

## **Virtual Worlds and Social Work Education: Potentials for “Second Life”**

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***Abstract:** Virtual worlds such as “Second Life” hold promise for social work education. They may be especially useful for distance/distributed education. Social relationships, groups, organizations and entire communities can be modeled and explored for role playing and laboratory instruction. This article provides an overview of “Second Life,” an example of a well developed virtual world. The CSWE Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards are used to examine possible applications. Benefits such as experiential learning opportunities and problems such as technical mastery are discussed. Virtual worlds can support and may even supplant current approaches for distance education.*

***Key Words:** Second Life, distance education, distributed education, virtual world*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Roughly twenty percent of masters and fifteen percent of bachelors social work programs are currently delivering or planning to develop online degree programs (Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke & Adkins, 2009). Given this trend, social work educators need to explore options for delivering online courses. The compelling graphic nature of virtual worlds may well support online social work instruction. From our experience, virtual worlds offer promise for holding classes, conducting exercises and role plays, exploring client systems and examining practice competency issues.

Virtual worlds are three-dimensional computer simulations that have been steadily evolving over the last decade (Bartle, 2003; Castronova, 2005). Usually accessed through the Web, virtual worlds have become commonplace for recreation and entertainment. Some, especially those that are created by the participants themselves, have potential for social work education. As reported by the New Media Consortium “The social aspects of virtual worlds are...useful for educational purposes. These worlds lend themselves to role playing and scenario building, allowing learners to temporarily assume...responsibilities without incurring real-world consequences” (New Media Consortium, 2007, p. 18). Ancillary professions such as human services counseling programs are incorporating Second Life into their curricula (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009).

Our work and ideas are based on the virtual world called “Second Life.” Created by Linden Lab Research, Inc., Second Life (SL) holds significant promise for higher education (Conklin, 2005; Hayes, 2006; Linden Lab, n.d.). The authors have been using Second Life for instruction, both in brief classroom demonstrations and for complete

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courses. Second Life is regularly demonstrated in a foundation MSW macro practice course in a session on working with virtual communities. Students are issued pre-programmed “avatars” and explore social service agencies and cause-related simulations that have been developed “inworld” by non-profit organizations.<sup>1</sup> In a second application, students in the last semester of their MSW leadership concentration may choose an online section of a required class that meets and works in Second Life. This hybrid class meets face-to-face at the beginning of the semester and inworld throughout the remainder. Lectures, agency tours, presentations, and class discussions all take place in Second Life. Students work directly with inworld agencies to help them develop strategic plans and social marketing tactics to advance their causes. Students facilitate consultation and focus group sessions in Second Life with community stakeholders. In addition, one of us spent a semester-long sabbatical exploring Second Life towards possible social work education and practice applications.

Second Life offers the same features as text-based course management platforms such as WebCT/Blackboard, Angel, and Sakai. Audio and video streaming, PowerPoint displays, white boards, two-way audio and other common tools can be included inworld just as easily as in text-driven platforms. Links to other media such as websites and video clips can be added. Opportunities for group discussion and collaboration are easy to arrange (Hobbs, Gordon & Brown, 2006). The possibility that virtual worlds may supplement - and possibly supplant - contemporary text-driven platforms has not been lost on higher education administrators and software developers (Carnevale, 2007; Collins & Jennings, 2007; Herz, 2001). Text-base online learning is less engaging than 3D immersion (Brown & Cairns 2004). As a result, colleges and universities with online agendas are pushing virtual world technology.

Instead of just presenting text to students virtual worlds can provide well developed three dimensional visual settings that can be extremely engaging. For example, imagine taking a class on a tour of “CF University” where they can better understand Cystic Fibrosis policy issues [Boomer Island 94, 141, 27].<sup>2</sup> Or consider having students explore what the world may look like to a person with schizophrenia. “Virtual Hallucinations,” created by the University of California at Davis Medical Center reproduces visual and auditory hallucinations in a way that sensitizes students to this condition [Sedig 26, 45, 22] (Yellowlees & Cook, 2006). Or have an administrative practice class sit in on staff meetings every Friday in the “Non-Profit Commons” where seventy agencies discuss strategies and resources [Plush Nonprofit Commons 152, 131, 25]. All of these experiences are available in Second Life.

