

* On the Internet *

Second Life in Education and Language Learning

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With thanks to wiki-contributors: Dennis Newson, Barbara Dieu, Nick Noakes, and Venny Su

Editor's note: This process of writing this made use of an experiment in collaboration 'On the Internet'. Prior to submission I placed a working copy of this article at <http://webheadslink.wikispaces.com/> where it was left open for editing by anyone, though that fact was announced only in the community of Webheads, who have been exploring Second Life recently, having met regularly online for years now. I was interested to see what would happen with the article, and the extent to which spontaneous collaboration would be useful. By deadline time, several contributors had been attracted, all of whom engaged the author to improve the article.

To continue the experiment, the wiki will be left online. If you would like to respond to anything in the article that follows, you may go there and leave a comment. As with Wikipedia, there is no password.

The topic is a lively and rapidly evolving one, though interaction on the issue regarding this article had to be cut off at deadline time Dec 27, 2006. Meanwhile, there follows an encapsulation of what can be found at Second Life, itself inherently a work-in-progress, to stimulate thinking about the direction of the learning potential of virtual worlds in 2007 and beyond.

It seems that first life is not good enough. Just when we were coming to terms with a chaotically morphing online life in conjunction with a hectic here-and-now real one, along comes yet another breakthrough in virtual existence. Reactions with respect to benefits in education vary, but those expressed by many of the million or so people who inhabit its alternate universe suggests that Second Life is a virtual world with a difference.

Or is it more of the same? Is Second Life the up and coming harbinger of collaboration and productivity online, or a banal trap that is consuming resources and time best spent elsewhere? Is Second Life ideally matched with the open source nature of the read-write Web and social networking, a next-stage in the level of conversations redirecting our interpersonal and societal interactions (including those in the marketplace) applauded in the Cluetrain Manifesto <http://www.cluetrain.com/>, or is it heading in the other direction, uncomfortably corporate and profiteering? And what if anything does it have to do with education? No matter where you think this particular virtual world is heading, the answer is, "a lot"!

Depending on whose figures you believe, perhaps half a million unique avatars have touched down in Second Life in the last two months, and that number has been growing steadily. It's not the numbers so much as what those avatars find when they get there, a virtual world where possibilities seem endless. Not only can you (or someone more clever than you) create the world of your choice replete with gizmos and widgets that do things (like play recordings and slide shows or provide you with utilitarian tools and information), but your avatar can defy gravity and fly at will. You can teleport from place to place, world to world, and you can ride all manner of conveyances if available. I recently sat fully clothed on a stool half-submerged at a poolside bar and had a pleasant chat with an attractive lady as fully dressed and waist deep in water as I was. In real life this lady had put on a conference at which I had been a plenary speaker. A snippet of what it's like "in world" is captured in this cameo: "Yesterday a cheerful Italian gave me a Babblar translator so we started teaching each other Italian and Hungarian using English as the common language, which was real fun, especially that we were figure ice-skating meanwhile." (posted Nov 27, 2006 at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/message/14030).

Second Life appears at first glance a reincarnation of Active Worlds, an avatar-based MUVE, or multi-user virtual environment, developed in the mid-90's which once had around half a million users (according to <http://awportals.com/>). It's been remarked that diminishing populations are taking the fun out of life there; e.g. <http://forums.activeworlds.com/archive/index.php?t-5429.html>. However MUVE's such as Active Worlds have often been used in education as simulating environments rich in learning opportunities e.g. The River City Project headed by Chris Dede, <http://muve.gse.harvard.edu/rivercityproject/index.html>.

Active Worlds has also been used as a virtual space to nurture language learning. As is archived in my web site http://www.vancestevens.com/findbuds.htm#active_worlds there was as recently as 5 years ago an InterZone University site built by a teacher in Osaka named Gordon Wilson, which featured voice chat in the inherently text-based 3D environment and encouraged students to participate in building up the world. Wilson had arranged for native-speaker hosts to be present each day to assist with making the world sympathetic to non-native speakers. Nowadays, his websites are down, and a Google search on 'Gordon Wilson Active Worlds' leads only to the entry at my website :-)

Another such example, "Language learning in a Game-based Multi-User Virtual Environment: Quest Atlantis," was presented at the 2005 WiAOC Conference <http://wiaoc.org> by Dongping Zheng, Robert Brewer, and Michael Young. Like the River City project, Quest Atlantis <http://atlantis.crlt.indiana.edu/> is National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded, and uses an Active Worlds kernel to immerse children, ages 9 to 12, in educational tasks. The project goes beyond language, researching "the complex variables that constitute an online learning, playing, and socially conscious experience" according to a broadside of the Center for Research on Learning & Technology at Indiana University <http://crlt.indiana.edu/research/qa.html> (and see Dede, 2005).

