

## INTRODUCTION

The virtual community has existed in one form or another since the inception of the World Wide Web (www) in the 1990's. One early example of such communities were MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). MUDs were online text based forums in which students initially played extensive role-playing games. MUDs had both their supporters and detractors. Sherri Turkle of MIT has been one of the more visible examples of the former. She wrote the seminal articles book, " discussing the therapeutic benefits of such environments (Turkle). Others like social critic Clifford Stoll began to examine the negative consequences posed by online communities (Stoll). Along the tradition of asking about trees falling in the forest, academics and philosophers began to debate whether online communities were cure or the disease for contemporary communities' ills; whether online participation facilitates or hinders interpersonal communication and relationship building; and whether online communities really are "communities." (Dertouzos, 1998; Rheingold, 2000; Stoll, 1995)

Online communities are now becoming virtual communities. And as technology improves, the distinction (visually) between real and computer generated will become less clear. Due to dramatic leaps in both computing power and broadband access, online communities have moved well beyond their text-based roots, evolving into MMPOG's and MMPORG's. MMPOG stands for Massive Multiplayer Online Games. Examples include Halo and Call of Duty. A closely related cousin to the MMPOG is the MMPORG, which stands for Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing. Examples of MMPORG's include World of Warcraft and Eve. MMPORG's differ slightly from MMPOG's in the emphasis on developing one's game character. Both involve virtual online environments in which players interact to achieve certain game-related objectives (Castronova).

## SECOND LIFE

Second Life is an online, immersive, 3D universe. Second Life retains some of the characteristics of MMPOG/MMPORG's such as virtual representation, avatars, self-directed participation, online culture, social interaction, progression, etc. However, that's where the similarity ends. Second Life cannot truly be considered a "game" since there is no strategy, opponent, outcome or contest as part of the designed Second Life experience. Rather, Second Life is a virtual online environment in which social interaction is the end vis-a-vis the means. Second Life distinguishes itself as a purely social alternate reality. Many MMPOG/MMPORG's involve playing a never ending game with all the trappings of games such as winners, losers, prizes, goals, teams, competitions, etc. Second Life, on the other hand, bills itself as a place to "connect... work... love... explore... be different... be yourself... free yourself... free your mind... change your look...love your life" ("What is Second Life?," 2010). Rather than providing an intense visual fantasy game, Second Life provides a "place" in which people might "live" an alternate life where real world social rules, indeed physics, need not apply. Second Life creator Philip Rosedale sees Second Life as a means to improve human connectivity. He states, "I think when people go into virtual worlds, the sense of being near each other causes them to behave better than they do in say email or instant messaging, and that's an interesting phenomenon" (Frontline). It was originally designed in the 1990's by Linden Labs to support the development of their haptics hardware. It was eventually released to the public as a beta version in October 2002 ("What is Second Life?," 2010). Design, computing capabilities and residents steadily grew. Attention also grew in the latter part of the decade with several media reports and portrayals in popular TV shows.

I chose Second Life for several reasons. First, it was a relatively new application of virtual technology to the rather established (by Internet standards) online games known as MUDs. Secondly, It offered students an experiential learning opportunity directly related to the course objectives. Finally, it provided a way for student to gain first hand experience in an online community. As virtual environments like SL become more ubiquitous, their importance in students' lives will also become more relevant. Addressing issues such as community, reality, interpersonal communication must become an important aspect of social science curricula. In many colleges, courses such as Communication Technology and Social Change have begun to address these very issues. This paper discusses an assignment in such a course, designed to help students better perceive and discuss such issues.

### THE ASSIGNMENT

The impetus for the assignment came from years of frustration with discussions of online communities. In my early days of grad school, MUDs had just begun to appear and with them came the inevitable social, psychological and philosophical discussions of what this meant to world civilization. Such discussions often coalesced around whether such environments constituted a "real community." This inevitably would lead to the emersion of two camps of thought: those who saw MUDs as the only true form of community and human communication and those who saw it as a wasted effort in futility, or even something worse. Unsurprisingly, these camps were usually made up of those for whom online communities provided some escape from the distress of real world encounters and those who saw it as nothing more than unhealthy avoidance behavior. As I began to teach media courses, I saw a similar pattern repeated over and over. While I found these discussions useful, I was always disappointed that students often

merely reinforced the preconceptions with which they entered class. This appeared particularly true for those who were not regular visitors of such sites. However, regular visitors seemed to have an equally difficult time understanding how MUDs could not be considered communities.

The genesis of the activity came as I was preparing to teach a new course on Communication Technology and Social Change. Coincidentally, a new online virtual community happened to be receiving a lot a media buzz at that time. Instead of the text based games of the MUDs, this new entity simulated a 3-D visual experience. Like the development of the GUI and object oriented programming, this made such experiences accessible to a wider audience. Furthermore, Second Life did not require the significant investment of MMPORGs such as World of Warcraft. Thus, it provided the perfect environment for an experiential learning assignment.