Virtual worlds vary considerably and range from those for children such as Disney’s “Club Penguin” to the extremely violent “World of Warcraft.” Neither of these, of course, is particularly suited for social work education and many virtual worlds are solely intended for amusement and commerce. It is important to understand a fundamental difference between SL and many other virtual worlds. Most virtual worlds are “games” with specific participatory agendas and payoffs. Gaming worlds have highly organized rules and relationships. SL does not. It is instead a platform where participants may develop simulated environments for any desired purpose. This lack of a specific agenda makes using Second Life a most flexible tool for distributed education programs.

While Second Life is currently very popular—1,400,000 people generally visit within a sixty day period—other virtual worlds are available. Virtual world projects such as “Active Worlds” and “There” have educational possibilities as well (Thomas & Balsalmo, n.d.). The Croquet Consortium “is dedicated to developing and distributing asynchronous and synchronous Croquet-based collaborative simulations, experiential environments and virtual laboratories for industry, research and education. The Consortium is committed to a community-source vision of open software development and distribution.” (Croquet Consortium, n.d.). Rather than relying on a single host server controlled by the provider—a possible liability with Second Life—Croquet-based virtual worlds conceivably could be built by individual universities, making for better control and clear ownership.

While these other virtual worlds may eventually emerge as platforms for instruction, Second Life remains the current “killer app” that is readily available and supportive for higher education. At present there are over two hundred colleges and universities with a presence in SL (Linden Lab, n.d.). Some entire systems such as the University of Texas are developing extended learning environments in Second Life (Linden, 2009).

## SECOND LIFE

“Second Life is a 3D online digital world imagined and created by its residents.” (Linden Lab, n.d.) Participants voluntarily create artificial environments on “islands” called “sims.” Rich three-dimensional renderings range from literal reproductions of actual places—the complete Sistine Chapel for example—to imaginative fantasies that can only exist online [Vassar 169, 86, 24]. Within the sim, the participants create all features including landscapes, architecture, roads, buildings and infrastructure. The scale of the sim can range from a building on a small plot of land to an entire island that is roughly equivalent to sixteen acres in size. Costs and ongoing maintenance fees apply and discounts are available to educational institutions and nonprofit organizations.

While island and sim development is not within the scope of this paper, social work programs conceivably could build complete islands for student recruitment, instruction, and competency evaluation activities. Early adopters are beginning to pioneer sim development. For example, Dr. Cindy Tandy at Valdosta State University has created a complete interviewing laboratory in Second Life. Students can conduct and record mock interviews in home, prison, hospital and office settings. Practice interviews are a common instructional strategy in many social work curricula (Personal communication, 6 September 2009).

Most relevant for social work education, social service organizations and agencies are present and growing in Second Life. For example, the “Plush Nonprofit Commons” and “Aloft Nonprofit Commons” host over seventy non-profit organizations [Plush Nonprofit Commons 128, 179, 26]. Teaching hospitals for physicians and nurses are reproduced in Second Life such as the Ann Myers Medical Center [Hospital 142, 193, 21]. Diversity and populations at risk are well represented in Second Life. One example is the Transgender Resource Center [Milo 239, 36, 21]. Independent counseling services and support groups are also available. Some are staffed by volunteers. Others are serviced

by credentialed professionals such as the Center for Positive Mental Health [Kkotsam 168, 180, 68]. Actual support groups regularly convene in Second Life such as Alcoholics Anonymous chapters [Idunn 110, 53, 107]. Direct services such as information and referral and online counseling by some inworld agencies are provided. Information about services and resources both in the real world and in Second Life is commonly available. In summary, there are abundant locations in Second Life that have potential for social work practice education.

### **Getting into Second Life**

Learning to participate in Second Life is an acquired skill. New participants visit the Second Life website (<http://secondlife.com>) or alternatives such as "Virtual Ability" (<http://virtualability.org>). One goes through a registration process. An "avatar" must be selected from generic choices. A name is selected for the avatar from a list of available surnames, and one is free to use any first name one chooses. Registration is complete and an account is created when verified through email. The participant then downloads and installs the software, called a "viewer," and can begin to participate (Linden Lab, n.d.).