In one study on the use of Active Worlds for language learning, Peterson (2006) found that participants were able to undertake a variety of tasks through target language interaction, and also employed transactional communication and interactional strategies. Task type influenced the quantity of negotiation, and the use of avatars facilitated learner interaction management during real time computer-mediated communication. He concludes that the learner interaction was influenced by the complex interaction of a number of

variables including task type, sociolinguistic factors, context of use and the mix of technical affordances provided by Active Worlds.

So Second Life is not particularly new in concept. The look and feel of both worlds is, on first arrival 'in world', strikingly similar. In both, you appear in a 3D fantasy land as an avatar in the company of other avatars. You can walk or run or fly about. You can alter your camera angles (and take pictures - many people do, both still and moving, and galleries abound online). You can converse with other avatars there, and you can teleport to other spaces. Why then has Second Life taken off so successfully where Active Worlds never quite achieved that threshold? (Second Life reached a million users in October 2006, per <http://blog.secondlife.com/2006/10/18/1000000-residents-happy-crushing-signup-load-sad/> -- but see also Clay Shirky's "Story too good to check": <http://valleywag.com/tech/second-life/a-story-too-good-to-check-221252.php>, where Linden Lab's figures and means of arriving at them are questioned).

Perhaps it was a question of timing. Computing power and people with ability to use it have become more ubiquitous now. Both Active Worlds, at its inception, and Second Life at the present time, have pushed the limits of typical computer resources, and are thus wholly enjoyable only to those with above-average computers and bandwidth. Both are challenging to use and require competent awareness of how computers work, as well as high tolerance for ambiguity. But "normal" computing power increases more rapidly these days, as do the skills of those behind the keyboard. The culture of computing and digital literacy is more receptive to virtual spaces and more conducive to their potential than was the case ten years ago, and the mindset of both digital immigrants and particularly of digital natives has changed to greater acceptance of immersion in virtual worlds (Prensky, 2001).

Another reason for the success of Second Life is that there is much greater mutual community awareness than there was when Active Worlds appeared on the horizon. The nature of the blogosphere plays to the popularity of Second Life, and promotes the formation of viable communities within virtual spaces. When Active Worlds was developed in the mid-90's the news was spread by e-mail, BBS (bulletin board systems), static webpages, and emergent IM clients like ICQ. Second Life has appeared at a time when people are much more closely interlinked through blogs and various other social networking devices, and news of interest to particular communities tends to spread more rapidly (at the [Speed of Creativity](#), as Wesley Fryer has entitled his blog). Furthermore the news now carries with it objects such as video clips that allow people to vicariously experience Second Life without actually being there, as we'll see shortly in this article.

There is also a much better understanding now of the impact that ubiquitous access to computers has had on giving voice to communities in the "long tail" (Anderson, 2004) and Second Life has timed itself to be right in step with this. More importantly, Second Life has become a vehicle for this development, seized by its participants as a means of stimulating interaction among a target spectrum of constituents.

Like-minded people 'loosely joined' throughout the blogosphere populate communities which overlap and influence other communities, and these communities disseminate and share a wide range of objects associated with Web 2.0 and social networking, such as open source scripts and tools supporting interaction in Second Life. For example, a Moodle community has formed, called Sloodle <http://www.sloodle.com/>, where you can take advantage of various tools in the Sloodle environment and be in Second Life but interact through Moodle. Add-ons such as the voice clients Ventrilo and Teamspeak are freely downloadable and usable in Second Life. Objects can be found throughout Second Life where developers have linked to digital and multimedia resources available on the open-access Web. Someone has even created a notorious CopyBot that will replicate objects there (much to the consternation of the segment of the community that is *not* open source and prompting [threats from Linden Lab of expulsion of those using CopyBot](#)).

