefully we'll get a confession or two about that one as well.

Then she went on to work as an investigative journalist for about seven years, where her primary focus was on corporate social responsibility issues, specifically in the nuclear industry, here locally but also in the Gulf Coast and some of the post-Katrina efforts to rebuild there with [FEMA](#) [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. She put out a report on that, called "[Big Easy Money: Disaster Profiteering on the American Gulf Coast](#)", which got a lot of coverage internationally.

Rita is also a frequent speaker on creative collaboration and the new global economy. Dancing Ink Productions has been picked up all across the world, from *The New York Times* and CNN, to *Time* magazine and most recently, [Boing Boing](#) and [Wired](#).

Josh, her partner at Dancing Ink, is the Chief Global Strategist there, which is I think one of my favorite job titles.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** I like the title too.

**EVAN O'NEIL:** He has also been a Senior Fellow here for the past year. He is also a Senior Fellow for Digital Media and Public Policy at the [Center for the Study of the Presidency](#).

Josh has nearly 20 years of expertise in the innovative uses of new technologies for international relations, journalism, government, and strategic nonprofit management. Before joining Dancing Ink, Josh co-founded and directed the University of Southern California's [Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School](#). Previously, he directed and co-founded the USC Annenberg online journalism and communications program, where he also co-founded and edited the first Internet-based [online journalism review](#), which is a fabulous publication. And before that lots of other things.

With that, I am going to turn it over to these two. Thank you, Rita and Josh.

## Remarks

**RITA J. KING:** Thank you.

It's a pleasure to be here with so many of you. Some of you we have not met in person; we know you from Twitter, we know you from [Second Life](#), we know you from a restaurant. There are people from all over the place here. It is a pleasure to be with all of you.

We want to thank the Lounsbery Foundation for funding this work, and the Carnegie Council. We could thank everyone by name, because everyone has contributed in some way to this project, and particularly Evan O'Neil, who has helped us from the beginning to shape this philosophically, along with Joel Rosenthal and the rest of the Carnegie Council.

It was important to approach this project from a perspective of ethics in international affairs because the subject matter can be viewed as so potentially incendiary, and we wanted to present our findings in a way that centered on something new, the new conversation. As Evan mentioned, there are perennial problems of conflict that have permeated human relationships and cultural relationships since the dawn of time until whatever happens to us eventually happens to us. But that is the focus that we used to approach this.

Some of you may not be familiar at all with virtual worlds. Some of you are very familiar with virtual

worlds. We will try to present the information in a way that, if you have absolutely no idea what we are talking about, we will try to explain a little bit, because we know that it's difficult to understand the first time out, and we appreciate that some of you are here out of interest and don't know what a virtual world is.

It's a three-dimensional, digital environment in which people can create characters, the world that we use for our project today. You'll see a short documentary video that was filmed in the virtual world of Second Life.

We have a 150-page graphic report that we did, which is in the style of a comic book. All of the art is created from snapshots that we took in Second Life, and the dialogue is all from the transcripts of the interviews that we conducted with the people who are real people from all over the world. So each time you see an avatar on that screen over there, that will be an avatar created by a person in the physical world, all of whom, like all of us, were born into a complicated framework of geopolitical, physical, socio-economic realities that are no longer applicable in a virtual world, where your mind and your creativity become the manner in which you express yourself creatively.

Initially, this project was going to be a series of discussions that we were going to host in Second Life, where we would bring in speakers to talk about Islam. And then, we realized that there was already a vibrant community of people—in fact, there are people here tonight who told us about projects that we didn't even know about. Baghdad Street is the name of one of the projects. There are just so many projects that it would be impossible to even cover them all. We could have done this for years.

We chose to highlight examples in which the conversation is unique to the medium. For example, is it disrespectful to wear virtual shoes in a virtual mosque? In the physical world, wearing shoes in a mosque is disrespectful because you are bringing in dirt and germs and there is a traditional framework around the notion. But in a virtual mosque you are not actually bringing in dirt and germs, but yet it is still a symbolic gesture, coming into a mosque wearing shoes. And so those examples will be unique to virtual worlds. We tried to stick to that.

While we worked on this project, we didn't know who the next American president would be. I can't imagine what it would be like tonight if we were presenting policy recommendations to the [McCain](#) Administration. But the Obama Administration has demonstrated an extremely exciting, fluent use of the Internet, and we are thrilled to be able to present these policy recommendations in that way.

This entire project was guided by the 13th-century Sufi mystic poet [Rumi](#)'s poem, which is:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing  
there is a field.  
I'll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down upon that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other,'  
doesn't make any sense.

