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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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Blue Skies: Education in Second Life

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Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing, technological world. Christians and Christian teachers in particular often find themselves outside their comfort zones in attempting to incorporate or even to understand some of the new media with which their students have grown up. It is tempting for many instructors instinctively to think of these new media as counterproductive or bad simply because they do not understand them, but this is not necessarily the case. These media are tools, and although tools can certainly be put to contrary use, they can also be used for positive outcomes if instructors can embrace and control them. The challenge to teachers is a worthwhile one, because such media offer the opportunity to establish real communication and rapport with many students using channels with which they are familiar.

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Try to picture the most comfortable, spacious and well-laid-out classroom possible. What would it look like? Could it comfortably accommodate 25 students? Floor-to-ceiling windows could look out into a cool, shaded forest, but any windows would have to be out of direct view of the students so as not to be a distraction. They could let in just enough ambient light to illuminate the room, but not so much as to overpower the full-size video screen behind the podium. Class will be starting in a few minutes. As they enter the room, students greet both the teacher and each other with smiles and small talk before taking their seats. They are a diverse group, representing many different genders, colors, sizes, and shapes. Some are male and some are female. A couple of students arrive late and sneak into the back row of seats. The lesson begins. After a class or two, the teacher decides to change the classroom around. The twittering of birds is audible and could be a distraction. The video screen might be more effective on *that* wall instead of this one.

The door should be bigger. The teacher raises her hands and beams of light spring from her hands as the room swirls and dances while obeying her silent commands. . . .

Although this may all sound like something from Hogwarts School as described in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books (Rowling, 1997)(Rowling 1997), it is in fact something that is not only possible but is happening right now. This isn't magic or make-believe. This is just a typical classroom in Second Life, the immersive, interactive virtual-reality world created and hosted by California-based Linden Labs.

What is Second Life?

Since its inception in 2004, the virtual online environment called Second Life (SL) has attracted considerable media attention, largely because of its meteoric growth to by some estimates as many as nine million residents (Bugeja, 2007). Also noteworthy is the development of an economy that causes over a million very real U. S. dollars to change hands in SL every day. This economy has developed from a burgeoning real-estate market, and from the fact that SL residents can create either static or animated objects, clothes, weapons, etc., and sell them for real money to other residents (Terdiman, 2008). It is for this reason that companies like Sun Microsystems, Sony, and Dell have established permanent presences there.

Real-life demographics also contribute to corporate interest in SL. In deciding to open an embassy in SL, a Swedish government spokesperson explained that tech-savvy SL coders, web-writers and early adopters are the type of potential emigrants that Sweden would like to encourage (Cheng, 2007). Judging by the recent "in-world" (meaning in Second Life) job fairs and hiring clinics put on by several technology companies, Sweden's viewpoint concerning SL residents is not unique. People unfamiliar with SL often assume that it is some sort of online video game and certainly not something to be taken seriously as an educational medium. A

closer inspection, however, reveals a complex and self-evolving interface, still very much in its infancy, with implications and applications for education as well as for many other fields of research.

Some of the most exciting possibilities for this medium lie in education. Web-based learning, like most educational tools, has its pros and cons. On the one hand, online learning can transcend geographic and sometimes temporal (if asynchronous) obstacles that might prevent students from attending conventional classes. Student interfaces tend to be structured and extremely visual. On the other hand, all of the non-verbal communication cues upon which we, as human beings, depend for the bulk of our interpersonal dealings are typically absent in a web-based environment. All of the smiles, frowns, eye-contact, and body language simply are not going to be there, and interaction with fellow students is going to be nonexistent . . . or so we used to think.

Second Life has changed the rules we thought we knew about web-based education. In SL, it is possible to create a custom virtual classroom or amphitheater much more quickly, cheaply, and easily than in real life. Once created, students can attend by way of “avatars” or virtual bodies and viewpoints. Just as individuals in real life can express themselves with their clothing and accessories, so can SL avatars. Avatars can be minutely customized until they reflect their real owners’ identities, if not always their true appearances. Students can sit or stand and listen/read/watch and otherwise interact with an instructor avatar while watching or chatting with each other much like students do in real classrooms. This degree of interpersonal interaction in an online environment represents an exciting new frontier in instructional technology (Carr and Pond, 2007).