For the assignment students must visit Second Lift a total of eight times for 30 minutes. This may be adjusted, but I have found that more than eight becomes tedious for the students, and fewer than eight may not be enough to achieve some of the results discussed below. Thirty minutes is also somewhat arbitrary but seems to be appropriate for students to acclimate to the virtual setting and associate with others--especially in the cases of those students with very little experience in immersive virtual environments. Since there is a learning curve to navigating and interacting in Second Life, students may not count their first visit(s), which usually take place at an orientation locale designed to ease beginners (referred to as “noobs”) into the Second Life experience.

In addition to their eight visits, students are also required to meet 4 individuals in Second Life. While the anonymity and video-game like setting might appear to provide some psychological protection, students might find it easy to avoid interacting. Lack of confidence

with the technology also increases communication anxiety. Since Second Life is primarily a social site, participating in social interactions is vital to experience. This requirement helps push students into interactions they might otherwise avoid. Students are further required to visit 5 specific locations and to attend one event. Again, these requirements are meant to encourage exploring. Like any locale, Second Life is host to a variety of “neighborhoods,” some of which are, shall we say, more colorful than others. I often describe the different areas as PG, PG-13, R and NC-17. While, there is a filter that allows users to screen searches within Second Life for “general,” “moderate” and “adult” areas, this does not protect students from encountering unique individuals or accidentally wandering onto some undesired activity or environ. I am very respectful of student’s rights to avoid certain offensive content so I make them aware of these areas. I also provide them with suggested areas that tend to be “safer” while at the same time interesting. In addition, I instruct them to carefully choose names not associated with the real names and to not divulge any personal information, whether connected to their avatar account or in their discussions.

Students document their visits with journal entries and “photographs.” Students are required to keep a journal of each visit. The main reason for this is to create some accountability in participation. It also provides students with an aide when they reflect upon and analyze their experience. Students must write approximately a page detailing their experiences during each visit. I strongly encourage them to not only chronicle events and interactions but also their feelings and thoughts. Again, this is later proves helpful for their own analysis and class discussion. They are required to take a photo of the avatars, locations and events. The Second Life viewer has a “photo” function, which essentially allows users to snap a screenshot and save it to a hard-drive or flash drive. I give explicit instructions for students to request permission

before photographing other avatars. While Second Life does not require consent for snapshots, I view it as a matter of common courtesy.

One final, important requirement: students must make a significant change to their avatar's appearance part way through the assignment. For example, they can change the gender, body shape, color...even species (Second Life does not limit its avatars to humans). This aspect of the exercise is the most important in my opinion. While many interesting learning moments occur by merely engaging in interpersonal communication in Second Life, this one requirement has had the most unexpected and significant results.

At the end of the assignment, students are required to write a summary analyzing their experience in Second Life. They are instructed to focus on the question of community, what constitutes identity, and whether their avatar is an extension of their identity or just a digital character (Note: The class curriculum covers these topics prior to the due date of the paper so students are prepared to incorporate the theories into their analysis). This provides an opportunity for introspection and reflection upon the activity. This is crucial. In many pedagogical methods, reflection is considered an essential step in the learning process. Along with the summary, students are required to turn in their journal entries and photos of landmarks, people, and before/after photos of their avatar changes. We then discuss their experiences on the day the assignment is due. This helps bring the theoretical concepts discussed in class together with a shared experience they can all relate to. The discussion also has somewhat of a cathartic effect in providing closure at the end the experience.

## RESULTS

This assignment was designed to cultivate a more informed discussion on the concepts of community and identity with respect to the mediating technologies. Before this assignment,

discussions often remained somewhat flat, with little movement beyond already entrenched opinions. Participation in an online environment such as Second Life along with the incorporation of theoretical readings has had a very powerful influence on the quality and outcome of the discussions. Students now get it. That is not to say they necessarily see online communities with bright-eyed optimism. Rather, if they come to the conclusion that online communities offer less than real-world counterparts or are even problematic, such conclusions are not merely a knee-jerk reaction to the unknown.

Besides bringing more insight into class discussion, viewing Second Life through the eyes of the neophyte and non-habitue has revealed some interesting aspects of Second Life. One of the most interesting is the proclivity of real-world social behavior to be carried into this virtual world despite its stated intention to offer a place to “free yourself...free your mind.” Reeves and Nass (1998) have demonstrated strong evidence supporting their hypothesis that despite conventional wisdom, people’s interactions with computers and communication technologies are no different than social interactions. That is because we apply socially learned behaviors and rules to our computer mediated communications. One of the most astounding demonstrations of this, is the social stigma of “physical appearance” in Second Life.