The first week I was in Second Life, I had just completed six months of investigative reporting across the Gulf Coast on post-Katrina corporate profiteering and had just finished a month of press and was at a lunch. Somebody I know who works at IBM started talking to me about Second Life. This was in November of 2006. I remember sitting there, not quite really fully understanding. Avatars, virtual economy—I couldn't really imagine.

So that day I raced home from lunch and I signed up for Second Life and created Eureka Dejavu. That's my avatar in Second Life. You'll see her soon.

Josh's is Schmilsson Nilsson.

They say that Second Life is full of sex. I say seek and ye shall find.

I went in and looked for temples, synagogues, mosques. I met a Muslim woman in a Jewish synagogue who told me that she had, all her life, wanted to go to prayer services and had never had the courage to try because she feared being persecuted or making other people uncomfortable. I was absolutely amazed by the fact that people could experience one another's cultures in a way that was physically safe.

Physical harm is impossible in a virtual world, which makes it the ideal medium for conducting sensitive and controversial discussions about cultural issues that are simply quagmires in the physical world. This isn't just a good medium for these conversations; it is the ideal medium for these conversations. We are hoping to see more of it—sustained, focused use of these spaces.

Physical fear, however faint or strong it may be, is a limiting factor in the physical world. We witnessed extreme disagreements in Second Life and observed or participated in conversations and events at which challenging views were posed. But as arguments escalate in Second Life, you can mute speakers, you can ban them from the space in which the conversation is taking place. There are a number of different ways to control escalating conflict in these spaces.

It is my belief that life itself is art, that we are in a period of evolution of human consciousness where our lives are becoming a source of content generation, where people are actually documenting their own existence and putting it out there in a way that enables us all to reflect and inhabit one another's ideas.

I think the Internet is like an ocean fed by springs and tributaries that are its platforms. Those platforms will rise and fall over time, but the collective remains. And, like an ocean, the Internet reflects the physical reality beyond its borders, but at the same time it contains life within it.

This project that we conducted across four continents in the physical world and the virtual world of Second Life showed us a microcosm of that life within the Internet.

I want to thank Joshua S. Fouts for approaching me to work with him on this project. It has been life-altering for me. My perspectives on culture are radically different than they were when we started this project, and it took me outside of my own comfort zone.

We appreciate the guidance of the Carnegie Council and I appreciate Josh for bringing me into it and all of you for being here tonight, and the people that we interviewed—we interviewed scores of people in the physical world and the virtual world. The candor that they showed demonstrates the strength of this medium.

Thank you all for being here.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** I want to say a couple of words about the background of the project, and then Rita and I are going to take you on a tour of the past year, which we will use some visual aids to facilitate, and then we'll show you a mini-documentary that we filmed in the virtual world of Second Life. It is, again, a snapshot of the experiences and cultures and people that we met. Then we have a special performance at the end of that, and then we'll take questions.

A little bit of background. About six years ago, I sat down for lunch with [Jesse Ausubel](#) from the Lounsbery Foundation. I don't know if he is here in the crowd. I had this crazy idea, and that idea was that I wanted to explore the potential of virtual worlds and massively multi-player online games, which are sort of a kissing cousin to virtual worlds, about their potential for public diplomacy and cultural dialogue.

At the time, I had recently left the State Department, where I had spearheaded a number of new technology and public diplomacy projects. But inside of virtual worlds and massively multi-player online games, I had noticed that there were collaborative acts of creativity and cultural dialogue that were appearing in new and exciting ways, and I wanted to help the government understand that.

When I met with Jesse, I was actually at the University of Southern California, where, as Rita and Evan mentioned, I had launched a foreign policy think-tank. I told Jesse that what I wanted to do was to generate hard, quantitative data to help express and prove the value of these spaces to policymakers and to the government alike.

Jesse offered me some words of advice that I have kept with me since then. He told me that, first and foremost, the Lounsbery Foundation, where he is a Board member, was an activist organization, and if it was going to support any project it would have to be a project that focused on actions that demonstrated the value of space.

And then he shared with me a story about a project he had worked on with [Will Wright](#), who was the founder, as many of you know, of [The Sims](#). The game that he had worked on with him was called [Sims University](#). Jesse told me that instead of the students who first played the game learning how to run a university, what they first did was they actually tried to run it into bankruptcy. So he said to me, "Go to the players." He said, "Instead of hiring students to collect data, go to the players and ask them about games."

So what we did was we held a contest. It was called The Public Diplomacy in Virtual Worlds Contest. We challenged players and game designers alike to explain to us how these spaces could be used for cultural understanding.

