

Second Life and online collaboration through peer-to-peer distributed learning networks¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of distributed learning networks and their potential for professional development and collaborative learning using the Internet in peer-to-peer networks. Many innovative distance learning environments have arisen recently thanks to remarkable developments in the ways people are now able to interact over the Internet, freely and without reliance on client-server network models. Example learning environments range from relatively flat but open-source learning and content management tools (such as Moodle and Drupal) to richer facilities integrating learning with social networking tools (such as Elgg and MySpace), and beyond (for example, Second Life).

Introduction

Use of social networking sites (and ‘beyond’) in education has been called ‘transformative’ by some, whereas others seek to ban and block them. The challenge for proponents is to gain enough experience through experimentation and critical reflection to mount principled appeals to policy-makers, who may not have grasped the transformative benefits accruing from relatively unfettered access to an evolving Internet. Dangers of forfeiting the lead in this regard include relegating students to non-competitive positions in an ever-more-wired and connected world, and stifling opportunities for educators and students to carry on conversations that would otherwise promote learning through interaction with others in the distributed learning peer-to-peer (P2P) network. Second Life illustrates here the educational potential at the cutting edge of technology in an environment tolerant of experimentation. Second Life (and its precursor, Active Worlds) have long-standing credentials as educational environments (e.g. language projects in Active Worlds; elaborate simulations and labs/museums in Second Life). I hope to suggest how educators can use such spaces in transformative ways to foster distributed learning networks, such as hosting science simulations, in an environment well integrated with Web 2.0 and the read-write Web.

¹ A prior version of this article about Second Life in language learning appeared in Stevens (2006a).

Second Life as a peer-to-peer distributed learning network

These days collaboration online is sometimes characterised in terms of ecology. Dieu, Campbell and Ammann (2006) for example argue that ‘a pedagogical approach based on P2P can support learning ecologies that both complement and transcend conventional classroom structures and practices, ultimately benefiting learners’. Stevens (2006b) addresses the concept of distributed learning networks as having to do with ‘the notion that knowledge is distributed; i.e., not resident in any one person or repository. It turns out that peer-to-peer networks are preferable to hierarchical ones, and well suited to knowledge distribution, when working through the Internet’. Stevens draws heavily on the recorded presentations of Stephen Downes, as reported for example in Wise (2006). Downes promotes the concept that distributed learning networks as expressed in wikis and other tools where collaborators work as equal entities in parallel are not only productive but remarkably self-regulating.

Second Life² is a program with some potential for letting all kinds of collaborators, and especially educators, work within and develop these concepts. Second Life is produced by Linden Labs in California and allows anyone with a fairly robust computer and an Internet connection to interact with others in a three-dimensional virtual space. Wayne MacPhail describes the experience rather well in a podcast recording.³

Second Life is a 3D virtual world you enter via software on your computer. In Second Life you’re represented by a virtual you, an avatar. Male or female, tramp, vixen, animal, average Joe or fashion plate, how your avatar looks is up to you. ... My avatar, under my mouse and keyboard command can walk, run and fly, yes, fly, through hundreds of square miles of terrain, shops, houses and nightclubs. There are lots of nightclubs. But, there are also dozens of educational and non-profit institutions, that have created storefronts and campuses, 3D versions of real campuses in Second Life. Why?

That question, which this paper sets out to answer, can be expanded into more questions. 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,⁴ or is it heading in the other direction, uncomfortably corporate and profiteering? And what if anything does this have to do with education? Reactions of educators vary with respect to benefits to education in Second Life, but most of the million or so people who inhabit its alternate universe must feel that Second Life is a virtual world with a difference, or they would not be there.

Depending on whose figures you believe, perhaps half a million unique avatars touched down in Second Life in the last two months of 2006, and that number has been growing steadily. It is not the numbers so much as what those avatars find when they get

²<http://www.secondlife.com>

³<http://www.rabble.ca/rpn/episode.shtml?x=54785>

⁴<http://www.cluetrain.com>

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 is like 'in world' is captured in this cameo '[Y]esterday a cheerful Italian gave me a Babbler 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.'⁵

Active Worlds: Precursor to Second Life

Second Life appears at first glance a reincarnation of Active Worlds, an avatar-based multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), developed in the mid-nineteen-nineties which once had around half a million users.⁶ It has been remarked that diminishing populations are taking the fun out of life there.⁷ However MUVE's such as Active Worlds have often been used in education as simulating environments rich in learning opportunities, for example, *The River City Project* headed by Chris Dede.⁸

Active Worlds has also been used as a virtual space to explore how communities operate. Quest Atlantis⁹ for example was presented at the 2005 WiAOC Conference¹⁰ by Dongping Zheng, Robert Brewer and Michael Young. Like the River City project, Quest Atlantis is National Science Foundation funded, and uses an Active Worlds kernel to immerse children, ages nine to twelve, in educational tasks. One of its goals is to research 'the complex variables that constitute an online learning, playing, and socially conscious experience' according to a broadside of the Center for Research on Learning and Technology at Indiana University¹¹ (see, for example, Dede, 2005).

