Chapter 24
Second Life as a Tool for Engaging Students Across the Curriculum

Kathryn E. Stevens
James Madison University, USA

S.E. Kruck
James Madison University, USA

Jeremy Hawkins
James Madison University, USA

Suzanne C. Baker
James Madison University, USA

ABSTRACT
Second Life (SL) is a virtual world that possesses great potential as an innovative teaching tool. SL not only allows users to meet, interact, and collaborate in a virtual space, but also to create their own learning environments. This chapter explores how virtual worlds such as Second Life can be used to enhance the overall educational experience of both traditional and distance education students. We describe applications of SL to teaching diverse classes in art history and museum studies, business, and psychology, and to community building across the university. In general, our experiences with using SL have been positive, and our students report enjoying the creativity and flexibility of SL as well as the opportunity for social interaction in the virtual world. We provide recommendations to those considering the use of SL.

INTRODUCTION
The digital world is one constructed of information. It is a frequent complaint that the dilemma facing students today is no longer in locating facts but in determining their value. As a result many colleges and universities have adapted by teaching their students critical and empathetic thinking skills and no longer emphasize memorization of factual information. For instance, the mission of statement of James Madison University (JMU) is not to teach...
its students specific data, but to prepare them to be educated and enlightened citizens who can lead productive and meaningful lives. In other words, we want our students to be able to assess new situations, to interact successfully with them, and finally to reflect and to learn from their experiences. Inherent in their success is an ethical evaluative component that we believe will guide them at a personal and global level.

For this method of education to be effective, instructors need to understand the new generation of students. Frequently dubbed Generation Y or the Millennial Generation, these students were born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. Computers and the Internet have always been a part of their world. They tend to embrace new digital forms of communication, using instant messaging, text and twitters to connect frequently with their peers. Because of this familiarity with technology, Second Life (SL) can be a strong educational tool for students.

SL is a virtual world that came on-line in June 2003. It is owned by Linden Lab located in California, USA but is used by people all over the world. Unlike many virtual worlds or computer games such as Sims Online and World of Warcraft, SL is envisioned and created by its users. This fundamental difference is reflected in the Linden Lab’s slogan for SL, “Your World, Your Imagination” (www.secondlife.com). Also unlike many other virtual realities, SL is not a game, although it shares many characteristics with Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). There are no conflicts that must be resolved, no rules of game-play, and no requirements for progressing (“leveling”) in SL. Since there is no “object of the game” users are free to use the virtual SL world however they wish. Rather than a space for engaging the storyline of a game, SL is more accurately thought of as a space for social interaction. As of spring 2009, statistics indicate that approximately one million users from all over the globe log in to SL during a typical thirty-day period. It is this multicultural social aspect of SL that makes it particularly suited to the innovative uses generated by educators.

In SL users create an avatar, or a character that represents them in the virtual world. Avatars interact by chatting, using text or voice to communicate with others in their general vicinity or instant messaging to communicate privately or with others in different locations. Avatars travel through the virtual world by walking, flying, or teleporting from place to place. Unlike most other virtual worlds, SL users may make their avatar anything they can imagine. The basic creation tools allow users to change the apparent height, weight, age, and gender of their avatar. Avatar shapes may be manipulated to appear as animals, futuristic robots, or any number of inanimate objects.

We have found this creation of a digital self to be an important aspect of SL for most users. It is common for an introductory session to focus specifically on avatar creation and image manipulation, regardless of the planned agenda. Many people are simply unwilling to continue tutorials about how to use the world until they are satisfied with their appearance. It is also not uncommon for users to select or to create avatars that are dissimilar from their appearance in the physical world, preferring instead to experience SL as an avatar that may be of the opposite gender, older or younger age, or more or less attractive.

It has already been noted that a major distinguishing feature of SL is that users create most of the content. Current estimates suggest that less than one percent of all objects found in SL were created by Linden Lab (Boellstorff, 2008). Because of this freedom, SL is home to a tremendous diversity of environments. Some areas seek to recreate parts of the physical world, such as ancient Rome or a New York City street. Other sections of SL reflect the creativity of their owner or are personal interpretations of science fiction or fantasy worlds.

Since SL is not a game that involves specific rules or requirements, what do people do with their avatars in SL? SL is primarily a space for social