Second Life has opened doors to creativity and imagination that have been particularly transformative for education. To paraphrase Jeremy Kemp, one of Sloodle's developers, speaking on the Worldbridges Network, EdTechBrainstorm #57, November 9, 2006, the asynchronous objects available in Second Life have much greater potential for transformative impact on educations than the synchronous interaction there <http://edtechtalk.com/node/739>.

Yet another reason for the success of Second Life is that it's being taken quite seriously by a growing number of successful people and entities firmly rooted in the non-virtual world. It's hard to ignore the serious attention given to this environment by such a wide range of personalities and bona fide institutions (not to mention start up companies making money off accessories for avatars, and a vast cadre of gamers, which serious Second Lifers avoid by setting up their worlds on islands away from the inconveniences of the mainland).

How seriously Second Life is taken can be deduced from a short list of links with accompanying videos that give you a good idea of what Second Life is like. For example, Susan Vega gave a recent concert in Second Life, resulting in some fascinating artifacts such as a multimedia film clip of how her virtual guitar was constructed, <http://secondlife.com/showcase/>; and numerous videos of her performance, such as that at http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2006/08/nwntv_the_secon.html. Mark Warner, presidential hopeful and former governor of Virginia, staged political events (a news conference and town hall meeting) in Second Life in September, 2006. This transcript with screenshots can give you the flavor of the event: http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2006/08/the_second_life.html and you can play the YouTube video at the governor's website: <http://www.forwardtogetherblog.com/story/2006/9/15/18268/4612>.

Countless institutions are setting up in Second Life, among them:

- Reuters has an island there and has engaged author Warren Ellis to write a weekly column called "Second Life Sketches" for the Reuters Second Life News Center starting January, 2007. In the news blurb, Ellis is quoted as saying: "Second Life is not only the biggest digital art installation in the world, but potentially the most radical shift yet in the way communities are formed online, and possibly also the germ of the next great operating system, ... It's not only a place where people get as strange as they can, but an incubator for the future." <http://secondlife.reuters.com/stories/2006/12/22/warren-ellis-to-write-weekly-sl-column-for-reuters/>
- You can visit the International Spaceflight Museum <http://slspaceflightmuseum.org/drupal/> on the island in Second Life of Spaceport Alpha, and enjoy a virtual tour courtesy of the Worldbridges Network: http://worldbridges.net/SL_Spaceflight_Museum_Tour.
- The Aho Museum and Gallery being built by the New Media Consortium is going to have a display from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art <http://blogs.electricsheepcompany.com/chris/?p=14>.
- There is a 3D hospital on Health Info Island where you can meet free online consultants who can help you find resources regarding medical conditions or issues you may be dealing with: <http://www.rabble.ca/rpn/episode.shtml?x=54785>.
- In case you need more information, Second Life Library 2.0 is a virtual library providing real services to Second Life residents. <http://www.infoisland.org/>.

Many of the institutions purchasing islands in Second Life are educational ones.

- The New Media Consortium has a virtual campus on Second Life which you can tour in the video "NMC Campus: Seriously Engaging," <http://www.nmc.org/sl/2006/06/12/seriously-engaging-movie/> which provides an overview of Second Life and of the NMC Campus, and how people are building a new way of real work and interaction there. I recently attended a presentation and tour on the NMC campus hosted by a group of media design students who had visited Morocco and then demonstrated what they had learned about the country and the culture with a 'build' in Second Life recreating typical scenes where avatars could stroll <http://www.nmc.org/sl/>. I was struck not only by the learning value inherent in the project itself, but also how stimulating it must have been for the students to have attracted so much attention and reaction to their work, as the crowd of avatars gathered at the presentation attested.
- One widely known virtual campus has been created for the Harvard Law School. At <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/cyberone/videos/CyberOne.mp4> you can follow biker (and professor at Harvard Law School) Charley Nessen as he conducts you around CyberOne: Law in the court of public Opinion, <http://www.the-court-of-public-opinion.com>, the course mentioned in Carvin (2006) and Lamb (2006). Nesson's daughter Rebecca, also a professor at Harvard, keeps office hours in Second Life. A student participant in that course can be heard in conversation with Jeremy Kemp in the EdTechBrainstorm #57 referred to above: <http://edtechtalk.com/node/739>

