

Chapter 18

Education–Oriented Research Activities Conducted in Second Life

Jiuguang Feng

Towson University, USA

Liyan Song

Towson University, USA

ABSTRACT

Second Life (SL) is a multiuser virtual environment (MUVE) that can be used to enhance students' learning. It is a virtual environment constructed by SL residents, where students can engage in collaborative learning with other SL residents. In the field of education, SL has been used as a professional tool, a synchronous online system, a virtual environment mimicking real life, a platform for role-playing, a communication tool between teachers and students. This chapter focuses on education-oriented research activities conducted in SL. The authors explain and analyze SL usage in higher education, foreign language instruction as well as investigated its contribution to various learning paradigms, and suggested future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Various perspectives (e.g., SL as a new economy or an educational tool) have had significant influence on Second Life and residents in Second Life. As educators, our primary concern is about the impact on student learning, and our main interest is to explore what is happening with Second Life in education today and impacts on the future. Different perspectives are interwoven in most of the cases. This chapter attempts to address the follow-

ing topics: SL in teaching for higher education; SL for foreign language learning; and research on social factors in SL in education. The topics (as shown in Table 1) can help illustrate some major uses and impact of SL in education.

Higher education is moving toward student-centered learning environments and this movement has provoked a series of reforms, service learning, learning communities, collaborative learning, and technology enhanced classroom (Daynes, Esplin, & Kristensen, 2004). Second Life (SL), a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), where university students and instruc-

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Table 1. Educational research activities and issues in Second Life

Activities and Issues	Illustrations	Organizations
SL in higher educational	Campus building, courses and office hours	NMC (New Media Consortium) Virtual campus of universities
SL for foreign language	Formal and informal learning experience	English Village Chinese and Spanish in SL
Social factors	Students' social exploration and activities	Second Life Bar Association Second Life Liberation Army

tors can meet and collaborate to work on course projects and exchange course related information, seems to fit in the general trend of the development of higher education. SL and a few other online virtual worlds have been identified as 'emerging technologies likely to have a large impact on teaching, learning, or creative expression within higher education' (Johnson, Lavine & Smith, 2007). Apparently, SL has had impact on teaching and learning in higher education institutions and the impact is very likely to increase in the near future.

One of the subjects that have been taught in SL is foreign languages, though it is still at its early stage of development. Learning foreign languages in SL has already generated great interest from students, teachers and education consultants. SL residents can study and practice foreign languages in both a formal and informal way. Some of those classes are structured lessons. Other activities are more informal where the residents can meet other residents from all over the world.

One issue that has been brought to people's attention with these environments is social interaction. Just like the real world where people interact with each other socially, residents in Second Life participate in social activities. Social presence and the feeling of being surrounded by others is a key factor to the success of virtual worlds. As students interact with other students socially during instructional activities, they might be looking for shared experiences and a sense of social presence in other places within SL. Therefore, educators should be

aware of some of social factors while conducting instructional activities in Virtual worlds.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze issues with teaching in SL for higher education, foreign language, and social factors for teaching and learning in SL. In addition, we develop a rationale for the popularity of Second Life, especially in higher education institutions and foreign language teaching and provide some guidance for educators who have already conducted teaching activities or who want to start using SL.

SECOND LIFE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As a well-known fact, SL is not the first virtual community, but it has become a widely known MUVE, especially in higher education. Recent statistics show that there are over 100 educational institutes that have established their virtual campus in Second Life and are actively working in the virtual world (Joly, 2007). Besides teaching activities, SL has also been used to build student communities, student and faculty communities, develop self-paced learning and even to promote the image of universities.

Teaching Classes in SL in Higher Education

Higher education institutions are advancing their online teaching methods by offering classes in Second Life. The basic instructional models offered

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