The Educational Potential of Second Life

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Outline:

A) Introduction

Released to the public in 2003 by San Francisco based Linden Lab, Second Life (a MUVE, or Multi-user virtual environment) is an ever-growing virtual playground that is limited only by the creativity of its users. On October 18, 2006, the population of Second Life reached one million registered users – users who spend around $500,000 of real money in a virtual world every day. It seems as if everyone is taking notice of Second Life: business executives, politicians, reporters, musicians, and, at an ever-growing rate, educators.

This short study explores the educational possibilities of Second Life. The research conducted for this work was part of a Graduate Assistantship for The Ohio State University, and took place during October, 2006. This is noted merely because Second Life is drawing a large amount of attention currently; every day more information and online discussion appears about the game. The reader is encouraged to explore the links listed at the end of this paper to get a feel for how educational thought on Second Life is changing. The ideas generated from this study are aimed mostly at higher education, but the general concepts should transfer well to other educational levels.

If the reader is interested in Second Life and would like to explore these educational locations, free accounts may be activated at www.secondlife.com. Once an account is established and an avatar (a user's persona in the virtual world) created, readers can click the "Slurls" at the end this paper, which will instantly teleport the avatar to a specific location in Second Life.

B) The Negative Aspects of Second Life

For objectivity's sake, I consider negative as well as positive aspects of Second Life. Most of the writing about Second Life and education online (of which there are many) does not deal with the negative aspects of the program (of which there are also many). This is understandable, since Second Life is a very exciting program; however, I believe that before leading students into Second Life, it is important to be aware of the potential downsides of the software.

1) Second Life requires high-end technology

The system requirements (http://secondlife.com/corporate/sysreqs.php) for Second Life are high. The vast majority of computers that are over a year old will have difficulty running this software, meaning that many students will potentially be unable to log onto this program without some serious hardware upgrades. Also, the internet connection one uses needs to be of high quality. For example, I use a basic, 112 kbps, cable internet connection at home and Second Life will not run without extreme difficulty. Obviously this will get better in time, but at the moment it will be very costly to have a classroom meet in Second Life for any university that does not already have top-notch computers available for students. Even if a computer lab does have the necessary technology (including high-end video cards), many labs are probably not anxious to have entire classes of students spending hours and hours every day on their Second Lives, which could cause some potential scheduling problems.

2) Second Life crashes fairly often

This issue will presumably also improve in time, but it should be noted that Second Life crashes a lot for a program this high-end. At one point, between October 9th and 13th, the system crashed at least once every day. An educator might recall how difficult it is to resume class after a fire drill; I imagine it would be even harder if during the fire drill all of the students left the universe.

3) The learning curve is steep

Anyone planning to use Second Life, student or professor, should plan on a decent amount of learning time. Speaking from my own experience, it took me a couple weeks to feel comfortable using the program and I haven't even gotten into scripting (which allows the user to create programs to control object and avatar behavior) and prims ("primitives" are basic objects that can be linked together to build larger objects that can have physics associated with them). This

problem can be mitigated by having students learn in groups and share knowledge in Second Life, but an instructor should not assign anything very complicated for a least the first two weeks. Also, before the class even starts, a professor should spend quite a bit of time in Second Life so that he/she will have greater, or at least equal, knowledge than the students.

4) It can be expensive to teach in Second Life

While Second Life does allow teachers a one-semester free trial period, after that time a university will have to pay for land. Second Life offers many different options for purchasing land (http://secondlife.com/whatis/landpricing.php), ranging from small chunks of a large area to an individual island. The price of a small island, which is supposed to represent 16 acres, is currently $1,250, plus $195 a month for maintenance fees. If a university is interested in purchasing an island to build a campus, library, or whatever else, Linden Lab offers an educational discount ($980 plus $105 maintenance for a small island). There are also larger islands of approximately 64 acres for $5,000. Obviously these prices are not even close to actually building and maintaining a new building on a physical campus (let alone buying an "island"), but the cost might be prohibitive for some colleges or universities.

5) Second Life and other MUVE's place the poor at a disadvantage

The digital divide between rich and poor is growing. If a student graduates high school without basic computer skills that are gained mostly from a home computer, then he or she is at a marked disadvantage compared to those that can afford a computer. Second Life perpetuates this problem because the software requires such high-end technology that only wealthy students and universities with enough money to provide students with computers that are not only high-end models, but also constantly updated, will be able to participate. If a teacher offers a course in Second Life and a student wants to take the course but can't afford a high-speed internet connection and a new computer, he or she will have great difficulty participating in the class. Once again, computer labs can offer computers that can run Second Life, but to really be able to function in Second Life takes a lot of time, and some computer labs wouldn't be happy with a student spending four hours a day "playing a video game." Therefore, at least for the time being, most students will need a high-end computer and high-speed connection at home that will allow them to log into Second Life.