If you've viewed some of the images and videos at these links and heard the voices speaking of their experiences 'in world' you might be on your way to conceding that Second Life might be a creative place to visit and explore. Among other educators reaching that same conclusion:

- Peter Twinning's Schome at: http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Second_Life is not school, not home, but "Schome", an Open University project leading towards an educational system designed to overcome the problems within current education systems in order to meet the needs of society and individuals in the 21st century. Resources available here include Second Life education websites: http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Second_Life_education_websites and an annotated list of ideas for educational projects in Second Life: http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Second_Life_Projects
- Sarah Robbins, <http://home.intellagirl.com/> and a.k.a. Intellagirl Tully in Second Life, conducts a creative writing course using Second Life whose syllabus reads like a typical college catalog, but check out the blogs; e.g. "This is by far one of the funnest things that i have ever done. We have taken school and incorporated video games with it. I feel like we are breaking new barriers for what education can be." ("video games" = Second Life). More information here: http://eng104sl.intellagirl.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=27 and in Foster, 2006.
- The Global Kids Digital Media Initiative, <http://www.holymeatballs.org/>, has been actively running projects for 13-17 year-olds on the Second Life Teen Grid, <http://teen.secondlife.com/>, examining subjects such as global inequality, the genocide in Darfur, and global warming. It has recently been holding the UNICEF 'World Fit For Children' festival in Second Life, with scavenger hunts, building competitions and dance parties.
- One interesting project is EduNation, a creation of Consultants-E, <http://www.theconsultants-e.com/education/education.asp>, and described in Gavin Dudeney's and Nickey Hockly's Global Learn Day Ten, European Keynote, "Get a MUVE on... , <http://www.ben300.com/TENPLAN/?p=61> . There is a video tour of the premises at: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4235810743638836880&hl=en>. This island has become a focal point for Webheads in Action, <http://webheads.info> and <http://www.webheadsinaction.org>. One reason for this is that Consultants-E have donated a hut on the premises where Graham Stanley has created a learning space where Webheads frequently convene. Starting in January 2007, Education will be the Second Life HQ for the participants in the 'Digital Gaming & Language Learning' TESOL Electronic Village Online session, <http://ev007sessions.pbwiki.com/digitalgamingELT>. The program is free and includes a series of scheduled demonstrations and discussions for language educators interested in investigating language learning and teaching possibilities in Second Life.
- Anya Ixchel's long post on My Teaching Semester in Second Life: Pitfalls, Challenges and Joys, is an interesting read about how she conducts a New Literacies course in Second Life: http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=107&Itemid=40

There is no shortage of information on educational developments in Second Life. Linden Labs provides 'in world' support at the Second Life website under Community > Education: <http://secondlife.com/community/education.php>. SimTeach, providing information and community for educators using MUVE's like Second Life in teaching and learning, has a blog, a wiki, a discussion group, and some sample Second Life videos at <http://www.simteach.com/> . The wiki lists many education projects and resources in Second Life: http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki.

If audio is your modality, you can subscribe to Who's on Second? a podcast "about nonprofits and educators jacked into Second Life," at <http://www.rabble.ca/rpn/podcast.php?id=wos>. Podcaster Wayne MacPhail creates a subtly ethereal ambience while conversing with people doing serious and interesting work using Second Life as a base; for example, Nancy Hill, an activist with Code PINK - Women for Peace (Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq, works with this group in real life) and Harry Pence, a Distinguished Teaching Professor of Chemistry at the State University of New York who talks about some of the people he has met online in his own effort to explore the impact of Second Life on online communities of educators. This podcast demonstrates how *human* second life is by engaging the voices underlying the avatars and granting each a soapbox in the podosphere.