### **The Second Life Economy**

Second Life has a virtual economy in which "Linden Dollars" (L\$) are earned or purchased with real currency. Several levels of membership ranging from free to fee-paid are available. The paid levels allow participants to own land and create sims, but the free level permits a wide range of activities. As of this writing, 1000 Linden Dollars costs about \$4.00 American dollars (Linden Lab, n.d.). In the writers' experience students do not need to spend any money in SL although some occasionally will buy peripherals such as additional costumes for their avatars. There are no associated costs for students or faculty for simply exploring islands and interacting with other avatars or groups. A small fee, generally (L\$10) is charged for establishing a group in Second Life.

### **The "Avatar"**

Participants have complete control over the avatar that represents them. With practice, one can literally change the avatar's gender, age, race, ethnicity, ability, and even species. As a result the participant can create a literal interpretation of herself or himself or instead assume a wholly different visual identity and persona. Thus the abilities to experimentally explore diversity and the presentation of self are well developed (Meadows, 2007). For example, as an initial test of student competencies at mastering Second Life we have used a "Been there-done that" assignment that requires students to create two different avatars. They craft one avatar that looks as close to their real world selves as possible and an antithetical one that differs in gender, race, age, body morphology, and dress. Students then explore sims with each avatar to see how they are treated inworld because of their appearance and report results. This sharpens their awareness of how appearance influences acceptance, a dimension of the professional self.

### **Communications in Second Life**

Avatars can interact with each other on a one to one basis and in groups of up to about fifty avatars within the same island. The most common form of communication is through typing out messages and clicking on a chat button to post the message to the screen. All participants nearby can then read what is being said. A second means for communicating is through Instant Messaging, or "IM." This channels communications directly to an individual within a group without others seeing the contents. In a sense, this is like being able to privately whisper to a friend nearby. Thus, several ways to coach students in role play activities are available. For example, in a role play assignment the instructor can watch two students engaged in a mock intervention, one impersonating the client and the other the social worker. Both students can directly see each other's dialog as can the instructor. Should the instructor wish, she or he may send an instant message to only one of the students, perhaps to redirect questioning. This message will only be seen by the student to whom it is directed and not by both. As a result, the ability to use instant messaging so that only one of the role players sees the communication offers opportunities for coaching (Bender, 2005.)

Instant messages can be sent to participants who are not inworld and will be delivered when that person signs in, making delayed and asynchronous communication possible regarding meeting announcements, lectures, or special events. Voice is also available if the user has a working headset with a microphone. The avatar can also move its body, head, arms, and face to make non-verbal gestures such as pointing, laughing, and shrugging. A wide range of additional gestures are available. Thus, non-verbal communications are possible and these too can be incorporated into role plays and exercises.

One is often struck by the truly global nature of Second Life: It is not unusual to see avatars talking in other languages. Several online translators facilitate communication. These can be brought up on the screen as "HUDs" or "Heads Up Displays." With the exception of voice, all communications in SL can be recorded and copied as text. This allows participants to create a permanent written record of the inworld session. Cutting and pasting transcripts into word processing documents can be easily done through simple keystrokes. For example, in the macro course described at the beginning of this article students regularly interview stakeholders who are developing non-profit sims. The students help them generate "SWOT" plans (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) to advance their causes. Students probe these factors with organizational leaders inworld and completely record transcripts from focus groups for subsequent analysis and incorporation into recommendations. This results in a written record of how the students' competencies in mastering the SWOT process have developed.

### **Movement within Second Life**

The avatar is capable of movement throughout most of Second Life, and can "Teleport" between the different islands through simple keystrokes and "Landmarks" that denote specific sims inworld. Once teleported, the most common method of getting around on an island is getting the avatar to walk by using the direction arrows on the

keyboard. Flying is also possible. Within our experience students can reasonably learn these skills within a short time. This is convenient when demonstrating Second Life in single class sessions such as the previously mentioned unit on virtual communities. We keep an inventory of demonstration avatars with preset landmarks for specific non-profit sims that the students can easily use for short visits inworld. "Teleporting" to islands is easy in Second Life, and students guide their demonstration avatar to the assigned sims. Once there, they walk about and explore what the sim's creators have provided and their findings are then discussed.

