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Get a Life! A Second Life.

Second Life has been described as a Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming environment or MMOG. One could argue, however, that Second Life is not a game at all.

Games typically have a system of quests or goals with rewards for achieving the set goals. No system of required activities and rewards for completing tasks and activities that are traditionally found in an MMOG such as Everquest or Halo exists in Second Life. A more accurate description might be Massively Multiplayer Virtual World (MMVW). Some have even used the term metaverse (from Stephenson's novel Snow Crash) to describe Second Life (White 5).

Linden Lab, the company that created Second Life states on www.secondlife.com:

Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely created by its Residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe.

Linden Lab takes considerable care to separate Second Life from massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG) in the FAQ on their website. According to Linden Lab, two key factors exist in Second Life that diversifies it from an MMORPG, creativity and ownership (secondlife.com).

Creativity is the factor that makes Second Life more than a game. Users are limited only by their imagination and ability to create. Second Life is a user centered technology and is not dependant on a programmer's intended game design conclusion (White 5). Like real life, it is open ended.

Ownership in an MMORPG is tied to goals, levels, and earnings. In Second Life, everyone with a basic free account can create, earn money, and own intellectual property. These rights are basic rights of existence in Second Life and are outside of the goal driven scenarios of traditional games. Second Life residents live only by their own goals to meet their own outcomes (White 5).

Why should we as educators embrace Second Life as a viable option for teaching students? Keesey, in his "Virtual World Conference Summary," gives insight to the answer:

Evolution. As humans, we share a few million years of 3D experience. Quite simply, virtual worlds work the way the world works. We already imagine, create, live and work in a 3D world. It could be stated that this shared experience and subsequent consistency of social context is precisely why the 3D environment is better at creating a more complete online "sense of self" and presence that has been so well documented by those who study social interaction in virtual worlds. The virtual worlds ability to allow for co-creation and the ability to size and scale and play with perspective in a safe environment where mistakes have no real physical or financial repercussions is often stated and worth repeating. (1)

Traditional online learning is accomplished through learning management systems or an LMS. Web CT, Blackboard, Moodle, Angel, and Desire to Learn are a few popular LMS. The LMS is usually composed of content storage areas with other text-based tools such as discussion boards, quizzes, and chat (Kemp and Livingstone 13-14). Some include wiki and blog functions. Although multimedia use is possible in the LMS, most courses are typically text based with some enhancements such as Power Point presentations (Kemp and Livingstone 13-14).

Though proven effective, these text based learning systems are not always satisfying to learners (Kemp and Livingstone 14-18). The following formula: $i \times i = e$ immersion \times interactivity = engagement (Keesey, "Virtual World Conference Summary 1), shows that immersion and interactivity are the prime sources for creating engagement. Second Life is an immersive technology with unlimited interactivity, and therefore, it is engaging!

Still not convinced? Why should an educator use Second Life as a teaching and learning environment? Here is another more complex answer; it meets the four factors of successful online collaboration.

Tapscott and Williams in their book Wikinomics state that there are four factors of effective online collaboration. The four factors are openness, peering, sharing, and acting globally. If the factors are applied to the Second Life environment, it is easy to see that Second Life serves as a powerful collaborative teaching tool.

Openness refers to open source or collaborations where anyone can make contributions or edit content as well as referencing the trend of corporations opening up content for outside contributors (Tapscott and Williams 20). Second Life was created by Linden Lab to be an open source technology. Any resident can share code to script and build as well as sell objects created (Rymaszewski et al. 8-14, Heaton XXXI-XXXII).

Peering, is the abolition of hierarchy in favor of horizontal organization, all contributors have equal importance (Tapscott and Williams, 25). In the world of Second Life all residents are considered equal. As part of the history of Second Life, there have been a few skirmishes, and one revolution that created a pact between residents that is similar in form to a democracy (Rymaszewski et al. 274-289). All users have the same basic rights under a free account (secondlife.com). Paid accounts give the resident the right to own land (secondlife.com). All other rights to create or sell intellectual property are retained by both paid and non-paid accounts (secondlife.com).

Sharing in Tapscott and Williams definition covers the sharing of created content and the release of that content into collaborative environments for editing, contribution, and comment. Sharing also refers to creating a mass shared computing platform in which users link their computers together physically to share computational power to solve a problem (Tapscott and Williams 25-27). Second Life is considered a prime example of this concept. Users create, share, and log into a set of servers that house Second Life. All users contribute a certain amount

of time to the running and creation of content for the world with their own machines networked into the Linden Lab Servers (Rymaszewski et al. 147-151).

Finally, acting globally in Tapscott and Williams definition, “. . .has no physical or regional boundaries. It builds planetary ecosystems for designing, sourcing, assembling, and distributing products on a global basis (Tapscott and Williams, 29-30).” Once again, Second Life not only meets, it exceeds the principal. Residents from all over the world create, socially network, and engage in commerce with in Second Life (secondlife.com). It is a virtual ecosystem.

