

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT:  
SECOND LIFE IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

By

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## DEDICATION

To Laura, who provided feedback, support, and motivation from conception to defenses.

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## ABSTRACT

The recent development of digital tools has spurred educators to think differently about how they teach and how they can use computers in their classrooms. The use of virtual worlds, in particular Second Life, in higher education has been the focus of quite a few studies, although few if any researchers have evaluated the value of Second Life in a hybrid implementation of a first year composition course. This thesis is based on such an experiment—in the fall of 2010, I taught 23 students in a hybrid English 101 course that included Second Life in the first three assignments. The findings are based on data collected from two student surveys, five student interviews, course work, emails, screenshots, and observations collected over the course of the semester. While the majority of the students experienced difficulties getting the program to work and became resistant to it as a result, they also acknowledged its value and demonstrated improved engagement and learning in many instances. In this account, I detail the specific experiences that illustrate these findings, the similar and dissimilar experiences of other Second Life researchers, a number of best practices based on this study's successes and shortcomings, and possible areas for future research.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The week before the Fall 2010 semester started, Dr. Robert Kustra, the President of Boise State University, addressed the faculty about the direction of higher education and the need for innovation. In his remarks, he cited national and state educational goals, and then he said, “We cannot reach these goals if we continue on our present course with our dependence on traditional delivery systems” (10). He continued by discussing how technology provides new delivery systems—he cited Curtis J. Bonk’s book *The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education*. Bonk specifically discusses Second Life, the most popular and fully-featured virtual world and the subject of this thesis. Kustra said that Bonk “helps us understand how ... Second Life communities offer new learning strategies, giving examples that come from the halls of the most venerable academic institutions,” including Harvard, Stanford, and MIT (10). Later in his address, President Kustra gave this invitation: “[Let us] scan the changing landscape in higher education, see what we can learn from those who are blazing new trails, consider how Boise State expands on the innovative behaviors that are flourishing on our campus and others and apply that thinking to teaching and learning” (11). President Kustra invited the faculty at Boise State to explore new teaching tools, including Second Life, and experiment with how they can be used. This thesis is meant as a step in the direction President Kustra indicated. In this thesis, I intend to explore Second Life’s strengths and weaknesses as an educational tool by gauging its suitability as a vehicle for engagement

theory, as described later. I view my primary audience as those who are curious about virtual world education, but unsure of how they would implement it in a beginning composition course.

Not only are educators at Boise State interested in the pedagogical value of virtual world education, but it is clear that the popularity of virtual worlds in teaching is growing dramatically worldwide. While no clear record exists of exactly how many universities use virtual worlds in their courses, some parts of the world are adopting them much more quickly than others. Countries with an online, Second Life university include the following: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Mexico, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden (“Institutions and Organizations in Second Life”). Even more have used Second Life in less formal ways—without buying land and operating a Second Life location called an island. Conservative estimates indicate that over three fourths of the universities in the United Kingdom use virtual worlds in one capacity or another (“Universities Running in Second Life”). The United States does not have *that* high of a percentage of universities using Second Life, although definite interest exists, as demonstrated by President Kustra’s speech.

Concomitant with such interest, virtual world studies documenting reactions, theorizing approaches, and analyzing results have begun to dot journals, newspapers, and bookshelves with increasing frequency. A few education or composition journals that have published articles about virtual world education from February 2010 to February 2011 include *Computers and Education* (Cheryan), *The Journal of Distance Education* (Stoerger), and *College Composition and Communication* (Wohlwend). Books concerning the values of Second Life in higher education published within the last two

years include the following: *A Practical Guide to Using Second Life in Higher Education* by Maggi Savin-Baden (published Oct. 1, 2010), *Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life* by Judith Molka-Danielsen and Mats Deutschmann (published Feb. 17, 2009), and *Higher Education in Virtual Worlds: Teaching and Learning in Second Life (International Perspectives on Education and Society)* by Charles Wankel and Jan Kingsley (published Nov. 23, 2009). Numerous articles and books about virtual worlds precede these, but the frequency with which material is now appearing indicates that there are some very interesting things happening in education with Second Life.

