7 things you should know about...
Second Life

Scenario

The business school at Craig's university created a shopping center in Second Life that includes a row of retail spaces. His marketing class is spending next month on a unit covering retail space design, and class projects are based in these virtual shops. Working in teams, students create virtual items (merchandise)—such as clothes, furniture, or hair styles for avatars—and design and build retail spaces where they can sell their goods to Second Life users for Linden dollars, the currency of Second Life. Craig's group decides to sell sunglasses, and the five members of his group create a few dozen styles, ranging from fairly pedestrian tortoise-shell options to frames that look like flamingos. They build out the interior of the storefront, creating display cases, informational signs and tags, and virtual mirrors where Second Life residents can admire their "reflection." They use picture-editing software to make posters of celebrities "wearing" the group's sunglasses, which they hang around the store. Finally, they create a sign for the front of their store, "Second Life Shades."

The student team observes how Second Life users—through their avatars—move around the space, noting which displays tend to interest users and which sunglasses are the most popular. The ease with which they can modify the space lets them rearrange the interior of the store to see how they can influence traffic patterns and whether this affects purchasing. Second Life Shades plays music, and students watch to see whether different styles of music seem to influence buying. Although avatars do not have to represent the users behind them, Craig assumes that, for the most part, users create avatars of their actual gender, and he focuses on apparent differences in shopping habits between men and women. With a few simple clicks, Craig can change the posters in the store, or change the colors of the walls or the carpet, to see how these changes affect the shopping habits of the male and female avatars. Two students in Craig's team "work" in the store. Their avatars, one male and one female, answer questions about the products and otherwise interact with visitors, so the team can observe how the salesperson's gender and behavior appear to influence shoppers. By the end of the project, Craig has observed many of the marketing principles he read about in the textbook at work in the virtual store.

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1 What is it?

Launched in 2003, Second Life is the largest virtual world, with tens of millions of square meters of virtual lands, more than 13 million registered users (or "residents"), and a thriving economy. Since its debut, Second Life has added several key features, including VoIP, which lets users speak to one another. Developers of Second Life continue to refine the application, adding functionality and increasing the level at which aspects of the environment—such as the flowing of water, the movement of trees in the wind, the way the light changes during the course of a day—reflect those of the real world. Residents of Second Life exist "in-world" through personal avatars and can spend time in any of a vast number of locations (or "islands") that have been created for purposes including education, socializing, entertainment, and commerce.

2 Who's doing it?

A better question might be, who's *not* doing it? Artists have set up galleries, musicians have held concerts, and authors have read their work in-world. Churches have set up virtual congregations that hold worship services, and counseling services allow users to visit with real therapists—through avatars. Second Life includes a place called Diplomacy Island, and the governments of several real nations, including the Maldives, Sweden, and Estonia, have opened virtual embassies there where users can speak to representatives of those nations about their history and culture or about visas and other requirements to travel to those countries. Countless entrepreneurs participate in the Second Life economy, which is based on the in-world currency of Linden dollars and lets people exchange real money for virtual assets. A number of nonprofits, including the New Media Consortium, have islands in Second Life where they can share resources and host activities for users.

Large numbers of colleges and universities—or, in some cases, individual departments or faculty—have established a presence in Second Life. These efforts are frequently for academic purposes, but they also include campus visits, recruiting activities for prospective students, and fund-raising. Many faculty have begun teaching distance courses in-world, saying that the sense of presence and interaction among a class of remote students is more compelling than through other modes of communication.

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How does it work?

Second Life users install an application that runs locally and communicates with servers that host the virtual world. Once registered, users create and customize their avatars, which can be changed at any time using either the built-in options (for things like hair and clothing) or by creating new options or buying items that others have created. Basic accounts cost nothing but have some restrictions, such as for owning land. Premium accounts provide a weekly stipend of Linden dollars and enable other features. All users can buy Linden dollars to participate in the Second Life economy. Once in the virtual world, users can search for places, people, and activities. Avatars can teleport (think "beam yourself there") to any location in Second Life and navigate by walking or flying around the space. Users can communicate with others through chat and other text media or, with VoIP enabled, can speak to one another. Each avatar has an inventory of things it can use or give to other users. Numerous gestures are available, including waving, sitting down, or dancing. In short, avatars can *do* anything for which a programmer has built a function.

Why is it significant?

Although Second Life offers a compelling synchronous experience for geographically disparate users to meet and interact, the stronger attraction for many academics and researchers is the extent to which the environment serves as a legitimate surrogate for the real world, allowing users to inhabit personas and situations that are otherwise unavailable to them. For example, setting one's avatar as the other gender exposes a user to attitudes and behaviors that a person of that gender might experience in the real world. Activities in Second Life can teach users how to work effectively in a group by allowing them to experiment with behaviors that they might be too reluctant or shy to try in the real world. Despite the expectation that users are prone to alter their actions because of the medium, observing how people behave still offers a window into the motivations of the people behind the avatars. How do users respond to promotional campaigns or in social settings? In what sorts of mischief do users engage, and how frequently? That Second Life has a functioning economy sheds light on questions of where real people find value, even in a virtual world.

At the same time, Second Life affords an opportunity to reconceive how many interactions might take place. Educators can easily build and modify learning spaces to test how different strategies for a physical space affect learning, and a similar approach can be taken toward educational activities in those spaces. The results might influence the design of real-world classrooms, or it might be clear that some exercises only work in a virtual world. Either way, the range of possibilities in a virtual world and the ease with which they can be implemented offer many opportunities for discovery.

What are the downsides?

Second Life embodies an inherent tension between using technology to create a visually and aurally lifelike experience and the reality that in a virtual world, people (and things) are not bound by the laws of physics or the rules and norms of society. Some users might argue that activities that are illegal or unethical in real life are acceptable in the virtual world—gambling, child pornography, and pyramid schemes have appeared in Second Life—and in many instances it remains unclear what authority, if any, has jurisdiction over virtual activities that spill over into the real world. Blurring the line between virtual and real highlights a wide swath of untested legal issues that have yet to be resolved. Because Second Life is virtual, after all, and because avatars are largely anonymous, the way users behave in-world is at least somewhat suspect. Moreover, Second Life is sufficiently engaging as to raise concerns not only about overuse (technology addiction) but also about the erosion of some users' ability to recognize the difference between virtual and real.

Where is it going?

Most of the educational settings in Second Life look and function like traditional classrooms or lecture halls. This is fine for instructors teaching distance courses who need a medium for synchronous communication, but it does little to address the fundamental question of how teaching and learning can be changed through virtual worlds. As new ideas are developed and tested, instructional settings and activities in Second Life may evolve into forms that bear little resemblance to the real world. In the future, a wide range of everyday activities might routinely take place in virtual worlds, such as getting support from a help desk or "visiting" the DMV to register a car or renew license plates. Second Life contributes to the development of such activities and prepares users for a world in which many forms of interaction become virtual.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The level of participation in Second Life by colleges and universities suggests considerable confidence that the application really does—or has the potential to—effectively combine electronic communication with the quality of a shared space. Some academic areas, such as foreign-language instruction and 3D modeling, are particularly well suited to the tools and the experiences that Second Life offers to educators. Virtual worlds allow students to interact in 3D spaces that are comfortable, facilitating educational exercises such as virtual field trips or visiting a gallery of student-created art. The social dynamic builds rapport and exposes students to teamwork, and the sense of presence encourages students to explore and engage in informal, self-directed learning. Educators are pursuing hundreds of experiments to elucidate the elements of a meaningful educational experience in fields ranging from journalism to the sciences to history.

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