Second Life in the Psychology Classroom:
Teaching and Research Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the advantages of using online virtual environments such as Second Life (SL) to assist in teaching and research. Although instructors have used SL to supplement the in-class experience in various fields including Information Technology, Communication, and English, few have used it widely for the teaching of psychology. The authors first present a best practices guide for teachers looking to incorporate SL into the psychology classroom. Next, an easily adaptable and readily modifiable class activity for illustrating research methods in an Introduction to Psychology classroom is introduced. The study demonstrates how this activity can generate research data to further students' and instructors' research agendas and enhance learning.

Keywords: Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) Virtual Environment, Mediated Communication, Research Methods, Second Life (SL), Teaching of Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Second Life (SL) is a free, Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) virtual environment in which the user creates an avatar and interacts with other users within a variety of user-generated virtual environments, termed "destinations," in which the avatars can interact. These destinations are constructed to look like a beach, a shopping mall, or anything else one can imagine. Involvement in SL can be as simple or as elaborate as the user wishes, although more elaborate play can involve making purchases for avatars using actual money.

Although SL is widely used for leisure purposes, colleges and universities have embraced it for a variety of educational purposes, including teaching and recruiting. In this paper, we review some of the related literature on the use of SL as a teaching tool and present a best practices guide for teachers looking to incorporate SL into the psychology classroom. We then introduce a novel and easily adaptable classroom activity that can improve student learning of research

methods while allowing for the collection of meaningful research data.

Using Second Life as a Teaching Tool

Instructors have used SL to supplement the in-class experience in various fields including Information Technology, Communication, and English among others (Mayrath, Traphaga, Jarmon, Trivedi, & Resta, 2010). Research efforts have concentrated on comparing face-to-face classes to classes taught completely online and supplemented with SL (Lester & King, 2009). University admissions professionals have created virtual representations of their universities to act as a recruitment tool, provide high school students with the opportunity to virtually visit their campus, and interact with potential and current students as well as recruiters (schools using SL include: Hamilton College, Indiana University, Yale University).

Whereas other disciplines have demonstrated the integration of SL into teaching, psychology instructors have yet to widely embrace the use of online virtual environments (see, however, Baker, Wenz, & Woods, 2009, for a primer on using SL in the teaching of psychology). Although research providing quantitative support for specific SL activities for psychology classes is lacking, there are a few notable examples, including the development of an environment that simulates the experiences of a person with schizophrenia (Yellowlees & Cook, 2006).

As SL has been used as a teaching aid in other disciplines, we believe that SL has the same potential for psychology, particularly as it illustrates research methods and the growing trend of replicating established psychological findings within virtual environments. Examples of such research topics include self-disclosure in virtual environments (Guadagno, Swinth, & Blascovich, 2011; Joinson, 2001), self-presentation strategies for online dating (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012), social exclusion in virtual environments (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003),

social influence tactics in virtual environments (Eastwick & Gardner, 2009), the relationship between real-world social norms and the social norms in online digital realms (Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, & Mergert, 2007), and participation in online role-playing games and mental health (Longman, O'Connor, & Obst, 2009).

As such, the present paper attempts to remedy this gap and add to this body of literature by first providing a brief best practices guide for psychology instructors who wish to incorporate SL into their courses. Next, an example of a specific SL exercise is described. Finally, we discuss the results generated by the SL exercise and how SL can be used to supplement student and faculty research agendas.

Best Practices in the Psychology Classroom: Recommendations for Teaching

Step One: Become Familiar with Second Life

While SL sets out to be a user-friendly product, we have found that students are more comfortable using the product after a brief introduction lead by the instructor. As noted in previous work looking at teaching in SL, unfamiliarity with SL can serve as a barrier to using the online virtual environment (Warburton, 2009). As such, our first recommendation for using SL in the classroom for teaching and research is to become familiar with the system before assigning a project using SL. This allows instructors to become a resource for students. To begin, open an account (secondlife.com) and download the software.[1] We found the SL quick-start guide provided by SL (Linden Labs, 2011) to be a helpful resource. It is also important to be cognizant of the fact that SL will run on most recent computers (Mac OS 10.5; Windows XP, Vista, & 7; as well as Linux) but will slow down computers with older systems or slow Internet connection.

After creating an account and logging in for the first time, users will be transported to their first land – Orientation Island. This land is set

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