The winner of that contest, I'm pleased to say, is actually here with us tonight, [Asi Burak](#), who designed a game while in graduate school called [PeaceMaker](#), which was a role-playing game that helped people to understand how difficult it is to manage the conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian governments.

Fast-forward to the design of the Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds project. When Rita J. King and I decided to collaborate on the project, I described a series of activities, as she mentioned, that we could do to help elicit ideas from the space. That included things like bringing U.S. members of Congress into Second Life.

Within weeks of even discussing these ideas, we found that people had already done it. Rita came to me and, in her infinitely creative way, said to me, "Let's make this a quest." Before that, Rita had been an investigative journalist, and she had just completed three quests of her own, so questing was a natural approach.

The first quest, as she mentioned, was this major investigative report exploring corporate profiteering in the Gulf Coast immediately after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. While she doesn't describe it this way, as I've listened to her stories about driving around in a rental car post-Katrina and reporting on the devastation, the image that keeps coming to mind is of a real-life [Lord of the Flies](#). It was a quest to understand and chronicle how corporations were exploiting this devastation to their profit.

Her next quest was then a civil rights quest through the Deep South. And then, finally, a quest into Second Life that she did, in which she chronicled the development of IBM's Virtual Universe Community.

So Rita's expertise is in telling stories, and to be a good storyteller you have to be a good listener. This project really is, at its heart, a project about listening and telling stories.

Earlier this week, as Evan mentioned, President Barack Obama launched one of the first public diplomacy campaigns of his administration by granting his first international interview with a Middle Eastern satellite channel, Al Arabiya. In doing this, he effectively went over the leaders of the Middle East and spoke to the people. He spoke to the public. That's essentially what public diplomacy is about in government rhetoric.

But what he said were some important points that were central to this. He said what he wants to do is to listen because, he says, all too often the United States starts by dictating, so let's listen.

This project at its foundation is about storytelling, which is about understanding something new about the human condition, about public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, strategic communications—whatever the government euphemism they use to describe that—efforts by governments, NGOs, civil societies, to tell their stories to foreign publics.

Too often, one of the things that we have noticed in public diplomacy is that it is criticized for being too preachy and not listening. So the idea for the Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds project was really hatched with this very specific idea: How could we learn about other cultures in an authentic and experiential space, and specifically how could we learn about cultures that self-identified as Muslim?

Now, we chose Second Life for many reasons, but the best reason for us was because it is an inherently international space. More than 70 percent of the registered users for Second Life are from outside the United States. That made it a right and unique space for this kind of conversation.

Our goal was really to see what we could learn about Islam—not by inviting particular people with particular perspectives into Second Life, as Rita mentioned, but rather to follow the trail of what was already happening culturally in the space that might yield new insight into Islam.

So the work was really a bona fide listening effort. I keep coming back to that word "listening," listening and storytelling. What it is is that virtual worlds add a twist to that effort, because you become part of the narrative. So while you are listening and chronicling, you are actually incorporating yourself into that story.

We went into communities in Second Life that either self-identified as Muslim or were self-declared efforts to better understand Islam—we'll tell you more about those through the documentary later - and we asked people to tell their stories. What we found were people building new narratives to find new ways to coexist.

That said, we're not Pollyannas, and Second Life is not a Utopia. Rita mentioned "seek and ye shall find." As I like to say, human vice knows no bounds and any venue can provide an opportunity for human vice to be expressed. But it also can provide a similar venue for human creativity and collaboration to be expressed in new ways, and that's really what we were about.

We encountered numerous situations where tense and impassioned dialogue occurred. It wasn't all sort of a "Kumbaya" space. There were a lot of interactions we had where moments were tense, where we thought that they might not move through to a point of reconciliation or understanding, but they ultimately did, and that was what was particularly exciting about the space. And really, that was the opportunity that we found.

But we also found new leaders. That's another thing that NGOs and governments who are in the business of public diplomacy, if you will, are trying to do, is to identify where leaders and opinion makers exist. They tend to use the physical space to do that. What we identified were leaders in the virtual space. I think that this is really a clarion call, if anything, to pay attention to the fact that new leaders are arising in spaces that are not traditional, that if you are a diplomat or if you're an NGO or a civil society and you're attempting to reach out to other communities, you'd best be aware that the communities where new ideas are forming aren't necessarily going to be in the physical world, but may be coming out of virtual spaces.