### **Relationships in Second Life**

Given that tens of thousands of people participate in SL at any given time, many social interactions and relationships become possible. The two common strategies are forming friendships and joining or creating interest groups. Typically, one interacts with peoples' avatars through typing or voice. Should one want to form a more permanent relationship, a right click on the other person's avatar brings up the "Add Friend" choice. If accepted, the person is automatically added to the "friends" inventory that is readily accessible. One can add private notes about the "friend," making it possible to keep track of whom one has added to the list. It is easy to instant message friends, offer a teleport, enact payment if a financial transaction is being negotiated, and allow them to see your location and online status if desired. As a result, social contacts are easy to form and maintain.

Thousands of specialized groups are available in Second Life. These range from interest and amusement groups to cause-related professional organizations. For example, the "Path of Support" on Healthinfo Island lists over seventy different support groups that regularly meet in Second Life. The path is categorically organized and includes disability, mental health, addiction, abuse, family, bereavement, and health groups. [Healthinfo Island 93, 73, 21]. The "Social Workers of Second Life" has over one hundred and twenty members from many different countries. Most groups are free, and generally open to the public. Others are more restrictive and can only be joined by contacting the owner. Announcements may also be posted for group events, and members who are not inworld will see them when they come inworld.

The groups feature is very helpful when teaching in Second Life. We create an exclusive group for only our class members and require the students to join as proof of beginning competence, part of the "Been there, done that." assignment. Once the group is established it becomes easy to send announcements to the class and also provide Teleport locations for class meetings and assignments. When we are holding a regular class session avatar-to-avatar we simply put the location into an announcement that all students will see when they come inworld. Many possible meeting places for holding classes are located throughout Second Life.

### **Distributing, Accessing, and Recording Information in Second Life**

In addition to providing opportunities for social contacts, developers often provide information for visitors. Many information kiosks invite the user to "touch" and receive

information, usually through “Note Cards” about features within the sim or events. In addition, one can easily add ancillary websites through URLs. It is also possible to record visual information in Second Life by taking single snapshots and recording movies via supplemental screen capture software such as “Camtasia.” Called “machinima,” motion pictures of events in Second Life can be recovered and edited for both education and evaluation.

### **Supports for Distance Education**

Distance based class discussions are actually easier to follow inworld than through text-based chat rooms. This is because one can see when a student is going to type something *in advance* plus there are *visual cues* from the avatar. This makes conversation more natural and less disjointed than in text-only distance sessions. Additional resources are also available. Several complete islands are devoted to education in Second Life such as the Eduislands [EduIsland 148, 69, 23] and the New Media Consortium [NMC Campus 139, 224, 42] and Sloan-C [Teaching 95, 126, 22]. These organizations offer regular meetings and seminars inworld to support distance education. Listservs such as Second Life Educators at [educators@lists.secondlife.com](mailto:educators@lists.secondlife.com) offer online discussions and an ongoing digest of readers’ contributions. Blogs are available too such as the Second Life-education blog at <http://www.SecondLife-educationblog.org>. Finally, regional and national education conferences are available. Some meet inworld, others meet face to face, and some are jointly convened in both.

## **POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

The competencies specified by the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for the Council on Social Work Education (2008) offer a framework for describing Second Life applications to social work education. The following examples are presented using selected competencies. We have chosen EPAS Educational Policies that correspond to our experience with Second Life, so not all of them are included here. Competencies are practice behaviors that are visible and measurable (Commission on Accreditation, 2009). Second Life lends opportunities to directly observe and record practice behaviors that can provide data for outcome measures on competencies.

### **Professional Identity: Educational Policy 2.1.1—Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.**

One key dimension of social work identity is knowledge and presentation of the self. Awareness of how one presents the self as a social worker—and how one is perceived by others—is critical to successful practice. Second Life offers a unique opportunity to explore the presentation of self towards competently mastering how this concept may lead to successful practice. As previously discussed in the “Been there, done that” assignment, individual avatars can be radically changed in terms of how they appear. When students explore islands they interact with other Second Life visitors (not necessarily other students) and visit agencies and organizations. They use each avatar separately and record how they are treated in encounters. The results are reported back in the inworld class meetings. This sharpens their awareness of how physical presentation

affects identity and practice, and offers a source for data on how competent the students have become in understanding presentation of self as a professional social worker. This is determined by assessing the depth and sophistication of their comments.