Finally, tag, you're IT: You can find del.icio.us links to secondlife/education here: <http://del.icio.us/secondlife/education>

The prognosis on Second Life is not universally considered rosy. Charlie O'Donnell raised eyebrows, hackles, and some interesting points with his Nov 27, 2006 posting *10 Reasons to Go Short on Second Life*, http://www.thisisgoingtobebig.com/2006/11/10_reasons_to_g.html. The ten reasons are (excerpted):

1. Second Life "probably will never be, mobile ... and will not wind up on your cellphones anytime soon."
2. In "a short attention span world... small and bitesized. SecondLife can't easily be consumed in small bits. You can't link to an event that already happened, or tag a place, or share it with someone who doesn't have the software."
3. "Second Life is a benevolent dictatorship. ... a very small group of people basically dictates what goes and what doesn't in this market... a group of people that is not beholden to the residents by law, is a political risk."
4. "Second Life is a business. Linden Labs has taken venture capital investment and those firms are going to look for an "exit" at some point over the next four years or so. Maybe Linden Labs will ... have the pressure to grow revenues which may be at odds with the authenticity of the service."
5. "Diminishing returns for brand participation ... Right now, you can gain a lot of PR buzz by participating in Second Life... probably enough buzz to justify the investment in development for whatever you build to put in there. But, how long will that last?"

6. "Requires 100% attention. ...You can't casually browse Second Life... It's very different than an IM window you can put away in the background when you're doing other things."
7. "Lack of context. ... no guidance, no schedule ... users find themselves lost over overwhelmed."
8. "Digital world with an analog business model ... but because of their digital nature, Second Life has experienced problems lately with users copying digital items that would otherwise be sold."
9. "Reach. No matter how many registered users you have, getting less than 20K simultaneous users online really isn't very much. ... Yes, it's growing, but interestingly, the number of registration is far outpacing the active usage of the site. ... more people are coming to check it out, but they're not sticking around. "
10. Escapism vs. Reality. The promise of social networks is that you've got digital self expression going on in unprecedented volume.... to connect you with real people based on real and authentic things about themselves. ... I thought the blog/Web 2.0/Cluetrain revolution was all about authenticity and living online the way I do in real life... my digital world as a reflection of my real interests and real personality? So far, that seems a lot more compelling for people than fantasy... otherwise, wouldn't most of the profiles on MySpace be roleplaying profiles... fake people created and maintained by real humans behind them? If I'm a business, I want to make sure I'm connecting in a sincere way with real people as well.... not sponsoring a fantasy."

O'Donnell's post has prompted reactions, including Chris Carella's "Ten Reasons to Go Long on Second Life" <http://blogs.electricsheepcompany.com/chris/?p=178>, which (inexplicably) addressed just 1-9 of O'Donnell's points. Regarding the last point, and from my own experiences with Webheads and EduNation, Webheads are people who already knew each other in 'real life', if that's a phrase we can use to describe other more familiar yet totally virtual, forms of professional interaction. Second Life has been an enhancement to that, a playground, a crucible for ideas about how people can augment their interaction through constructive, and constructivist, play/work/whatever. In that respect it has supported real productive effort as opposed to its appearance of fantasy.

Second Life promotes a spirit that proclaims that there is much scope in education for experimentation and enjoyment, and the result doesn't have to look like 'education'. As Stephen Downes also says often in his podcasts, learning should be built into and part of what people do naturally day to day rather than something people are 'kidnapped' into doing within the walls of an isolated institution. If people are drawn to virtual worlds such as Second Life, then educators who are also drawn to those places might be in the best position to intersect with the interests of the target learners already there, or who accept invitations to go there, and help make these experiences educational ones.

As Graham Stanley mentions in Language Learning and Web 2.0 technologies for our 21st century language learners: Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and other emerging technologies (viewable here: <http://www.pod-epl.com/video/Web%202.0%20&%20Language%20Learning.mov>), Second Life might be seen as a prototype for some future form of learning. Whereas that future generation of educational computing might not *be* Second Life (if it's too commercial or implodes on its own popularity, as O'Donnell suggests) it may be something *like* Second Life. Lacking a crystal ball, it's hard to say what will happen in a future with so many imponderables, but it's clear that Second Life has caught the imaginations of many who see in the depths of their computer screens how their work can be made more enjoyable, productive, and interactive in the course of encountering others attracted to 3D virtual spaces. One certainty is that Second Life is having an impact and making a difference now, and that it has already altered in interesting and positive ways the shape of upcoming developments in technology used for education.

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