In another such study, Peterson (2006) found that participants in Active Worlds 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.

⁵Posted 27 November 2006 at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/message/14030

⁶According to <http://awportals.com>

⁷<http://forums.activeworlds.com/archive/index.php?t-5429.html>

⁸<http://muve.gse.harvard.edu/rivercityproject/index.html>

⁹<http://atlantis.crlt.indiana.edu>

¹⁰<http://wiaoc.org>

¹¹<http://crlt.indiana.edu/research/qa.html>

Why the time is right for Second Life

As we see, Second Life is not particularly new in concept, but follows on work most recently developed in Active Worlds. The look and feel of both worlds is, on first arrival ‘in world’, strikingly similar. In both, you appear in a three-dimensional fantasy land as an avatar in the company of other avatars. You can walk, 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?¹²

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-nineteen-nineties 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.

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 Sloodle¹³ where you can take ad-

¹²Second Life reached a million users in October 2006, according to <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’ at <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.

¹³<http://www.sloodle.com>

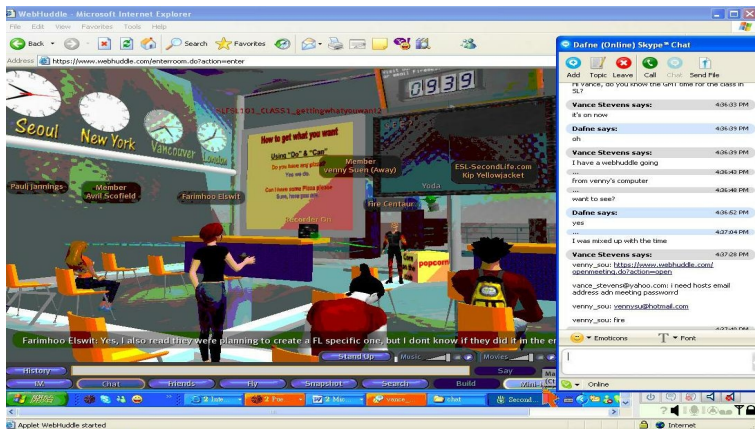


Figure 1: Second Life performance can be degraded by insufficient bandwidth, poor machine resources, and firewalls. In the illustration above, participants are using a thin client called Webhuddle (<https://www.webhuddle.com>) to share the screen of one participant in Second life while interacting with each other in Skype (<http://www.skype.com>).

vantage 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, 9 November 2006, the asynchronous objects available in Second Life have much greater potential for transformative impact on educations than the synchronous interaction there.¹⁴

Cory Ondrejka, a developer at Linden Labs, is giving a presentation at the Games + Learning + Society Conference in July 2007 entitled 'Brace for impact: How user creation changes everything.'¹⁵ The abstract touches on how Second Life has less to do with gaming and more to do with peer-to-peer interactivity. Highly flexible virtual worlds are starting to allow content created by one user to be experienced immediately by other users. This 'user-created content' has the capacity to significantly change how games can be used for learning. Technical limitations have traditionally limited the creation of educational games to professional game developers, as they were the group with access to the game-building tools. Second Life is a unique digital world that puts

¹⁴<http://edtechtalk.com/node/739>

¹⁵<http://www.glsconference.org/pop/ondrejka.htm>

the tools in the hands of its residents. Through a scripting language, embedded three-dimensional design tools, an easy-to-use character creation system, and methods for exchanging data with the real world, Second Life allowing highly interactive learner-to-learner and amateur-to-amateur creation and education.

So Second Life isn't just a game?

No, it's not. For one thing, there is no object to it except for whatever goals might be set by individual users. From a constructivist standpoint, that is, or should be, the goal not of a game, but of a programme of learning. Or perhaps the point is that learning might be even more effective if it appears to be a game, or if it is something the learner is intrinsically motivated to do. It is clear that many who are drawn to Second Life are intrinsically motivated to be there.