#### **Diversity: Educational Policy 2.1.4—Engage diversity and difference in practice.**

The opportunities for exploring difference and diversity and practice are abundant. Countless groups from different cultures are available, creating many opportunities for students to interact with people with different and diverse identities from across the globe. For example, isolated people with disabilities such as survivors with neuromuscular disorders often use Second Life as their principle means for establishing social contact (A. Krueger, personal communication, April 11 2008).<sup>3</sup> The accident victim on a respirator and confined to a back bedroom may use Second Life as their *major* source for making friends and enjoying a social life. One complete island, Virtual Ability, has been developed as a dedicated place for people with disabilities where they can learn how to use Second Life for social contact. The orientation pathway can even be negotiated by people who are blind, and assists such as a virtual guide dog or cane are available. As a result, students exploring Second Life have opportunities to interact with people with disabilities and discuss practice issues with them. In our experience, students encountering people with disabilities in Second Life become aware of how differently abled people adapt and form strong social bonds. This is evidenced in comments the students make in our inworld class discussions. We have discovered that it is very helpful to provide students with landmarks to islands that have been specifically developed by people with ability challenges. The Autistic Liberation Front, for example, is a sim created by people within the autism spectrum and includes memorials and a museum [Porcupine 49, 200, 108]. Deaf communities have established a complete island [Cape Able 132, 177, 21]. “Wheelies” is a virtual discothèque for people with mobility challenges. It offers dancing and social contact. Virtual wheelchairs are optional [Taupo 168, 83, 23]. Interactions inworld assist students in separating the individual from the disability and to experience a social environment where it is acceptable to be disabled.

Student competencies can be measured through either direct observation, text-based captures of student interactions, photographs or machinima movies, or through student narratives that analyze diversity and difference experiences. Students’ interactive experiences in Second Life interactions can help them examine their assumptions about differences in values and abilities.

#### **Populations at Risk, Social and Economic Justice: Educational Policy 2.1.5—Advance human rights and social and economic justice.**

Second Life has many cause-related sims, groups, and complete islands that have missions related to human rights and social and economic justice issues. Learning activities related to increasing student familiarity with current social justice issues and community organizing activities are available. One of us, for example, has had teams of students help cause-related groups develop social marketing campaigns. In this assignment the students are divided into teams of two or three. They must contact the leaders of a group focused on a population at risk and conduct at least two stakeholders’

focus groups among members that specifically address the social marketing concepts of product, pricing, placement and promotion. Once the data from these meetings have been compiled the students then draft social marketing plans for advancing the group's cause and present these to the group's leaders. Evaluating how competently the students have mastered the collaborative role as consultants and also the specific concepts of social marketing is easy because complete transcripts of the meetings and also the recommendations that the students have electronically shared are readily available. We have found that this assignment works well provided the instructor spends a bit of time inworld with the group's leader to explain the nature of the assignment in advance and how the students' product will help them promote their cause in Second Life. This holds particular advantage for the distance-based classroom. When students are geographically isolated from each other, in some cases across state lines or international boundaries, this type of learning experience would be difficult or impossible.

**Research: Educational Policy 2.1.6—Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.**

Interview-based and survey research projects lend themselves to Second Life particularly well. The student teams in the MSW leadership course conduct inworld neighborhood surveys with few difficulties, a classic macro research intervention. The instructor creates a specific research group and requires that students join and wear the group label that appears above their name when conducting neighborhood surveys. This clearly identifies them as researchers. Students then participate in all facets of the research process. Learning activities include questionnaire development, data collection, and analysis.

Using the neighborhood survey assignment in a distance education class would be impossible or extremely difficult in the real world because the students are separated and cannot meet together. Second Life eliminates this barrier because students can easily meet in Second Life regardless of where they and the informants actually reside in the real world. Additional supports for conducting research inworld are also available such as the Social Simulation Research Lab that offers over one hundred and fifty full text references on cyber-research, lectures, seminars and discussions [Hyperborea 220, 87, 23]. Assigned readings and critically evaluating research competencies through graded assignments are thus possible. Second Life also offers numerous opportunities to engage students in naturalistic research experiences where they become the primary data gathering instrument, use qualitative research methods, or engage in inductive data analysis to identify multiple realities.