In August 2010, I joined those researching Second Life for its pedagogical value by implementing my own study. There were many key ideas that shaped my work—a foundational concept was that students today are part of a “net generation.”

### **A “Net Generation”**

A common argument in favor of using digital games in higher education is that the current generation of students are “digital natives,” a “net generation” that are inherently more capable of—and prone to—using technology. In their book, *Educating the Net Generation*, Diana Oblinger and James Oblinger describe characteristics of college students who were around 18 to 22 years old and were part of the net generation: 20 percent began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8 (2.2), during teen years virtually all of them were using the internet (2.2), and “by the teenage years, students use the Web extensively for school research (94 percent) and believe it helps with schoolwork (78 percent)” (2.3). They describe the net generation as “digitally literate,” “connected,” “immediate,” “experiential,” and “social” (2.5-2.6), and as preferring education that uses teams, is structured, visual, kinesthetic, and applicable (2.7).

However, not all researchers agree on the value of grouping and generalizing about generations. Whitton calls such attempts “flawed,” stating that “I very strongly feel that labeling whole generational groups in this way is not helpful and, indeed, self-limiting” (6). She continues: “We cannot make sweeping assumptions about a particular generation, or any group of learners. Instead we should cater for all degrees of technical competence and confidence, and accept that many people (of all ages) will simply prefer to communicate, play and learn in ways that are not associated with technology” (7).

While acknowledging that technology and games are not a golden bullet that will single-handedly engage an entire population of students, she also believes firmly that they can be appropriately used in the university: “I think it is important that digital games are seen as simply another tool available to lecturers and teachers, which, when considered and implemented with regard to the constraints of the higher education system and appropriate pedagogic models, can provide an effective and engaging way to learn” (7-8).

While many agree with Oblinger and Oblinger about the value of characterizing generational groups (for example, Roberts; Hartman, Moskal, and Dziuban; Wager), many educators share examples of when such characterizations break down (Gee; Jarmon et al.).

Oblinger and Oblinger do parallel Whitton’s thinking, however, when they caution against the “almost instinctive assumption to believe that Net Gen students will want to use IT heavily in their education” (2.10). Oblinger and Oblinger define characteristics of the Net Generation specifically, but acknowledge that technological preferences in the students’ personal lives doesn’t necessarily mean that they are going to be comfortable or excited about technology in the classroom. They say that “although

they are comfortable using technology without an instruction manual, their understanding of the technology or source quality may be shallow” (2.5). Whitton echoes this concern in her own work, similarly describing this inaccurate perception of younger students:

“Although young people show an apparent ease with computers, they rely heavily on search engines and lack critical and analytical skills” (7).

During this research, I have noticed general student trends towards familiarity (occasionally only superficially) with technology and excitement about using it and therefore see the value of thinking in terms of the “net generation.” However, I agree that the concept of the net generation often breaks down on a case-by-case basis, notwithstanding the pew surveys upon which Oblinger and Oblinger build their arguments. It seems that at times students who would logically be the most adept and comfortable with technology were far from it.

### **Engagement and “Engagement Theory”**

The basic premise behind the net generation hypothesis is that younger students have a predisposition towards technology and that education can be more effective if it uses technology. While this generalization can be problematic when applied to every individual born between certain years, the recent fascination with the use of technology in education—especially virtual worlds—indicates that there is something to it in a more general sense. This idea, that virtual worlds used in particular ways can engage students in course material, was one of my greatest interests in exploring this project.

But what exactly do I mean by “engagement,” and what does it look like in the classroom? Benyon et al. say that “engagement is concerned with all the qualities of an experience that really pull people in—whether this is a sense of immersion that one feels

when reading a good book, or a challenge one feels when playing a good game, or the fascinating unfolding of a radio drama” (qtd. in Whitton 41). In other words, an engaging pedagogical tool has attributes that provide a sense of immersion, which ultimately lead to a positive, memorable experience. As a research participant in the study by Edwin Love, Steven C. Ross, and Wendy Wilhelm said, engagement is “deeper memory creation through [a] rich-media experience” (Love 67). According to these sources, education that is engaging is immersive (through a media-rich experience, for example) and therefore leads to deeper memory creation.