Getting Started

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The first step in the SL experience is to create an account. Basic membership is free but only “premium” members can own land. A premium membership ranges from six to ten dollars per month, depending upon the length of commitment. After the initial user account is created and a unique SL avatar name is selected, the software is downloaded and installed. Customizing appearance is one of the first tasks a new resident faces. The first avatar “body” assigned will have a bland standardized appearance and clothes. The Second Life interface allows very fine control of appearance. Everything from the bushiness of facial hair to the foot size can be tweaked on a sliding scale until it is just right. From their bland starter avatars, new residents can choose whether to appear attractive, athletic, mythological, monstrous, or just to allow their online personas to reflect their real-life appearances. This degree of customization is one of the factors that make a Second Life session so visually entertaining and enriching.

With the software installed and new avatars created, residents are free to wander a seemingly endless landscape filled with mountains, forests, oceans, beaches, waterfalls, and lots of stores. This is no menu-driven two-dimensional façade with static figures standing with frozen smiles; residents are free to look around in any direction and to examine objects or other avatars from any angle. Avatars can also cover enormous virtual distances by either flying or teleporting. Although SL at any given moment will have tens of thousands of users logged on, the environment is so big that vast tracts may appear to be deserted. In other places, sidewalks, fields and even the skies are filled with other online Second Life avatars. These may be ordinary-looking or quite extra-ordinary looking characters. Residents can talk to, gesture to, smile at, and otherwise interact with each other. Just as in real life, most but not all SL residents are friendly.

Advantages and Opportunities

The advantages and opportunities for teaching in this medium are many, and to date over 60 colleges and university have offered classes in Second Life, including Pepperdine University, Ball State, and Harvard Law School (Lamb, 2006). Although many other virtual environments exist, few can match the complex, immersive experience of Second Life. One interesting result of the free rein given most residents within SL is the fact that the virtual world is being largely sculpted not by Linden Labs, the original company that created it, but by the residents themselves (White, 2008). As such, SL has become a self-evolving entity in its own right.

Besides being able to customize appearances, avatars are able to make many gestures at the click of a mouse. Laughing, shrugging, smiling, and so on are important ways in which people convey messages in real life, and many of these gestures are available in Second Life as well. This is an important way in which students and teachers can share an interactive learning experience. In addition to having a fine-tuned appearance and displaying a certain gracefulness while walking, flying, etc., one of the ways in which a newcomer to the Second Life medium can immediately be spotted is by his or her woodenness of expression (plus a tendency to walk into things). Another facet of the medium is that it opens new doors for diversity. Age, gender, and skin color become laughably unimportant when the options now extend to appearing as an elf, a robot or a glowing spark! In SL, appearances are fleeting, transitory, and sometimes misleading. Intelligence and imagination are what count.

Recently, an important change was announced in how SL avatars are able to communicate with each other. Originally, it was purely by text chat. If an SL resident wished to hail another, he or she would begin a chat session. Their avatars would mimic typing in midair, and a chat box would open on user interface screens. Now, however, voice chat is available in many SL regions (2007). If a user has a microphone and speakers, it is often possible to speak

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directly to other “in-world” avatars, thus enhancing the realism of the interface. This voice chat feature includes such realistic (and necessary) touches as having the volume automatically decrease with the virtual distance of the communicators (2007). Each marginal improvement in the realism and usability of the interface makes SL all the more practical as a learning platform.

In addition to stylizing their wardrobes, gestures and facial expressions, SL residents can also create and customize their own buildings. From modest bungalows to sophisticated office complexes, SL provides a platform from which users are able to create their own environments. Once a building or other object is created, its owner can assign or restrict permissions to it in order to direct very specifically which SL residents can access it and the degree of access they have (Au, 2008). Using a proprietary scripting language, users can create objects (weapons, buildings, street lights), animations (dancing, juggling), and animated objects (sports cars, video screens, sea monsters). Once these objects are created their owners can assign permissions to others or allow others to make exact copies (for a fee, usually).

Disadvantages and Obstacles

Although the lure of using Second Life as a learning platform is strong, there are obstacles as well. One problem is that the changing and dynamic environment of the medium is such that it is often difficult to police. Staying ahead of the deleterious effects of malicious scripts introduced in-world can be challenging. To be sure, when an SL resident habitually behaves in a harassing or threatening manner to others, he or she is referred to as a “griever” and can have his or her respective online persona banned from the world (Ludlow and Wallace, 2007). Unfortunately, there is nothing to prevent the real person from creating a new avatar and reentering with a new face and name, virtually reincarnated as it were (Ludlow and Wallace, 2007). Although such harassment is rare in the areas of SL that are devoted to academic pursuits,

they do happen occasionally. Second Life also requires a software installation on the user's PC, and the software is continually being upgraded and patched as SL evolves. Because of all this resident activity, the online environment is constantly in a state of flux and can be a bit unpredictable. Also, certain minimum hardware and bandwidth requirements for the user's PC must be met in order to have a meaningful online experience (Percival, 2008).