We met people in Second Life from England, the United States, Libya, France, Syria, Lebanon—I'm just going to race through these—Egypt, the Netherlands, Germany, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Qatar, Portugal, Canada, Mexico, the Russian province of North Ossetia, Indonesia, South Africa, Morocco, Japan, and on. These people took us into their virtual houses, their communities, their mosques. They invited us to [fatwahs](#)—we learned about a new definition for fatwah. They took us on a [virtual Hajj to Mecca](#). They discussed their perceptions of extremism, integration, creative collaboration,

and cultural values. And most of all, they shared their stories with us. They knew that we were creating out of that a story of our own that included them as characters.

**RITA J. KING:** Back in 1996, when I worked during my brief stint at AOL, if you misrepresented your identity back then—if you pretended to be a man but you were really a woman, although probably usually the other way around, I think—but if you presented yourself one way and that really wasn't how you were, it was a consequence of digital anonymity. That's what my article was really about.

Ten years later, I'm sitting here in a position of discussing virtual identity creation. So in ten years' time there has been this gigantic leap culturally from you were lying if you misrepresented yourself online to this expectation that somehow we can evolve culturally by creating these avatar identities, which are tied back to your physical real-world identities.

This, I believe, is the infancy in a new era of the evolution of consciousness. But it is the infancy. So just be mindful of that as we proceed from here, because it's still new to everyone.

We attended the [U.S.-Islamic World Forum](#) in Doha, Qatar, which is where we met Netta, Samos, and [Yas](#), who are here today to perform for you. We'll tell you more about them in a bit.

It was an incredible experience, a structured dialogue about some of the things that we're talking about here today. I think quite a few people were very surprised.

We did a [mixed-reality event from Doha](#), where we had Yas performing in Farsi and Muhammad Mughabi, a Palestinian hip-hop artist, performing in Arabic together. They had both been invited to the Forum but had not been invited to participate. We overheard them speaking through translators, talking about how they had not been asked to perform. We were hosting a panel discussion with [Howard Gordon](#). He's the show runner for [24](#). We'll wait until we get to that.

This is a quote that they pulled for me: "Creative expression can be a model for social development because it encourages risk taking, initiative, and responsibility." That was from the Forum itself.

[24](#) is a show in which special agent Jack Bauer consistently uses torture on pretty much anyone he comes across to get successful information to keep the United States safe. It's a Fox show.

In Doha, we had a really nice conversation with Howard about the difference between artistic responsibility as an individual and your job that you get paid for. So theoretically—he's the lead writer for [24](#)—does he feel that that's a story line? He was speaking about how he would really like to see Jack Bauer digging ditches in Africa.

I will tell you, the other day, when we were finishing the finishing touches on this project, we were in a restaurant, we looked up in the corner and we saw "24," Jack Bauer digging ditches in Africa. So I'm not really sure of the evolution of that, but—

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** From Doha to Africa in nine months, right.

The event that they were a part of was a mixed-media Second Life and physical world event. We basically brought [Nashwa \[Al-Ruwaini\]](#), Howard Gordon, and former U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands [Cynthia Schneider](#), who herself had been an advocate for more creative and artistic uses of new technologies to build bridges between cultures. This is an image of the avatar which actually ended up representing Yas and Muhammad Mughabi, who were the two hip-hop artists at the event.

There was a worldwide audience in Second Life who participated, as well as a physical audience. Cynthia Schneider was the author of this thing. It's called "[Mightier than the Sword](#)." As Rita said, had she not taken the title already, we would have certainly used it for our report as well. The subtitle is "Arts and Culture in the U.S.-Muslim World Relationship."



In her report, interestingly enough—she did sort of a first draft at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum—one of her recommendations was the use of virtual worlds as a way to enhance cultural dialogue. We pulled that out as an interesting example of a very traditional, conventional policy report in which she highlights how powerful the experience was of doing this mixed-media event in Doha.

One of the things that was really exciting for us—and this is where the video comes in—was that the Doha Forum is a very traditional, high-level policy forum; [Hamid Karzai](#) and [Madeleine Albright](#) were there. These kinds of gatherings are created in a very specific way. Policy discussions are high level. You don't have musicians perform. Art is not really considered to be a viable part of policy discussions.

We commend Cynthia, and since no one yet has been appointed to the U.S. Public Diplomacy position, my vote, for those out in the listening audience, is that Cynthia receive some sort of appointment. Her whole thing has been art and creativity is a catalyst for cultural dialogue, and government needs to pay more attention to that.