Jarmon et al. mention some very similar descriptions of engagement. They say that three key elements of engagement are interactivity, connectivity, and access. When an educational environment has these three elements, they claim that it “enhances student engagement through a sense of shared experiences, offers opportunities for collaboration, and provides access to the virtual environment and user-created content ” (225). Each of these points adds to the immersive and memorable aspects of the activity—in particular working with others in collaborative or shared experience is constructive.

In addition to the elements of immersion and memory at work in engagement, motivation also plays a role. James Paul Gee also is concerned with how media-rich material, in particular digital games, lead to motivation and learning. In his seminal book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee describes his interest in the effort young people put into learning new video games, as well as the enjoyment that they get out of them. He claims that good video games, although not usually thought of in this way, are intentionally crafted teaching artifacts from which we can learn principles of effective education. He asks, “How are good video games

designed to enhance getting themselves learned—learned well and quickly so people can play and enjoy them even when they are long and hard?” () He attempts to answer this question throughout the book, so I won’t try to summarize his response here; however, if those who play video games can be motivated and taught to complete complex functions, couldn’t educators use some of those same principles of engagement to increase the effectiveness of their educational techniques?

However, researchers caution against using games simply because they’re engaging. For example, Whitton stated, “A rationale for the use of games simply as motivational tools is not appropriate in higher education and is an oversimplification of the motivations that surround adult engagement in learning” (6). She later continues:

it is an oversimplification to assume that any game is motivational simply because it is a game. Different people are motivated by different types of games, and not all types are necessarily suitable in the context of higher education. Even if learners consider themselves to be *game players* in general, the motivational potential of a particular game will depend upon the individuals concerned and the type of game used. (Whitton 39)

She concludes that the purposes and rationale behind the game must be very clear—to the students as well as the teacher—before they be considered for class use: “It is . . . crucial to consider the context in which games for learning are used, their role in the curriculum and the activities that precede and follow any game for learning” (Whitton 47). Similarly, citing Whitton, Dudeney and Ramsay state, “*it is essential to have a clear educational purpose for their use, not simply because they are thought to be motivational*” (17). This attention to purpose was something I tried to keep in mind as I developed my course, as you’ll see in the next chapter.

Engagement has elements of immersion, memory-making, and motivation and is one of the main reasons why the argument in favor of using digital games in the

classroom is so compelling. Not only do digital games, including virtual worlds, provide engagement in teaching situations, but they also tap into a relevant and personal part of the students' lives. Using virtual worlds in educational settings is an act of meeting the students where they are. For example, Oblinger and Oblinger start their book by describing a typical student, Eric, and his use of technology. They conclude that "information technology is woven throughout Eric's life. . . . Computers, the Internet, online resources, and instantaneous access are simply the way things are done" (2.1-2.2). Virtual worlds in the classroom can be another of the many "online resources" already integral to student life, both inside and outside the classroom.

Concerning more specifically about what this might look like in the classroom, I turned to engagement theory, developed by Greg Kearsley and Ben Shneiderman in 1998. While I've used it as a lens with which to view my work rather than a guiding force with which to shape it, I have been impressed and proud at how many features of this theory do show up in my work. Also, because this theory is relatively new, I view using it as a valuable contribution to the field.