Second Life is being taken quite seriously by a growing number of successful people and entities firmly rooted in the non-virtual world. It is 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. For example, *Reuters* have reported (9 November 2006) that half a million dollars changes hands every day in Second Life.

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 artefacts such as a multimedia film clip of how her virtual guitar was constructed,¹⁶ and numerous videos of her performance.¹⁷ Mark Warner, a US presidential hopeful and former governor of Virginia, staged political events, such as a news conference and town hall meeting, in Second Life in September, 2006. This transcript with screenshots can give you a flavour of the event¹⁸ and you can play the *YouTube* video at the governor's website¹⁹

Countless institutions are setting up in Second Life. Giulio Prisco (2006) has an article in the Future Technologies Advisory Group wiki describing several interesting implementations.²⁰ Some others:

- Reuters has a bureau in Second Life and has engaged author Warren Ellis to write a weekly column called 'Second Life Sketches' for the Reuters Second Life News Centre 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

¹⁶<http://secondlife.com/showcase>

¹⁷http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2006/08/nwntv_the_secon.html

¹⁸http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2006/08/the_second_life.html

¹⁹<http://www.forwardtogetherblog.com/story/2006/9/15/18268/4612>

²⁰<http://futuretag.net/index.php/Slgp1>

future.’²¹

- 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.²²
- There is a three-dimensional 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.²³
- Now you can do your banking online with virtual money. Wells Fargo Bank has set up Stagecoach Island to teach young people the basics of managing their money; see ‘money matters in cybercash game.’²⁴
- In case you need more information, Alliance Library Systems in East Peoria, has won recognition for its Second Life Library 2.0, a virtual library providing real services to Second Life residents²⁵ and Andrea Mercado’s blog ‘LibraryTech-tonics: A librarian riding the shift.’²⁶

Educational presence in Second Life

Many of the institutions purchasing islands in Second Life are educational ones. Two that provide visual tours of what it is like there are:

- The New Media Consortium (NMC) has a virtual campus on Second Life which you can tour in the video ‘NMC Campus: Seriously Engaging’,²⁷ 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 learnt about the country and the culture with a ‘build’ in Second Life recreating typical scenes where avatars could stroll.²⁸ 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.²⁹ Here 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,³⁰ the

²¹<http://secondlife.reuters.com/stories/2006/12/22/warren-ellis-to-write-weekly-sl-column-for-reuters>

²²<http://blogs.electricsheepcompany.com/chris/?p=14>

²³<http://www.rabble.ca/rpn/episode.shtml?x=54785>

²⁴<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4248074.stm>

²⁵<http://www.infoisland.org>

²⁶http://www.librarytechtonics.info/archives/2006/05/kicking_around.html

²⁷<http://www.nmc.org/sl/2006/06/12/seriously-engaging-movie>

²⁸<http://www.nmc.org/sl/>

²⁹<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/cyberone/videos/CyberOne.mp4>

³⁰<http://www.the-court-of-public-opinion.com>

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.³¹

If you have viewed some of the images and videos at these links and heard the developers describe their experiences 'in world' you would be forgiven for thinking that Second Life could be a creative place for teaching. Among other educators reaching that same conclusion:

- Peter Twinning's Schome³² 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 twenty-first century. Resources available here include Second Life education websites³³ and an annotated list of ideas for educational projects in Second Life.³⁴
- Sarah Robbins,³⁵ aka Intellagirl Tully in Second Life, conducts a creative writing course using Second Life whose syllabus reads like a typical college catalogue, but check out the blogs, for example, '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' (here 'video games' = Second Life). For more information see either Foster (2006) or the website given below.³⁶
- The Global Kids Digital Media Initiative³⁷ has been actively running projects for 13–17 year olds on the Second Life Teen Grid³⁸ 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.
- 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.³⁹
- You can see kids at play in images posted at Peggy Sheehy's 'Suffern Middle School in Second Life: A running account of the process of the proposal, acquisition, development and integration of a virtual presence for education at Suffern Middle School, Suffern, NY'.⁴⁰ This blog documents uses of Second Life in a K–12 setting and gives illustrative insights into its educational applications there.