We did this mixed-media event. Rita invited Yas and Muhammad Mughabi to be a part of it. They were so inspired by watching the event that they did a spontaneous performance in Arabic and in Farsi. I don't know whether Yas actually speaks or understands Arabic or whether he was just riffing with Muhammad, but it was a really magical moment, where two people who spoke very different languages, who didn't know each other but were artists, were coming together in this shared art, just like jazz, coming together and doing a really powerful performance. We have a very small clip of that that comes up here.

[Video presentation.]

**RITA J. KING:** We are thrilled to have Yas here with us tonight. The last time I got to introduce him was in Doha. It was at the beginning of the project. It is a thrill to be able to introduce him here to you this evening.

Referred to as the "Persian [Tupac](#)," he is the first rapper to have been granted permission by the Iranian government to record and release his music to the general public. Yas has been listened to and downloaded by millions of people. He has been interviewed by various media, including CNN, the BBC, *Time* magazine, *National Geographic*, and [huffingtonpost.com](#). He was born in 1982. He was introduced to hip-hop by his father, who would bring him music CDs after his trips abroad. After the sudden death of his father, at the age of 17 Yas was left with the responsibility of working and taking care of his family, a household of six. He began to sing hip-hop as a means of self-expression.

I should also note that in Cynthia Schneider's report, hip-hop is one of the three recommendations that she had for bridging the chasm between the Western world and the Muslim world, along with virtual worlds and poetry, which we also agree with.

He began to sing hip-hop as a means of self-expression and communication with others going through personal pains and hardship. The song that he is going to perform for you tonight is also about Rumi.

**YAS:** Thank you. I'm so sorry my English is not so strong. So music.

[Musical presentation.]

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** Thank you.

### Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** It seems like this medium is very good at helping communicate cultural, anthropological, political, geographic, physical information. I'm just curious. The essence of a spiritual experience is often ineffable and it's often interior, and many times it happens in silence and in three-year hermitages and

things like that. What potential is there to virtualize that interiority?

**RITA J. KING:** I'm glad that you asked that question, because that's really the heart of my interest as well. When you're embarking on a project like this, one of the things we are conditioned to believe we're not supposed to talk about is our respective religious beliefs or our spiritual beliefs.

One of the most interesting findings of this project was the candor with which people approached the discussion. But as you say, their language is painfully insufficient when it comes to discussing matters of the spirit.

However, if you look at the [Machinima](#) [video], for example, there is one scene—and I know [ILL Clan](#) [Animation Studios] is very proud of this scene, and rightly so—where the virtual marble is actually gleaming and there is sunshine streaming in through the lattice.

When you think about the fact that each and every thing you see in this virtual medium has been created by someone—someone had to figure out how to create a bar of sunshine to come through the window; someone had to figure out how to create the window; someone had to figure out how to build the mosque and how to get clerics in to talk about Islam, for example, in this case—personally I found that as I was reflecting on all this creation around me, it actually started making me look at the physical world and thinking, "Well, someone invented the staircase and someone created—"

So I actually found myself often challenging my own beliefs on the idea of—I did not become a creationist in the course of working on this project. However, the concept of creation, which is the attribute—no matter what spiritual system you are a part of or not a part of, creation is a quality that is attributed to God. So when you're in a virtual world and you're looking at the fact that everything is user-created, you start to appreciate—at least I did—the act of creation in a new way. So that ineffable quality of creativity permeated this entire process and became an unexpected spiritual side effect, if you will.

**VOICE:** So the medium is the message almost.

**RITA J. KING:** I think it is in some ways.

And there are also periods of silence in Second Life. But Second Life is only one of many different platforms. This is just the one that we chose for this project for reasons that Josh mentioned earlier.

But in the periods of silence in Second Life, what you're doing together is creating something. For example, our space, which is called the Imagination Age, in Second Life we have to build and create. So in those moments of silence it's not passive; it's often active, that you're creating something with someone.

The reason why I say this is the ideal medium—as a training ground for the digital culture that is growing around the world right now to learn how to reapproach interaction in the physical world, it made me realize, in a carbon-based world where you can't escape the body, this medium liberates your mind so that the concepts that are ineffable sort of take on a life of their own. It was amazing.

**QUESTION:** I have to respond to this as well. I'm a practicing Quaker. Most of my spirituality, I think, is rooted in my real physical community in Brooklyn, but I also have a Quaker community in Second Life. I would say personally I would feel a lot of my spiritual connections come from whatever spaces I happen to be in and being with people of like mind and of like spirit.

I guess my question is more about, as you said, there are other venues for interchange on these issues. I wonder if you could speak to some sort of lower-bandwidth environments and why Second Life is a particularly unique environment versus, say, an online chatboard or other kinds of instant-messaging platforms. I think some people might question why do we have to use something that requires extremely high bandwidth, expensive computers, which is not accessible to lots of people even within this country,

and certainly within a lot of the developing world.