Some professors, such as those for Harvard's first class taught in Second Life ("CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion," offered by Charles Nesson, Rebecca Nesson, and Gene Koo), have made it mandatory for students to own computers that can run the program before taking the class. An instructor will have to decide before offering a course in Second Life who they want to be able

to take their class because there will be some students at every college that cannot afford the necessary technology.

6) MUVE's in general rob us of the human existence

This is the general complaint that people make who distrust technology. It is naïve to think that spending countless hours in front of a computer working on our second lives will have no direct results on our first lives. Certainly some of these results will be good, but it is very possible that at some point the negative consequences will be greater for at least some users. I personally have lost friends to the world of MMORPG's (massive multiplayer online role playing games), who sacrificed their real lives for the good of their fake ones. Obviously Second Life is different than MMORPG's like World of Warcraft in many respects, but in some ways the game can be just as addictive.

A potential problem with Second Life is that directly feeds into two common weaknesses of humans; we are lazy and we often don't like dealing with people. Students are already able to communicate with their friends, research for all of their homework, and order pizza without ever leaving their dorms. If we provide a way for them to only go to virtual classrooms then they might never actually leave home. Beyond this, an important part of the college experience is learning how to interact with other people on a semi-professional level in the classroom or by non-virtual interactions with professors – social skills can be just as important as other proficiencies when it comes time for a student to look for a job. The more time students spend living in a virtual world, one could argue, the less prepared they will be to interact in the real world.

7) Second Life allows traditionally unacceptable behavior

This is the obviously one of the strengths of Second Life, as people are able to do things they would not normally be able to do. However, any professor encouraging (or forcing) students to log onto Second Life must realize that this freedom has created a very seedy world awaiting victims. Second Life is teeming with strip clubs, casinos, escort services, cyber prostitutes, etc. The real world is also, of course, but in Second Life people are free to engage in whatever they wish, creating an environment with no accountability or punishment system.

Along the same lines, there is very, very little keeping a 13 year old boy from logging on and hiring a virtual prostitute. There are certainly similar problems with the internet in general, but the seamy side of Second Life is easy to find. There also seems to be nothing preventing people from getting on, trying to meet people in Second Life, and arranging meetings with them in the real world.

Obviously it is not the educator's responsibility to fix this problem, but he or she must at least be aware that these things are possible.

Linden Lab has tried to confront this issue with two approaches. First of all, there is a "Teen Second Life" (http://teen.secondlife.com/) which only people between the ages of 13 and 17 are allowed to enter. The login in pages for Teen Second Life repeatedly say that people will be prosecuted if they are found giving false age information; however, I had no difficulty saying I was a 16-year old girl and signing on. Secondly, in adult Second Life there are two different kinds of regions, PG and M (mature). All of the casinos, strip clubs, virtual brothels are located in M regions (as are most libraries, art museums, and virtual campuses). However, in the PG region sexual material and foul language is not allowed. A university could easily make its region a PG area, which would solve some of these problems.

C) The Positive Aspects of Second Life

It is more difficult to determine the positive aspects of Second Life simply because the system is so wide open that the experience one has is often determined by how much effort they put into the program and with what people they come in contact. Nevertheless, I have included some positive features for those who might be hesitant - or were scared away by the negative aspects listed above. All of the points listed below can in some ways be linked to education, although some of them are general comments on the software itself.

1) The only limit in Second Life is one's own creativity

This is far and away the best thing about Second Life. People can and do just about anything in Second Life, albeit with a decent amount of tech experience, and more importantly, a lot of patience. But the fact remains that almost anything can be done in this system, and almost always much cheaper and easier than in the real world.

- o Architects can build virtual structures and explore their possibilities without actually having to build anything.
- o Business owners can try out a new business model in a relatively safe environment (although there are certainly some differences between the economy in Second Life and real life).
- o City planners can plan virtual cities before hiring a construction crew or laying any concrete.
- o Philosophers (or anyone for that matter) can hold conversations with people from all over the world.

Just walking around Second Life, one can be amazed at all the things people insert into their virtual world: impressive art works, lovely outdoor scenery, or ridiculously huge shopping malls, just to name a few.

2) Second Life provides a low risk environment

The other main appeal of Second Life is that all these things can be tried in an almost risk-free environment. This can encourage experimentation in a way not possible in the real world. There can be some very real, human aspects to this, such as people with social disorders practicing talking to people behind the safety of a computer screen.