³¹<http://edtechtalk.com/node/739>

³²http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Second_Life

³³http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Second_Life_education_websites

³⁴http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Second_Life_Projects

³⁵<http://home.intellagirl.com>

³⁶http://eng104sl.intellagirl.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=27

³⁷<http://www.holymeatballs.org>

³⁸<http://teen.secondlife.com>

³⁹http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=107&Itemid=40

⁴⁰<http://rampoislands.blogspot.com>

Many projects in Second Life are geared toward science, technology, design, and enterprise:

- Science – The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Earth System Research Laboratory (ESRL) have set up interesting simulations in Second Life, to help people understand phenomena relating to fluid dynamics. According to *Second Life Insider*⁴¹ the NOAA's simulation Meteroa has 'fully interactive educational demonstrations about the ocean and weather. Examples include a sea life submarine ride created by The Magicians, and two different tsunami demos by Aimee Weber Studios and Electric Sheep Company. Other fun stuff includes a demonstration of a real-time temperature map powered by Yahoo, narration by Exploratorium Chief Scientist Paul Doherty, an aeroplane ride into a hurricane, and a melting glacier demonstration'.
- Technology – You can visit the International Spaceflight Museum⁴² on the island in Second Life of Spaceport Alpha, and enjoy a virtual tour courtesy of the Worldbridges Network.⁴³
- Design – Second Life, with its basis in building and creating objects, is an obvious place to experiment with design. As reported in Core77's Design Blog,⁴⁴ 'Philips Design intends to use its presence in Second Life to gain feedback on innovation concepts, engage residents in co-creation and gain a deeper understanding of potential opportunities in this virtual environment. This will allow Philips Design to find new ways of relating to end users. Having such direct feedback can significantly enrich the design process and lead to innovative and surprising end results'.
- Enterprise – Reuters reports that IBM is 'ramping up its push into virtual worlds with an investment of roughly USD10 million over the next 12 months, including an expanded presence within the popular 3D online universe Second Life'. Chairman and Chief Executive Sam Palmisano is holding town meetings there. Why? According to Reuters,

We always ask the question, 'if you knew twenty years ago what you know about the Web today, what would you do differently?' said Sandy Kearney, IBM's director of emerging 3-D Internet and virtual business. The company said it is already holding meetings and conducting development inside virtual worlds with about twenty major clients, including telecommunications and aerospace firms, a petroleum company that wants to use virtual worlds for training and 'a major grocer in the UK' that wants to build a virtual storefront that will allow consumers to buy real-world groceries online.⁴⁵

⁴¹<http://www.secondlifeinsider.com/2006/08/18/noaa-comes-to-second-life>

⁴²<http://slispaceflightmuseum.org/drupal>

⁴³http://worldbridges.net/SL_Spaceflight_Museum_Tour

⁴⁴http://www.core77.com/blog/business/philips_design_joins_second_life_5083.asp

⁴⁵'IBM accelerates push into 3D virtual worlds', 9 November 2006 available from http://today.reuters.com/news/articleinvesting.aspx?view=CN&storyID=2006-11-10T004727Z_01_L09622039_RTRIDST_0_TECH-IBM.XML&rpc=66&type=qcna

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ The wiki lists many education projects and resources in Second Life.⁴⁸

If audio is your modality, you can subscribe to Who's on Second? a podcast 'about non-profits and educators jacked into Second Life,'⁴⁹ 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.

Conclusion

The prognosis on Second Life is not universally considered rosy. Charlie O'Donnell raised eyebrows, hackles, and some interesting points with his 27 November 2006 posting of ten reasons to go short on Second Life.⁵⁰ 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?'

⁴⁶<http://secondlife.com/community/education.php>

⁴⁷<http://www.simteach.com>

⁴⁸http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki

⁴⁹<http://www.rabble.ca/rpn/podcast.php?id=woshtml>

⁵⁰http://www.thisisgoingtobebig.com/2006/11/10_reasons_to_g.htmlhtml

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 or overwhelmed'.
8. 'Digital world with an analogue 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 versus 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 role playing 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'⁵¹ which (inexplicably) addressed just one to nine of O'Donnell's points. Regarding the last point, from my own experiences with a community of practice whose members already knew each other in 'real life', if that is 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 does not 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.

⁵¹<http://blogs.electricsheepcompany.com/chris/?p=178>

As Graham Stanley mentions in Language Learning and Web 2.0 technologies for our twenty-first century language learners: Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and other emerging technologies,⁵² 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 is too commercial or implodes on its own popularity, as O'Donnell suggests) it may be something like Second Life. Lacking a crystal ball, it is hard to say what will happen in a future with so many imponderables, but it is 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 three-dimensional 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 appropriately applied in education.

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