In a 1998 issue of the journal *Educational Technology*, Kearsley and Shneiderman describe their theory, and what technology has to do with it:

The fundamental idea underlying engagement theory is that students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks. While, in principle, such engagement could occur without the use of technology, we believe that technology can facilitate engagement in ways which are difficult to achieve otherwise. So engagement theory is intended to be a conceptual framework for technology-based learning and teaching. (20)

While they also give three specific components to be implemented in the classroom, they also acknowledge that this approach is general enough to put it in the same theoretical area as the theories of constructivism, situated learning, experiential/self-directed

learning, problem-based learning, and service-learning (20). For my purposes, rather than focus on how this theory overlaps with others, my main concern in this thesis is to analyze the three components that they mention, and how they relate to the work that I've done. According to the authors, approaches that use engagement theory "occur in a group context (i.e., collaborative teams)," "are project-based," and "have an outside (authentic) focus" (20). So the most engaging approaches to education, according to this theory, organize the students to work in groups, allow the students to design and implement their own creative projects, and focus the products on outside audiences. The features of engagement I discussed earlier are clearly at work here: the groups, student-chosen projects, and applicable focus are all designed to immerse the students in their experience and motivate them to perform high-quality work. These features are also compatible with the description of the general preferences of net generation learners discussed earlier. In future chapters I will mention more specifics concerning these three components.

Kearsley and Shneiderman discuss how the technological aspect of the theory is essential to strengthen student communication and creativity (23), although they don't specifically mention virtual worlds. However, they do invite researchers to help them answer a number of questions related to engagement theory, including "What kind of groupware (collaborative software tools) would best support engagement theory?" (22) This thesis is meant to do just that—to use these three components (group work, creative projects, and authentic focus), and the concepts of engagement upon which they are built, to gauge the effectiveness of my work and the suitability of Second Life to support engagement theory.

I now turn to two important indicators of the usefulness of Second Life—its

theoretical soundness, as discussed by those researching it, and its specific relationship with composition.

### **Second Life and Constructivism**

Constructivism is a common theme in the conversation about Second Life—Whitton even states that “the design of student-centred online learning environments has been very much influenced by the constructivist perspective” (46). As educators considering the use of new pedagogical tools (like Second Life), it can be beneficial to contemplate the nature of knowledge and ways in which we can help students make meaning. However, Constructivism is not a unified, easily described theory; rather, it has a rich history, with many fascinating, off-branching, and intersecting theories. Social Constructivism is traditionally attributed to Vygotsky, while Piaget is considered to have founded Constructivism. Both hinge on explaining the nature and origin of knowledge. While social constructivism examines the socially constructed nature of knowledge, constructivism emphasizes that our personal actions and perspective lead to our construction of knowledge. Thomas Duffy and David Jonassen describe this central concept of constructivism—the relationship between an idea, the experience from which that idea springs, and the potential learning that can take place between the two:

Meaning is seen as rooted in, and *indexed* by, experience . . . Each experience with an idea—and the environment of which idea is a part—becomes part of the meaning of that idea. The experience in which an idea is embedded is critical to the individual’s understanding of and ability to use that idea. Therefore, that experience must be examined to understand the learning that occurs. (4)

The experience and environment described by Duffy and Jonassen could easily involve social interactions, which is why I view their discussion as valuable to both social constructivists and constructivists. I view the meta-analysis involved in this meaning-

making process as significant for my use of Second Life. Duffy and Jonassen later describe their beliefs about the role instructors should play: “Instruction, we believe, should not focus on transmitting plans to the learner but rather on developing the skills of the learner to construct (and reconstruct) plans in response to situational demands and opportunities” (4). They put particular emphasis on skills of re-evaluation and reconstructing plans because in future jobs (and life in general) it’s more valuable to be able to cope with non-textbook, realistic examples that don’t fit neatly into pre-set plans.

Such an emphasis—providing students with tools and direction over set formulas to be rigidly followed—is not only more effective, but students tend to react more positively to such an approach. In terms of net generation students, Oblinger and Oblinger affirm that younger students react better to this kind of education: “Rather than being told, Net Geners would rather construct their own learning, assemble information, tools, and frameworks from a variety of sources” (2.12). They later describe how digital games tie into this approach: “Simulations and visualizations allow students to explore and draw their own conclusions. . . . Games and role playing provide students with the opportunity to assume another persona and learn by ‘being there’ rather than by being told” (Oblinger 2.12-2.13). Allowing students to explore a virtual world to complete a project can be an ideal format for them to develop and rework their own plans. Perhaps that’s why virtual worlds fit a constructivist framework so well.