3) More than chat rooms

In many ways Second Life is like a glorified chat room; however, the fact that the avatars exist in a virtual universe changes the feel of a discussion. Being able to actually "see" the person you are talking with can have a great effect on the conversation, even if that person's avatar looks nothing like them. Exploring Second Life demonstrates how the virtual atmosphere enhances the experience. People sit around a virtual campfire or in a booth in a virtual coffee shop to talk, providing a sense of community and realism that is not available in a chat room. It is beyond this study to say how this might affect one's openness in conversation in general, but most of the people I talked with said they liked Second Life because they "just like to talk to people."

4) Second Life encourage active participation

There are certainly many other options for distance learning, but the way that Second Life encourages active participation is unparalleled. Students actually have to be engaged in the world, and more often than not, they will probably want to be. Second Life can take a serious commitment, but that can result in a serious result. The educational ideas listed below all have the student doing far more than just listening to a lecture. In fact, if a professor is just interested in lecturing, there is really no reason to use Second Life. The software allows, and almost requires, that students be actively involved in what they are learning.

5) Linden Lab provide a free trial for teachers

On the practical side, Linden Lab offers a one-time trial period for educators. This will allow an educator to teach in a designated spot where students can build something for one semester free of charge. Click here (http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki) for details. It should be noted that it is totally free to sign-on and use the program. It begins to cost money once someone is interested in owning land to build things,

or if they want to purchase items in the game, which can range from decorations, to clothes, to just about anything.

6) Students get games

Today's students know more about video games and feel more comfortable with computers than any before. Students, I predict, will be eager to participate in Second Life. In fact, some educators argue that if we don't use technology to engage students, and therefore teach them how use technology in a way that enhances their education, we are failing them. For a wonderful article by Henry Jenkins of MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program, click here (http://www.digitallearning.macfound.org/site/c.enJLKQNlFiG/b.2108773/apps/nl/content2.asp?content_id=%7bCD911571-0240-4714-A93B-1D0C07C7B6C1%7d&notoc=1)

7) Less authority

Some educators might be dubious about ceding some control over the classroom, but Second Life can make it very easy to have an environment in which students take charge. Less authority for the instructor can create the opportunity for more engaging discussions that involve more participants than would usually speak up in class.

D) Some Educational Ideas and Possibilities

There are many, many educational possibilities for the game, but this short list will hopefully get some ideas flowing.

1) Role Switching

Probably the first idea educators will have when beginning their second life are the possibilities to be gained from role switching. Whenever a person sets up his or her avatar, they have endless options. In fact, until I got the feel of Second Life, by far the most fun thing to do was to play with my appearance.

- Having a student see how people treat them differently as a young black woman, an older Asian man, or big pink bunny can be a very educational experience.
- Perhaps students can be directed to change their avatar once a week and journal their experiences while walking in other people's shoes.

Here is my first avatar, Flip Dobropan, as a hip professor and as an oddly dressed woman:

2) Build something creative/useful/extravagant

It is apparently fairly easy to build things in Second Life once someone understands the software. I must confess that I have not actually done this yet, but others I have spoken to enjoy creating things. Most people say that after two weeks of trial and error, students can effectively build things in Second Life.

- o   An Art class can have students create artworks in second life, build a museum that perfectly caters to their work, and hold a virtual premiere.
- o   Architecture classes could build just about anything.
- o   Design classes could arrange and decorate endless hallways of rooms.
- o   Medical students can build gigantic replicas of cells and walk around them with their avatars.

Here is an interior shot of the library at Info Island (link provided under point E below):

3) International language labs

As Second Life is world-wide, the possibilities for language classes could be huge.

- o A French student could search for an all-French party and practice their skills (or just soak in the ambience).
- o With a little bit of communication, English teachers in Germany and German teachers in Ohio could arrange virtual meetings for their students to help each other with language skills. The first hour could be all English, and the second all German. (For this to best work there would have to be keyboards available for students to communicate with different alphabets. Many language labs already have this capability, but they would need to contain computers capable of running Second Life).

4) International collaboration

Because people often learn so much from working in groups, it would be fruitful to arrange students of similar subject matters to work together with students across the country, or even better, students across the world. Such experiences would provide students with invaluable inter-cultural communication skills. An

article that provides a brief description of students from New York working together with students from Amsterdam on building a virtual city can be found at http://www.edutopia.org/1709 .

5) Virtual advertising

Just like the real world, there are parts of Second Life that are covered with advertisements.

- o Design students could create advertising marquees.
- o Marketing students could design billboards, develop slogans, invent a new product, and rake in the Linden Dollars (which can be turned into real money).

6) History reenactments

I don't believe the technology will allow full-fledged battle reenactments, but it would certainly be possible to build some historic buildings and let your students loose with history.
- o Why not have the students virtually sign (or rewrite?) the constitution wearing their powdered wigs?
- o Students could even set up a virtual replica of an historic time, advertise for people to come explore and learn, and then teach people that come by – all in Second Life. Perhaps the students could build a replica of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, nail a virtual 95 theses to the door, and then have a theological debate with other students, or whoever might pass by (for the record, if you don't want people to wander by, that can be done).