In particular, I'm wondering if you could respond to if you've done anything about [Muxlim](#)—I know that they recently launched a Web-based virtual world—and if you've talked to any of those people who have used that platform, if that has been useful, if that is more accessible, or if there is less of an experience of this kind of dynamic interchange you speak about happening in Second Life, I'd love to hear about some of that.

**RITA J. KING:** The [Muxlim Pal](#), I think it's called. That world was launched after we actually finished the body of research for this project.

However, we did look at different platforms. We didn't just look at Second Life.

One of the differences between the two platforms is that there is less control in Second Life, meaning there is a Terms of Service in Second Life; you can't just do whatever you want, there are general rules. But the users create the experience themselves, and so there is more leeway for how that is expressed.

Whereas my understanding of Muxlim Pal is that it is more of a structured environment—which doesn't necessarily make it better or worse; it depends on the application. The same is true for business environments, I believe, as well. But it is not user-created. There is already content that people operate within. So we missed that platform because it came at the tail-end of our project. There are new platforms arising all the time.

Josh, if you want to talk about chatrooms?

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** Sure.

And just to add to what Rita said in response to both of your points, the whole creation of what is sacred—if you think about historically how humans have built temples, temples are intended to be these incredibly beautiful spaces that inspire the sort of spirit within. Much of what we saw were these creations of these incredibly beautiful spaces that people built as extensions or places in which to evoke spirituality. So I think that dynamic that humans have been doing all along, which is "How do I build an environment that evokes spirituality in me?" is being expressed in this space.

But to your specific point about why Second Life versus other platforms, Second Life was the most expressive platform, in that we had both a visual, audio, and text space.

But Rita wanted me to tell this brief anecdote, which was my first epiphany about why the Internet or how the Internet was going to change opportunities for cultural dialogue.

It was in 1991. I was in grad school. It was January, the beginning of the [first Gulf War](#). A friend of mine introduced me to IRCchat. So this predates the World Wide Web, it predates all those interfaces, but it was use of the Internet for real-time communication.

I started hanging out in various chatrooms. One of them happened to have Israelis in Tel Aviv. As SCUD bombs during the first Gulf War started to land in Tel Aviv, I was having a real-time chat with Israelis, getting a first-hand account of what it was like to experience that. That was when I realized that the Internet was really going to revolutionize the way that cultures are going to encounter each other and come to understand each other.

From 1991 fast-forward to today. You know, the World Wide Web was born. The rate of evolution that we have seen in that short period of time is just really phenomenal.

**RITA J. KING:** Briefly, why Second Life? I think it's just an immersive environment in which I perceive that there is the potential here in general—again, we are at the infancy of it—but a paradigm shift away

from collaborative acts of destruction, which war demonstrates. We are capable of collaborating on widespread acts of creating something together. Unfortunately, it has traditionally been destructive. I see the potential now to develop a paradigm where we are collaborating creatively and destruction is marginalized, because in a realm where physical violence becomes impossible, it loses its currency.

**QUESTION:** My assumption is that the lingua franca in Second Life is English.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** Not necessarily. Because of voice, people can chat in their own languages both in voice and in text.

**RITA J. KING:** And use translation devices. You can select your language that you're chatting in—I think the translation device I have might have ten or 15 different languages on it—and then you select the language you'd like it to be translated into. Now, it uses Google translation. It's still rudimentary.

But I think that the vulnerability it creates when you go into a conversation and you say, "Look, this isn't a literal translation, so don't take me literally"—it shows an effort.

Part of the value of the space is that people are sort of learning together how to function in these spaces. So part of what limits us in the physical world interacting culturally, or even on a personal level, is fear of—it's not just fear of violence; it's also fear of making a fool of yourself. You're afraid that you're going to say something wrong or you're afraid you're going to do something wrong.

Well, if you are an avatar and everyone's avatar operates under the same—for example, in the [Brazilian Sims](#), Brazilian avatars will stand closer to each other because the physical space in Brazil is different. Americans will stand further apart from each other.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** Brazilians' non-verbal comfort zone is about half of what Americans' is.

**RITA J. KING:** Right. So you emulate what you know. And yet, there is a whole new medium that everyone is trying to adapt to simultaneously.