**Human Behavior in the Social Environment: Educational Policy 2.1.7—Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment.**

The following example of a learning activity provides students with the opportunity to apply their understanding of a variety of HBSE theories to avatar behaviors: Have students choose a specific theory, complete associated readings and other research about the theory, and then ask students to join and observe a group of interest in Second Life. The group need not be directly related to social work practice and may exist for social

contact or recreation, although many practice-relevant groups are available such as the Grief and Loss support group that meets in “Rachelville.” [Imagination Island 42, 143, 151] or the regular Friday staff meetings in the Nonprofit commons mentioned above. Students join the group, observe meetings, and assess human and group behavior in terms of the theory. Students can be paired and asked to observe the same human or group behavior that they assess using different lenses or paradigms such as a strengths-based perspective and one that is pathology-based. Presentations to class members facilitate instructor assessment of competency.

### **Educational Policy 2.1.9—Respond to contexts that shape practice.**

In some respects, virtual worlds *are* new contexts that shape practice. Just as the ascension of the World Wide Web dramatically opened up countless opportunities for discovering and exchanging information and social networking, virtual worlds are often populated with people seeking services and opportunities for practice.

Speculatively, problems with addiction to Second Life may be present as well, just as with other psychiatric disorders that involve electronic media (Block, 2008). For students, experiences in Second Life can powerfully highlight the importance of context. By interacting with other avatars, students can become acutely aware of how they cannot assume anything about the context of another person, and how context-based their own questions and comments may be. Competencies for evaluating contexts include assigning logs and analytical papers that describe encounters with various avatars and sims and how these may be understood. For example, students can analyze their inworld experiences from feminist perspectives identifying Second Life supports and barriers to women realizing their full and unique potential.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on the examples above, Second Life clearly holds potential for many teaching agendas in social work that are compatible with and support the new competency-based EPAS. Clinical and micro-focused events and role-plays are readily possible. Group opportunities are abundant. Macro practices such as community and organizational leveraging assignments are plentiful. Second Life offers numerous opportunities to observe student competencies in a way that may not be possible in the traditional or text-anchored online classroom. Yet several limitations that the authors have encountered need to be addressed if one wishes to use Second Life for teaching. Possible problems with student access, the learning curve, finding resources, occasional harassment, and resource stability need to be planned for in advance of instruction.

### **Access Issues**

Students must have high-speed Internet connections and adequate graphics cards in their computers to successfully participate in Second Life. Yet this is not always the case (Hawkins & Oblinge, 2006). Some students may not have adequate connections or computers, so alternatives such as having dedicated machines on campus, perhaps in a lab, may be needed. Moreover, university rules regarding software placement and the

nature of the equipment in computing labs can present policy and investment barriers that may need to be addressed. For example, if the university recycles older computers into laboratories, the obsolescent machines may not be able to support Second Life. From our experience, having Second Life available in the campus computer labs has been very advantageous because it makes participation possible even when the student has marginal connectivity elsewhere. This strategy may not work for completely distributed classes, but hybrid courses that include accessible face to face meetings may find this advantageous.

Access, however, has more than technical dimensions. The 3D world of Second Life is extraordinarily visual, so students with sight disabilities will need accommodations. Just as sign language interpreters are often used in the classroom with deaf and hard of hearing students, similar assists may be necessary for students with visual challenges. Students from deaf and hard of hearing communities should have few problems provided that communications are kept to typing and the voice feature in Second Life is not used. Students with motor impairments may also encounter difficulties because Second Life is very dependent on keyboard and mouse controls. Development efforts are underway to help resolve this, although the current state of the art is not complete (Foster, 2007). As discussed above, Virtual Ability Island is available to help people resolve disability access issues. It is voluntarily staffed and the volunteers are trained in providing all comers with adaptive accommodations for Second Life participation.

A final access issue is the age of the student. Second Life is limited to participants aged eighteen and over, and actual birthdates are required in the registration process. As a result, under-age students, especially first year undergraduates, may not be able to participate.