As mentioned earlier, one of the assignments is for students to make a dramatic appearance change part way through the exercise. This affords to learning outcomes. First, it allows students a contrasting set of experiences to observe and analyze. Second (and originally unforeseen), it provides a impetus for students to push the appearance of their avatars more than they might if stuck with one look. In other words, knowing that they can and must change, they are more willing to not constrain themselves in terms of typical social factors such as beauty for example. Several students have taken on very extreme appearance of obesity, exaggerated

features or other aspects often considered unattractive. This has generated strong, mostly negative feedback from other Second Life residents. This is quite interesting, given the fact that Second Life is the epitome of “live and let live” and that one ostensibly visits it to be anything they want to be. Yet in a manner to make Huxley proud, the very ease of creating beauty seems to make it almost obligatory; a citizen’s duty as it were.

Extreme ugliness is not necessary to draw the ire of fellow residents. Even the ordinary is seen as unacceptable in an artificial world. The apparent exception to this requirement is the extremely outlandish, but even among monsters, a sensuous succubus is preferable to a Frankenstein's monster. Some students for reasons of their own feel uncomfortable with a super model avatar, preferring instead one much closer to their actual body type or other features. In some ways such ordinariness is even more inexplicable to many residents in Second Life. At least ugly can be explained away as some form of counter-culture statement. What does average mean? It’s perplexing. Another interesting illustration of responding to appearance in a way similar to the real world is the phenomena of “love at first sight.” Many students report encounters in which another resident becomes enamored, often professing love and offering proposals of one kind or the other. Such behavior is all the more astounding given that users must be aware that other avatars are mere constructions with very little connection to reality since the users themselves have participated in their own constructions. However, users respond to appearance in a way they might respond in the real world.

In addition to the reaction to “physical appearance,” another interesting outcome has been the students’ own internal reactions to the negative feedback. Despite the fact that it is in reality a digitally-generated illusion...not much different from a video game, students report feeling hurt and even sometimes a loss of self esteem. This is quite different from typical video game play

where, for example, losing may be accompanied by frustration but is generally not taken as a personal insult. Part of the difference may be explained by the knowledge there is a person on the other end, but the real impact comes from its appearance. Despite its obvious artificiality, Second Life replicates social environments to such an extent that students respond to it in a social way.

This impact of Second Life is further demonstrated by the perception of self and identity in just a few short weeks. Students often begin their early journal entries by referring to their avatar in the third person. Students refer to their avatar as “it” or by the avatar’s name: a student reports, “Today Dax [name of the Avatar]<sup>1</sup> went and explored Space.” But what is truly interesting is that by the third or fourth week many begin to refer to their avatar in the first person. For example, a week after the above entry, the student reports, “After being gone over the weekend, I came back to Secondlife [sic]. As *I* explored around *my* 'home' *I* found a lot more people than I had seen any other time I had been in Second Life.” In a subsequent post, she states, “Today I changed *my* appearance completely. The first thing I changed was from female to male and then I changed the whole body shape of my avatar. Another big change I made to *my* appearance was *my* hair.”

The change of appearance has in and of itself produced some interesting insights into gender. As in the example above, a common change is from male to female or vice versa. Many of my male students have reported that they didn’t appreciate how much women get “hit on” and how exhausting this can be. Similarly, women often express a sense of wonder at how difficult it is for men to initiate conversations. Both report a repeated pattern in Second Life. Female avatars (the prettier the better) are continuously approached and engaged in conversation by

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<sup>1</sup>The actual name of the Avatar has been changed to ensure the further confidentiality.

other (usually male) avatars. The popularity decreases significantly, however, when the avatar is presented as a male. Indeed, almost all students report that as a male, they have a hard time engaging anyone in conversation. Often they sense that others are threatened by them. This is striking, given that everything is digital and that participants are aware that the avatar may or may not be an authentic representation of its user's actual physiological gender.

## CONCLUSION

Second Life and other immersive online environments are for better or worse here to stay. Their existence will have real world implications. There remains a need for educational approaches to better improve student understanding and insight into such media. This paper has provided as example of one learning approach to improve discussion of these important concepts. Some important lessons to keep in mind: The most effective way to learn about such environment is through experiential learning. This poses some challenges however. There is a need to the importance of balancing the need for exposure to the environment while at the same time being aware and considerate of the fact that in many ways students are a captive audience. Such environments by their vary nature are impossible to control for all variables. Thus some precautions should be taken. For their own safety, students should be strongly advised on not revealing identifying, personal information. Also, students can be provided with some guidelines and locations to minimize unnecessarily offensive encounters. To encourage interaction, students should be provided with specific tasks such as visiting a certain number of locales and meeting a specified number of people. Students can record their experiences with both diary entries as well as snapshots. This has the benefit of confirming participation as well

as providing data for later reflection. Class discussion helps to crystallize class concepts with the experiences from the activity.

One final thought: when I began this learning experiment, my primary concern was making sure students participated. Inevitably, one or two students would ask if the “had to do go on Second Life.” And inevitably, the response was, “yes.” For the first few years, my fear was that students would not participate because it was uncomfortable for them. Recently, I have had to change this position after being approached by several students with diagnosed Internet addictions. This emerging phenomena should be carefully considered in assigning this project. I recommend preparing a comparable alternative assignment in as much as such diagnoses are likely to increase in the future.

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