Here is a small little village on the campus grounds of San Diego State University's Island, which I don't believe they are using for a reenactment, but it shows the kinds of things one could build.

7) Medical Education

    Second Life would be a wonderful environment for a professor or fellow students to have disease symptoms that the rest of the class must diagnose.

8) Virtual field trips

    This could work for any discipline, but would probably work best for a class investigating human behavior in some way, and probably for a relatively small class. The teacher could set up a time and place for all the students to meet, such as at a dance club, art museum, coffee shop, and then meet together afterwards to discuss. The discussion would be more significant because each student would have seen relatively the same thing and possibly even talked to the same people. The teacher could ask, after allowing her class to spend an hour at a certain club, why someone would want to dress like a chicken and break dance, and everyone would have seen the chicken break dancing.

E) A Beginner's Guide for Educators

1) Logging on

If you have decided you are ready to take the leap into Second Life, then it is relatively easy to begin. First, log onto www.secondlife.com. From there you will set up a free account, go through a brief tutorial, and then be placed on "Help Island." Once you leave this island, you will not be able to return. [I must confess that I was far too eager when I first signed up and I did not spend anywhere near enough time on Help Island.] Make sure you can master the basics of moving around and talking to people (just walk near them and press enter, then start typing, press esc. to leave the conversation). There is a large area on Help Island where you can learn to build things. Depending on what you are planning to do in Second Life, you might not want to spend the time to learn this. It will probably be most important for educators to be able to communicate, move, and look around with ease. Once you have mastered these you are ready to move into Second Life.

2) Places to go, things to do (SLURLS)

Now that you are in Second Life, here are some places you can go to generate some ideas, possibly talk to other educators, and start getting a feel for Second Life. The links below will take you directly into Second Life, or teleport your avatar if you are already logged in, but you must have an account on your computer before using them.

Info Island (Second Life Library 2.0)

NMC Campus (New Media Consortium)

Berkman Island (Harvard's Virtual Campus)

Second Life Campus Region

San Diego State University Campus

Democracy Island (New York Law School)

The Ohio Learning Network Island (Before accessing this island, you must first be granted access by Cable Green – he can be reached at cgreen@oln.org)

3) Online resources

As mentioned above, Second Life is a hot topic and there is new information posted online all the time about the program. Here are a few links that will keep you informed:

Second Life Education Wiki (http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Lif_Education_Wiki) – There is a wealth of information here, including blogs, discussion pages, and links numerous websites (far more than I've listed here).

Pathfinder Linden's Homepage (http://zero.hastypastry.net/pathfinder/) – John Lester, a.k.a. Pathfinder Linden is the Community Manager of education in Second Life for Linden Labs. His webpage also has tons of valuable information including…

Top 20 Educational Locations in Second Life (http://simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Top_20_Educational_Locations_in_Second_Life) – This list is hyperlinked to Second Life and includes some of the best places to visit.

NMC Campus Observer (http://www.nmc.org/sl/)– Homepage for the New Media consortium page on Second Life

Cyber One (http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/cyberone/)– This is the homepage for a course being taught autumn 2006 by two professors at Harvard.   There are blogs and other useful information on this website.

Liberal Education Today (http://b2e.nitle.org/index.php/2006/11/03/some_academic_locations_in_second_life) – A frequently updated list of important educational places within Second Life

Second Life Education Research (http://www.secondlife.intellagirl.com/) – The blog of "Intellagirl," an educator from Ball State University who frequently writes about her experiences with education in Second Life.

Ohio Learning Network (http://www.oln.org)– There are often posting, discussion pages, and other information at this site; just search for Second Life in the top right.

4) Practical concerns

These are some things you might want to consider doing before leading your class into the wide world of Second Life.

Insure the availability of technology

This will probably be the most important concern for setting up a virtual class meeting (see point B-1, Second Life requires high-end technology, above). Some professors might choose to make it mandatory for each student to provide their own means for accessing Second Life, while others might want to provide space in a computing lab. Make this decision early, which might require speaking with Tech support and computing labs on your campus.

Consider some sort of waiver

I haven't actually seen if professors are asking this of their students, but requiring a classroom to access Second Life could be a lawsuit waiting to happen. As mention above, in point B-7 – Second Life allows traditionally unacceptable behavior; Second Life is a seedy world. In one test, I randomly teleported to twenty locations, five of which ended up being sexually explicit in some way. The lawyers at your institution might thank you for having your students sign something that indicates they know what to expect in Second Life.

Contact Pathfinder Linden

His real name is John Lester (see his website, linked above), and he is the man that can set you up with a free space to teach your first time, as well as all sorts of valuable information. For a description of first-time costs, see point C-5 above.