A forward thinking instructor can get their disconnected and unconcerned non-collaborators to play *and* learn in Second Life because it enlivens their experience through collaboration and engages them because of the realistic relationship with others in an environment similar to the real world in which they live, work and play (Keesey, "Virtual World Conference Summary" 1)

The key to remember in collaboration is that for collaboration to work, you must engage the learner, whether it is a discussion board or Second Life.

Early signs among communities of educators point towards, if nothing else, more engagement for the learner in Second Life classrooms than in traditional learning management systems. Those who come to Second Life stay there. Students who take a course ask for more. Sara Robbins stated in "Creating Authentic and Engaging Community-Oriented Learning Spaces," that she receives 300 applicants for the 18 seats she has open for her freshman composition course (Robbins, www.youtube.com).

Second Life engages students in a collaborative environment, but it should be noted that in Second Life there are still challenges for instructors. The most important hurdle involves meeting the minimum operating system and hardware requirements. Second Life requires a modern computer system with a good graphics card and a lot of RAM if the experience is to be optimal (Mansfield 109-112). Settings for bandwidth and in world graphics can be customized

to fit specifications of the system running it (Mansfield 109-112). Lucky for everyone, Second Life has no preference for any particular operating system (Webber et al. 4).

There are two different skill sets needed in Second Life. One skill set is for the instructor, the other skill set is for the student. Instructors have the higher skill set, but students currently learning in Second Life, so far, have been capable of easily entering the world and engaging (Robbins).

If an instructor chooses to teach in Second Life, it may take several weeks of preparation and exploration as well as lesson planning revisions (Lester). Instructors should be prepared to study not only the basic skills of moving around, but to study higher skills such as rezzing or building. Lesson creation may involve not just lectures, but integrated components such as notecards, PowerPoint presentations, whiteboards, quiz boards, multimedia files, URLs, other sites in Second Life, and role play (Kemp 13-18).

Instructors have to be able to use notecards, whiteboards, and quiz boards. To effectively use the typical tools of teaching in Second Life, they must be able to create an object, known as rezzing, and to alter various Second Life scripts for the object they have created (Conklin 3-4). Items such as whiteboards and quiz boards can be bought or obtained for free at Education Island, but will still require an instructor to have the ability to alter them or add PowerPoints or other media to them (Burton). An excellent article for getting started written by Megan Conklin can be found at: <http://facstaff.elon.edu/mconklin/pubs/glshandout.pdf>

Notecards are the method by which papers, URL's and other assignment material can be distributed within the virtual classroom space. Often, the instructor must co-ordinate lessons with an HTML page or with a learning management system for detailed assignment capabilities (Sloodle.com). Moodle is one of the more notorious integration partners with Second Life. In the Second Life educational pages or educational wiki, you will see Moodle referred to as Sloodle (Sloodle.com).

For students, they must learn to use notecards as well, but their interaction with the whiteboard and quiz boards as a participant does not require as much tech savvy as the instructor

needs to possess. Their interaction with white boards and quiz boards is typically of the point and click variety. However, some instructors do require students to present in Second Life, and students will need to know how to create the presentations (Conklin 9-12)

Students may not need to know how to create or alter objects in Second Life unless those particular skill sets are the basis of the course. Examples of courses that would need to use rezzing would be 3-D design classes or gaming programming classes (Conklin 9-12).

Fortunately, most objects are available to purchase with Lindens, the monetary system of Second Life. Purchasing pre-built objects can make it somewhat easier on instructors and the students by leveling the technical playing field for both parties (Rymaszewski et al. 318-324).

Students and instructors do have a few sets of shared skills. Each person involved in Second Life classes must create an avatar or a digital representation of their first life. Basic bodies and looks are available to choose from, but customizing the avatar can require using the edit appearance tools and menus. Once again, some customization can be done through purchasing the cleverly crafted works of others for your character to use (Rymaszewski et al. 318-324).

Other shared skills would be chatting, instant messaging (yes it is different than chatting), search, teleport, buy and sell land or objects, and now voice chat (Rymaszewski et al. 318-324).

After the discussion on skills, it is a good time to stop and talk about how to get started with creating an account and creating a classroom space.

There are several good resources out for learning the skill sets required to become a comfortable user of the Second Life environment. The Official Second Life Guide by Michael Rymaszewski et al. and Second Life: A Guide to Your Virtual World by Brian A. White can be purchased from Amazon.com. There are many more books, but these two have detailed images and descriptions that are incredibly helpful. Richard Mansfield's How To Do Everything With Second Life is useful, but is text based and may not be for more visual learners.

Besides the printed and bound word, help can be located in various web resources. Second Life has an educator wikis, blogs, Sloodle, and FAQ's tied to everything from navigation

to scripting. However, the best resource is your first resource provided after you create your avatar, Help Island.