Another issue that has presented an obstacle to the widespread adoption of the interface for corporate training and seminars is the learning curve associated with using the medium itself (Tapley, 2008). As has been noted, newcomers tend to look bland and wooden until they become familiar with using the controls and environment. In a corporate setting in particular, individuals may be self-conscious about stumbling through the learning process. They might also question its need or value when options like live webcasts and other collaboration tools are available. One way to address that issue that is currently being discussed would be to have a "library" of preformatted and professionally dressed avatar accounts, complete with boardrooms equipped with teleconferencing facilities, available to check out on a temporary basis.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome in order for Second Life to be seriously investigated as a learning platform is the tendency for people to think of it as a game. Video games can be and are played in Second Life every day; it is true. But serious scientific and educational research is also being conducted. Much like the Internet itself, Second Life contains a little bit of everything. If the perception of it as merely an electronic playground is to be overcome, only time and publicity will be able to do it. Money is, of course, the quickest way to be taken seriously by businesses. Already SL's unusual but apparently thriving economy has generated considerable interest in the business sector. As businesses continue to create in-world presences, academic institutions, nonprofits and government agencies are following suit.

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Concerts, seminars, job fairs, simulations, focus groups, modeling and prototype testing are just a few of the applications that are already being applied to this environment (Rymaszewski, 2007).

Current Applications

Only now are scholars and researchers beginning to tap into the possible educational applications of this platform. Imagine what it would be like to bring history to life by taking groups of students on a virtual tour of Athens, Constantinople, or Troy. Imagine teaching Architecture by building a medieval cathedral outside the classroom and modeling several different types of arches to see the artistic effect. Students could glide and swoop among the rafters like cybernetic swallows in order to gauge the overall effect from various perspectives. Imagine teaching Geography by inviting a group of students to sit on a flying carpet, then rocketing them across Patagonia, Nepal, or the Gobi desert in perfect safety and comfort.

There are even more imaginative (even nefarious) projects currently underway. A group of psychology researchers at University College in London have written a software program that masquerades as a human avatar within SL to investigate the psychology of personal space in an online environment (Friedman, 2007). This program initiates conversations with people and then deliberately invades their personal space in order to see how they will react and to record the results. In so doing they have managed to bypass safety restrictions governing the control of human avatars within the environment and perhaps paved the way for unprincipled individuals to control the behavior of other avatars within SL. Finally, there are applications currently being used to develop effective teachers by having them practice using simulated classrooms with simulated students in them. These virtual classes could be customized with different learning issues for the instructor to deal with, and if the proscribed learning outcomes are not met the instructor can “reset” the class to its initial setting and try again (Brown, 1999).

Predictions

Someday, interactive virtual malls will probably be the preferred way to shop. Someday, clothes will probably be modeled on an avatar before making an online purchase. Someday it may be possible to monitor complex or dangerous mechanical systems from the safety of a virtual environment. Someday, the virtual reality environment of Second Life may be integrated with a virtual reality control mechanism (inspired by the Nintendo Wii, perhaps?), and the resulting amalgam might be hugely popular. But what does the future hold for Second Life as a learning platform? Is it really that much more effective than using webcasts, or than using one of several effective collaboration software platforms currently available? Answering these and other questions definitively will require long and thorough objective research studies. While we await the results, the interface and experience of Second Life and the possible applications thereof are rapidly evolving. Although no one knows for certain how long Second Life itself will last, it seems likely that the only thing that could hamper its continued development would be the advent of something even better.

The number of artists and musicians in Second Life is surprising, as is the number of churches, synagogues, and temples. Second Life does appear to have its spiritual side, or some of its residents do at least, and there are many opportunities there for teachers in different faiths and disciplines. The Second Life Grid is a web platform dedicated to ongoing research and development in (Labs 2007). It contains a wiki as well as a support area for those educators interested in exploring and experimenting with using SL for distance learning, collaboration, simulations, and training applications. It is very much a work in progress, and the web site puts it best when it says “The future of Education is best predicted by inventing it.”

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