So I have had conversations in multiple languages with people using the translation device, or using an actual translator, where you speak in voice and you have other people in voice who are translating in real time.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** But sort of an interesting example, with most of the interviews we did with people who were in the Middle East who were native Arabic speakers, they would speak to us in English. But what happened is that Second Life can't accommodate right-to-left languages, so Hebrew and Arabic are not presently—

**RITA J. KING:** And Chinese.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** Chinese actually goes vertically, so they can do Chinese and they can do Korean. But they can't do right-to-left.

So what's happening is they are using the Romanized alphabet to communicate in Arabic. What that looks like is a combination—it looks like Lead Speak, if you're familiar with Hacker Speak. It's letters and numbers. The number 6 looks very similar to an Arabic character. So we were completely out in the dark.

I was talking to Yas. Yas was texting on his BlackBerry. I said, "Is that said in Farsi?" He said, "No, it's in Finglish." People are developing these sort of idioms, working within the framework of the technologies. If there's no left-to-right capabilities, they just borrow the font and create their own language. That's a whole other exciting part of it.

**RITA J. KING:** Yes. We actually had some of the pages of our graphic book translated into the language

that—it's interesting visually.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** It's Arabic using the Romanized alphabet, Roman letters and Arabic numerals.

**QUESTION:** Do you think there are any language barriers? Do they feel that some people are intimidated if they don't speak English, even as their second language?

**RITA J. KING:** Much like the physical world—well, it's important to note that while probably the vast majority of people in Second Life do speak English, by dint of the fact that many people in the world speak English, the United States is only 20%, maybe 17%—

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** It's a little less than 30% [of Second Life].

**RITA J. KING:** It's mostly not Americans in Second Life, which is one of the reasons why we chose the space. So while we interviewed Muslims who live in the United States—we interviewed people from all over the world, but not everyone we interviewed spoke English. I think it's very similar to the physical world. I mean in the same way people would be intimidated by a language barrier in the physical world, it's still you at the keyboard. That's why I say it's the infancy of an evolution in human consciousness, because we're not—nor do I think we ever will break with the physicality of being human. I think it's important to keep that in mind.

But one of the things I find, much like the language barrier, the same way Josh and I met in this space and then met in the physical world, we've actually met a lot of the people that we've interviewed in the physical world later. It's amazing the transition that goes on between communication and non-verbal communication. So there's different ways you communicate in different media.

**QUESTION:** How much of the interaction that occurs in this forum is Muslim/non-Muslim versus intra-Muslim? I wondered if people within the Islamic world are using it as a forum to interact with each other or it's primarily a Muslim/non-Muslim mechanism.

And sort of off the topic, I would have a question for the gentleman who provided the entertainment. In the video that introduced him, there was mention made that some years back it would have been highly unlikely that a performer like him would have been permitted to publicly perform in Iran. I'm curious as to what he feels may be the dynamic that has led to his getting permission. Is there a broader trend that is in action, or is there perhaps something unique about what he sings about and talks about that has permitted him to be able to perform in public?

**RITA J. KING:** Well, it would be really difficult to track how many users of Second Life or virtual worlds are Muslim, in that Muslims live all over the world. It's the most widely practiced religion in the world. So when you sign up for Second Life, you might say you are from France, but you're not going to identify yourself by your religious background. So in that way it's a difficult thing to track. We do know regionally where the people are from who use Second Life.

**JOSHUA S. FOUTS:** We found that as we run into the various communities, they were using it as a religious resource and also as an opportunity for self-exploration.

So Muslima Questi, whom we feature in the documentary, is a 21-year-old woman from the UAE who was raised religious but didn't really identify with her religion, which is Islam. She went to the Internet to attempt to learn more about Islam. She found that Second Life, interestingly enough, provided a venue for her to explore it. What she didn't expect to happen was that she ended up in her self-exploration building a mosque that ultimately turned into a community, and she has now become this community leader for other people who want to discuss.

I think the second time we met Muslima she invited us to a seminar she was having, a cross-cultural discussion about rape in Islam. It was people from 17 different countries. It was literally, I think, maybe

20 people in the circle, people from Europe, from the United States—this was a meeting in Second Life—from a couple of different countries in the Middle East, talking about various governmental policies in a very frank and surprisingly candid way. So it touches on a lot of those different things.

When we went to the virtual Hajj to Mecca, they were also holding discussions about interpretations of the Qur'an relevant to Ramadan. Twenty or 30 people would gather at those on a nightly basis to meet with a Muslim cleric who would read passages and they would discuss the meaning of those passages.

The definition of *fatwah* is a legal ruling, but in the U.S. media, particularly U.S. media, but the Western media in general, it's a term that is more often referring to an edict that is attempting to condemn something in the West. But in its most basic definition it is really a cleric offering interpretation of religion. So we attended these fatwahs in temples.