### **Mastery Issues**

An additional problem must also be taken into consideration: Second Life has a significant learning curve. Students are not able to simply get into Second Life and immediately participate as is the case when visiting a website. Several hours of practice are necessary for acquiring basic social, navigation and communication skills needed to fully participate. Moreover, documentation that explains different procedures and features in Second Life is often spotty and uneven because the islands and sims are developed by many people without an overarching managerial structure. If the reader wishes to conduct a prolonged class in SL we strongly suggest that students enter SL through the Virtual Ability website and follow the orientation that is provided. In addition, allow students adequate time for skill development. Our approach has been to devote a three-hour hands-on orientation in a computer lab at the beginning of the semester and then provide incremental skill-mastery assignments.

One work-around to avoid the long learning curve is using “demonstration avatars” discussed above that are pre-programmed with landmarks for specific places for the students to visit. Students can learn basic movement skills within a few minutes and, while they cannot extensively participate, they can explore specific islands and sims that

are relevant to the class when landmarks have been pre-programmed into the demonstration avatars.

### **Locating Resources in Second Life**

While Second Life has a built-in search feature, it is not as well developed or sophisticated as web-based search engines. As a result, searching for resources such as people, places, or groups can be time consuming and may not always be successful. While this may improve with future iterations in the Second Life platform, students and instructors may be frustrated when trying to locate specific resources. One strategy we use is to simply set specific landmarks while exploring inworld to build up an inventory and electronically distribute this to students (Vernon & Lynch, 2009). Within the Second Life world, one can also use the “Map” feature and record sim locations. Nevertheless, finding and keeping track of teaching-relevant resources in Second Life remains challenging because of search limitations and the fact that sims occasionally change, expand, or disappear.

### **Griefing and Harassment**

As in the real world, deviant behaviors are present in Second Life. It is important to remember that there are sexually explicit and violence-prone sims in Second Life such as simulated crack houses and other locations that students may find offensive. Some avatars are sexually explicit and engage in exposure and confronting behaviors. Warning students about these possibilities must take place. This has a possibly positive dimension as this correlates with harassment and safety issues in actual field placement training. Real life brings difficult clients with inappropriate behaviors, and Second Life could potentially be helpful as a laboratory experience where competencies in dealing with difficult or aggressive people can be developed either through chance encounters and subsequent discussion or intentional role-playing.

There are two dimensions to “griever” behaviors. Some “griefers” intentionally attempt to wreck or severely disable sims, just as some hackers attempt to destroy websites. If this happens and if students have been directed to a “griefed” sim, then learning opportunities may be lost or delayed because the sim doesn’t work well. While rare, this remains a possibility. A more sinister dimension is personal assault from malicious avatars. Linden Lab provides community standards for behavior as policy assistance but these are no deterrents. Malicious avatars may push, accost, or physically assault innocent avatars. More commonly, verbally abusive behavior can be presented. The authors have occasionally encountered griefers who spew extremely offensive racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim speech. Problematic behaviors can be reported to Linden Lab, but there are no assurances that students will always have safe encounters. Liability and risk issues concerning student exposure to abuse remain unresolved at this time (Bugeja, 2007).

While we have found that griefing is rare, especially in social service related sims and islands, it remains a possibility. At minimum, students must be warned about this possibility, just as they hopefully are forewarned in real-life field settings. An alternative

is to build and use “private” islands and sims that are solely dedicated to education. Private islands and sims can be completely restricted only to allow authorized visitors. This may become a common practice within higher education.

### **Stability and Attendance**

A final concern is how stable some sims may remain and how long they will be available. For example, the Plush Nonprofit Commons and Healthinfo Island sims—very promising for social work education—are supported by grants and fund-raising. Thus there are no assurances that these will continue to be available. In our experience this is similar to using websites in class or as assigned readings: they sometimes disappear! While Second Life is less volatile than the web, the best strategy to overcome this is to preview sims prior to using them in class and make alternatives available as needed.

