

# GLOBAL WARMING ON SECOND LIFE: THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND FREE DISCUSSION IN COLLABORATIVE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, Collaborative Virtual Environments (CVE) have become more than mere entertainment for bored youngsters. These environments are the scene of encounters between people who develop conversations and discussions on a variety of topics. These discussions are grounded in norms and rules of conduct which, in part, are determined by the external service provider or the websites operators, and by the participants. Meetings in virtual environments resemble real-life, physical ones but are not identical to them, thus posing interesting questions about this newly emerging culture, the nature and quality of the resulting discussions, the option to set up and manage a community and to formulate agreed norms of conduct among participants. In the physical world, discussion occurs through the encounter between people, which then enables conversation, discussion, an exchange of opinions and, eventually, the consolidation of agreements. Lacking the physical presence of its participants, the virtual environment constitutes a new and different world. We chose to look at the *Second Life* virtual environment, whose participants go by the name of *avatars*, and we conducted discussion groups on the subject of global warming. The discussion groups were held both in the real world and in the virtual environment. The latter type of discussion is essentially similar to the one that takes place in Habermas's (1989) "public sphere," which is not necessarily physical and in the case of the virtual environment, differences in power and status between the participants, are temporarily suspended. Habermas's public sphere is considered a good, perhaps even utopian, basis for conducting a democratic discourse.

**KEYWORDS:** Global Warming, Climate Changes.