All Second Life participants must create an account with Linden Lab, the creators and administrators of Second Life. Accounts are free, but if you are willing to pay \$9.95 a month, you gain one very valuable right, the right to own land (Rymaszewski et al.19-21) Creating an account requires you to go to www.secondlife.com and download the software necessary on your machine to run Second Life. Please do read the minimum hardware requirements before downloading.

After the software is downloaded, go back to the Second Life website to create your account. You will be given a scroll down list of last names and can choose your own first name. Remember that this is your one chance to customize your name (Mansfield 4-5). Remember the date you created your account! In world and out of world those involved with Second Life will ask you your Rez Date. Think of it as your birth date into your Second Life. It is traditional to throw a big party on your natal day for all your friends and those who have helped you along in learning to navigate and master the skills of Second Life.

A quick refresher, rez is the term in Second Life for creation. Second Life has a system of Primitive Forms or Prims such as cones, spheres and cubes that one can select from to create other larger more complicated structures. Linden Lab developed this short hand system of 3-D forms to alter to make it easier for those not familiar with programs such as Autocad or Maya to quickly integrate into the world. It also saves space on the Grid because it is a form that can be reduced mathematically for storage (Rymaszewski et al. 144-149). The Grid is the server space that Second Life resides in. Think of it as a large map of sectors in a hard drive that if you applied a grid to it, you could locate a specific area. The World Map and Mini Map tabs in Second Life are a great way to visualize this principal (White 348-349).

Now that you have created your avatar, your digital identity in the virtual world, you have the ability to go through tutorials on Orientation Island (White 9). Orientation Island is the first place all new avatars are rezzed into. Once you leave Orientation Island, you can not return.

So make sure you go through all the tutorials and pick up all the free stuff (White 9). Help Island is a place to remember as well. If you leave Orientation Island and still need help, you can go there to meet Linden Lab employees and often volunteers who can answer questions (White 9).

Lindens or Linden Lab employees are designated in the Grid by the use of a first name and the Linden last name (Rymaszewski et al. 2-3) Only those who work for Linden Labs are eligible to receive the Linden last name. There are many famous personalities among the Lindens on the Grid. Two important names you should know are Claudia Linden and Pathfinder Linden. Both are instrumental in servicing the education industry (Second Life Education Wiki). Pathfinder is particularly known for his innovative work in sims for disaster recovery and has spoken in real life at hundreds of engagements (Lester). Both can be found doing office hours regularly. Look at the online calendar on the Second Life website support area to find a time to visit with them (Second Life Education Wiki).

Besides the traditional avenues of help, you have fellow Second Lifers willing to help you. On Education Island and the UK Education Island you will find members from all over the globe working together to develop courses and best practices in Second Life (Second Life Education Wiki).

Current uses are lectures, office hours, simulations (choose your way and real time), presentations, discussion groups, delivery of media (video and audio), and visual representation of conceptual knowledge (Conklin 1-31).

Christopher Keeseey notes that in Second Life, instructors have a safe place to let their students experiment, fail and adapt without real world consequences (Keeseey, "The Path Less Traveled"). In fact, it is that very reason that large corporations are infiltrating Second Life! What better place to test a product, train sales personnel, and market new products. Everything from cars to cell phone prototypes can be found in Second Life (Rymaszewski et al. 218-249)

Another innovative use of the space includes exhibitions, galleries, and museums. Instructors can take students to discipline based spaces, have students create displays, and

connect with others in their profession (Conklin 1-31). Second Life is a great way to bring a guest speaker to class without having to pay for flights and hotels! Students can ask their questions in real time!

As mentioned before, the skill sets of students and instructors take time to develop. The basic skills of chatting and exploring are the quickest to learn and integrate. Quests in the virtual world, visit this place or that place, meet here for a discussion are great first lessons. It will take the instructor at best a month at worst two or three months to master the skills needed for teaching. It should be noted that the same amount of time is necessary for creating a class in an LMS and learning to use the LMS. On the brighter side, it takes about a week of guided work to orient a student to the basic navigation of Second Life (Conklin 1-31).

Lesson plans using Second Life can integrate the use of note cards, or text cards with instructions, urls, and Slurls. Other tools for the teacher are white boards for PowerPoint presentations and video. Quiz boards are also popular. The good news is PowerPoints are still prepared the traditional way, you just need to save them as JPEGs (Burton). Educators will have to either create, buy or get for free the white board or quiz board. Education Island has freebies that are basic and more elaborate expressions you can pay a nominal Linden fee for. Linden is the currency of Second Life. Lindens are rated in exchange at about \$1 US for 270L or Linden (secondlife.com). Linden can be purchased or earned. Purchase is recommended over earning. Earning can take a great deal of effort for very little income (Rymaszewski et al. 212-249).