Who comes inworld to visit sims and when they do so is an issue as well. We term this the “nobody is home” issue. Some sims enjoy constant visitors and high use while others, even when well constructed and interesting, seldom attract many people at the same time. For example, the cause-related sim “Camp Darfur” provides information on genocide [Better World 179, 243, 21] but it is usually empty of other avatars. An instructor who wishes to have the students interact with other participants will need to carefully plan for this limitation. One contributing factor is time; people from Asia or Europe tend to be more active during hours when people in the Western Hemisphere are generally unavailable.<sup>4</sup>

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While there are distinct drawbacks to using Second Life, chiefly the time it takes for students to develop skills, technical and ability challenges, difficulties finding specific locations, and occasional griefers, the authors believe that virtual worlds such as Second Life are well worth exploration and incorporation into social work education. To summarize some of the lessons we have learned: Allow time for mastery if one plans to extensively use Second Life. Using the Virtual Ability entry into Second Life and their “Orientation Island” greatly eases this transition. Demonstration avatars for shorter forays inworld are very helpful. We acquired these by asking students in the inworld class to “donate their avatars to science” after the class ended and this has worked well. Making certain that students are fully advised about what is required for participation—and having alternative learning opportunities not linked to Second Life—is extremely important. Our inworld macro practice class, for example, has an identical section that meets face to face.

Other opportunities for using Second Life in different ways are possible and, while we have only provided sample experiences, other EPAS competency areas merit exploration. Using structured role-play assignments to assess, intervene, and evaluate practice in different settings is certainly a possibility. Direct policy leveraging can also take place in SL. For example, an extensive simulation of a hospital complex was designed in the United Kingdom for the United Health Service by the National Physical

Laboratory to demonstrate how wraparound care could be deployed. The simulation was specifically designed to leverage Parliament [National Health Service 174, 14, 26].

While speculative at this point, it seems plausible that *standardized clients* could be developed in Second Life through artificial intelligence (AI) programs. A reliable AI standardized client could provide consistent experiences and measurable outcomes for evaluating student practice competencies. For example, “bots”—automatons that look like avatars and are crafted to respond to students through AI—could be programmed to interact with students in predictable ways. This would allow evaluation of student competencies in a way that holds client variation constant against a known standard.

This paper has mainly focused on using Second Life as a platform for distance education programming. Using Second Life in the traditional face-to-face and hybrid distance education classroom invites exploration as well.

While we currently are limited to contemporary course management platforms, these will evolve. Additional “Web 2.0” applications such as blogging, wikis, RSS feeds, social networking, collaboration, mashup database sharing, geographic information systems, podcasting, social bookmarking, and other emerging technologies will transform course management platforms. Virtual worlds may play a key role in how these innovations are incorporated into teaching. If we as a profession wish to develop successful distributed programs, then virtual worlds such as Second Life are well worth exploration and evaluation. As with any new technology, Second Life and other online “Virtual Worlds” will continue to develop over time and many of the current limitations should be overcome. Just as social work education and practice today is no longer what it was pre-Internet, the existence of virtual worlds may shape the future of social service delivery and social work education.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Avatars” are graphic representations of the end user or participant in a virtual reality simulation. This 3D pictorial representation symbolizes the user. Avatars may be depicted as humans, cartoons, animals, or other characters. The user participates in the virtual reality simulation through manipulating the avatar. “Inworld” is the term for being connected to and actively participating in Second Life. It is a common term in Second Life, similar to “login” or “logon” in email.

<sup>2</sup> There are no citation protocols for orienting readers to specific locations in virtual worlds. Locations in Second Life are provided by giving the name of the island where the sim is located plus latitude, longitude, and altitude coordinates. This is the convention used by Linden Lab. We have provided this information for specific sims inworld should the reader wish to view them.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Krueger is “Gentle Heron” in Second Life, and has been instrumental in establishing “Virtual Ability, Inc.” a 501(C)3 organization that offers resources for different communities of disabled people. She and other colleagues recently receive a \$300,000 Linden grant from the Annenberg Foundation to help develop support groups for people with disabilities. Virtual Ability recently was awarded the first Linden prize as “an innovative inworld project that improves the way people work, learn and communicate in their daily lives outside of the virtual world.” (<http://virtualability.org>).

<sup>4</sup> The convention “SLT” is the term for “Second Life Time,” necessary because of the need to coordinate times for meetings inworld on a global scale. It corresponds to Pacific Standard Time.

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