So there is a wide cross-section of that kind of interaction, if that answers your question. But there has been no polling really to date about what people's religious affiliations or religious interests are in virtual spaces. I think that's an opportunity for a polling agency to explore.

Does Yas want to answer the other question? We could do that.

**YAS:** [Arabic].

**INTERPRETER:** Music is just something that really brings people together and is an international, universal language. For instance, right now I sang to you and you didn't understand my language, but you did understand through my feeling what I'm trying to communicate to you and that sense of the connection that we may have together in that moment.

In the music that I'm working on now and the projects I'm doing now, the reason why in Iran they have been able to give me permission to release a few of my songs is just really me going after it and pushing forward and not stopping regardless. I will just continue going after it and pushing for it.

You asked about if this is just the one case, that they use him [Yas] on CNN. He says one of the main reasons was through me I was able to connect with the youth of Iran because I spoke through my own pains, and through my own experience I was able to connect with them and they were able to relate with me in my music. So I represented a bigger voice of the entire generation and what they were thinking and saying. So perhaps that's why I was one of the first people chosen or allowed to move forward with this.

**QUESTION:** I just have to agree. Really I get it now. I got it when we first met and when you were explaining this, but this, the eight-minute documentary, really just kind of brought it home to me, and I want to go home and create something for myself now. So thank you for that.

I'm just curious because, as you're talking—for instance, you're sitting in a room and the cleric would come in and there would be an expert talking about—because everyone can be who they want to be, is there any kind of a filtering—you know, is that really a cleric?—because then you are at the risk of spreading false information? Is that something? So do people within a room filter themselves, or is there an authority? Because in that case sometimes it could backfire, where now there is misinformation being spread out there, because then of course it is going to trickle over to everyone else in other rooms and other conversations. So how does that work?

**RITA J. KING:** A great question.

By trade, because I am an investigative reporter, my proclivity is to verify something before I report it. Now, in this case, one of the philosophical issues we had in the beginning, and one of the reasons why it's helpful for us to be filtered through ethics in this case, especially as journalistic ethics are so under question—what does it mean anymore to be journalistically ethical, as the print media is falling apart and

these new identities are arising?

Some of the people that we interviewed, we took their identity at face value. In other words, some of the Muslim women we interviewed didn't want their family members to know that they even have Second Life accounts. They couldn't talk to us on [Skype](#). So we took them as a created identity. When we refer to people in this body of work by their avatar name, that means that this is what they presented to us.

Now, we also spent hours and hours and hours interviewing these people. So it wasn't like somebody just mentioned something off-the-cuff in a room and we reported it. In cases where we did, that's reflected in the bite.

But I think that there's a nuance in this. When you're reporting on these spaces, how do you accommodate for a mix of identities, where some people are green and giant, and how are you supposed to—is that an authentic representation of Josh? I think it is. I really do. It's weird. I see them as interchangeable. But you can control the circumstances under which you identify yourself.

Now, with that said, there are two kind of binary uses of the space and then infinite gray in between. There are gamers in the space who have wanted to be vampires their entire lives and, hurrah, now you can have fangs and be a vampire. Those people are identifiably gaming in the space—although I wouldn't discount the fact that you could also take them seriously. I would take that avatar seriously in a serious environment. But there are role-playing issues, games. That's a separate issue.

Then there are organizations like, for example, [Global Kids](#). Global Kids is an accountable organization. So in other words, if you are looking up at the Global Kids Web site, you can see someone's avatar. We're the same way. In our profiles it has our real name. If someone identifies himself as a member of DancingInk Productions or as a member of Global Kids, it can be verified by asking someone within the organization, "Does this person represent you?"

So yes, there are levels of veracity. But it's irresponsible, in my opinion—two different things. One thing that's irresponsible is—and I think the mainstream media narrative has embraced this wholesale—because it's difficult to get past the cartoonish appearance of the spaces, it's very easy to be cheeky in reporting so-and-so's avatar.

When they had congressional hearings last year on virtual worlds and Second Life, I actually had dinner that night with [Philip Rosedale](#), who is the founder of Second Life. I remember [The Daily Show](#) had a segment on a dolphin with ta-tas. It was funny—I'm not going to deny that. But that's sort of the general gist, where we can't take it seriously because these people have nothing better to do in the physical world. That's wrong.

But it's also wrong to not take into account the nuance of the fact that these are created identities. So I consider it mixed reality. We just have to get better at parsing out what that means, because that's where we're headed.

EVAN O'NEIL: Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you, Rita and Josh, for this great presentation.

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