You have the skills, you have the tools, you have the students, but where do you go? Land is the hottest commodity in Second Life. All paid accounts are given 512 meters of free land. However, that does not mean you are issued land with your account. You have to go find it and claim it. The 512 meters is a hard thing to find, indeed. It can take a month to find a plot (Mansfield 183-192).

Land is designated as Mature, PG or Educational. To obtain safe land PG and Educational are your best options (Mansfield 183-192). Mature is often flooded with material you would not want to be responsible for exposing students to. Educational land can be applied

for per semester to pilot courses with through Claudia Linden's group. However, that only covers one semester (Rymaszewski et al. 318-324). After that you will have to find a place to rent or gather in a space that is communal. The best solution is to purchase an education island for your institution and book it like classroom space (Rymaszewski et al. 318-324).

As a lone explorer of space, your options are limited, but as a group of educators, you have a wealth of opportunity. The cost for an island compared to other distance education software is nominal. Education gets a fifty percent discount on the purchase. Land with a yearly maintenance fee on the island comes to around \$2500 per year (secondlife.com). From personal experience, the average learning management system costs from \$15,000 to \$40,000 a year! Other collaborative meeting softwares such as Eluminate and Horizon Wimba cost form \$8,000 to \$25,000 a year.

There are still some issues with using Second Life, even with your own island. Someone has to create the buildings, manage the space, set user restrictions, and train others to use the software (Keesey, "The Path Less Traveled"). If Second Life is to be used as a learning management system or in conjunction with a learning management system, someone has to coordinate all the activity on a larger scale, not just the instructor (Keesey, "The Path Less Traveled"). It is a full time job, ask Christopher Keesey of Ohio University!

Christopher Keesey, in his article "The Path Less Traveled," creates a very realistic picture concerning virtual worlds as the next level of distance education. His disclaimer is that Second Life is not the end all be all of the development. In order for virtual worlds to survive and be a viable tool in education and business the platforms will have to open up for travel between worlds. Web 3.0 or Web 3-D needs to have the openness of the world wide web (Keesey, "The Path Less Traveled").

Christopher Keesey's statement is in accordance with Tapscott and Williams idea of openness as one of the main needs of successful collaboration. Right now, Second Life is very open in world, but those in other virtual worlds cannot cross from one virtual world into another virtual world without creating a new avatar and account.

There are partnerships happening with Second Life to open it up to other software add ons such as keywords, integrated web surfing, and voice chat (Keesey, "The Path Less Traveled"). Instant messaging and standard chat were the only communication methods until June of this year when voice internet protocol was integrated. Some shakiness occurred and some residents protested the integration, but so far it seems to be a boon companion for those who hate to type. It is also personalizing classroom spaces for the distance students. No longer the Orwellian realm of 1984, students are free to interact with their professor and other students. The sense of disconnection with other students and the instructor dissipates.

What does all this mean to you as an educator? That seems to be the burning question on most lips at every conference.

In my experience, technology grows and changes rapidly, but the base forms of communication do not. Oral communication, textual communication, and visual communication are still in use and are incorporated into the digital environments we teach with. Educators are learning to communicate over space and time in a virtual world using reliable methods in new forms.

Second Life and other virtual worlds are the next evolution of communication. In 1993 when I first began work with the Internet, NCSA Mosaic, a pure text environment, was the standard of research and sharing. Email and Discussion Boards were then the budding environments of debate. Mosaic has now grown from an entirely text based universe to a web of text, audio and video that we navigate with ease. Email and Discussion Boards have evolved into mashed technologies such as blogs, vlogs, and wikis.

The technologies that educators learn today will be built upon tomorrow. As we embrace and deny new technologies, the technologies evolve to suit our needs. If educators fail to embrace virtual worlds, the virtual world will be shaped without their input. It will be used by business and entertainment, but educators will lose their place.

Virtual worlds are here to stay. If educators begin incorporating technologies such as Second Life into their virtual classrooms, their influence will structure the technologies to meet

their needs. The Educators community in Second Life has already influenced the layout of the land, the creation of safe islands for learning, and the creation of tools or objects for the sole purpose of teaching.

If the secret to collaboration is engagement, then as an educator, the phenomenon is worth exploring. At the SLOAN-C 2007 conference, the key phrase for all presenters seemed to be, “ We don’t know what it is, but there is something there.” That something, is engagement. Educator’s in 2008 are beginning the explorations and data collection.

Second Life is not a game, it is a digital recreation of the world we live in. Most educators will say that Second Life is important, that there is something there. It is up to us as educators to define that something and to mould it to engage our learners and help them learn in new effective ways.

Why should you get a Second Life? It is the first step in embracing the engaging successful collaborative environment that is rapidly becoming the standard for what will become the next evolution of online communication and learning.

Get a Second Life!

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