Whitton provides another perspective on the ways in which we construct knowledge: “Fundamental to the constructivist perspective is the idea that people learn by constructing their own conceptions about the world by problem-solving and personal discovery” (46). I view Whitton’s “problem-solving” as the precursor to Duffy and

Jonassen’s plan-making—plans are patterns of action meant to resolve problems. However, her use of the term “personal discovery” implies a reflective, meta-aware approach to a successful constructivist paradigm. Reflection works well in constructivist learning environments because of the personally constructed nature of knowledge and the importance of not just learning, but of *realizing* what is learned.

Not only does Second Life support these general functions of constructivism, but virtual world researchers also maintain that Second Life supports features of cognitive and social constructivism specifically. Steff Broadribb et al. discuss this usefulness—their use of cognitive constructivism is very similar to my description of constructivism earlier:

In social constructivism, the focus emphasizes interaction with people and co-construction of knowledge . . . whereas in cognitive constructivism, the focus is on interaction with content and individual construction of knowledge . . . [our Second Life project] community readily demonstrates both: individuals in the community work together, and it is this collaboration . . . that enables individual reflection and learning. (206-07)

Collaborative work (supported by projects using Second Life) helps provide a framework within which students can individually create and reflect on their knowledge. In other words, the social scaffolding and an individual’s cognitive processes can both develop from/through the authentic contexts of Second Life and will be more apparent and usable to students who reflect about their experiences.

While I’ve just discussed branches of constructivism (Social Constructivism and Cognitive Constructivism), in the remainder of this thesis I will rely solely on the term *constructivism*—as, I’ve noticed, many constructivist theorists do—even when discussing social or cognitive aspects of the theory. One such theorist, Peter C. Honebein, gives an extremely useful list of goals for effective constructivist education in his essay, “Seven

Goals for the Design of Constructivist Learning Environments.” Not only do his goals for constructivist learning environments contain social and cognitive aspects, but many of them, the following three in particular, dovetail nicely with the components of engagement theory that I’ve brought up previously:

1. **“Provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives”** (11). While this goal is similar to the collaborative “group context” component, I view this mainly as dealing with outside perspectives that students encounter while not in the classroom. The worldwide nature of Second Life presented some great opportunities for the students to experience multiple perspectives.
2. **“Encourage the use of multiple modes of representation”** (12). Honebein clarifies that “Oral and written communication are the two most common forms of transmitted knowledge in educational settings. However, learning with only these forms of communication limits how students see the world. Curricula should adopt additional media, such as video, computer, photographs, and sound, to provide richer experiences.” The visual/auditory nature of Second Life encouraged this type of learning.
3. **“Encourage self-awareness of the knowledge construction process”** (12). This goal encompasses the first-year-writing outcome when teachers assign reflective writing assignments—teachers hope that students will become more self-aware of their ideas, their brainstorming process, and their presentation of knowledge. Second Life doesn’t necessarily lend itself to meta-awareness, so the in-class writing assignments will be the primary means of encouraging self-awareness so students can “explain why or how they solved a problem in a certain way” (12).

Implicit in these items is a value judgment about what kinds of things are important from a constructivist perspective and an approval of tools that can facilitate such goals. These three constructivist goals—appreciating multiple perspectives, using multiple modes of representation, and being self-aware of the knowledge construction process—mirror my own values and goals for the course and provide a useful lens through which to analyze the effectiveness of my implementation of Second Life.

### **Second Life and Composition**

A large percentage of the research that champions Second Life is focused on fields other than composition. For example, Second Life provides construction and models for the sciences, role playing and conversation practice for language learning, commerce and markets for business education, etc. While one of the things I value in Second Life is its diverse appeal and adaptability, there are still uses and research that are specifically composition focused. I discuss how others have implemented Second Life into their composition classes in more depth in chapter two, where I compare and contrast others' course and assignment design to my own. To give a sense of its value to composition pedagogies, I give a brief overview of some of the ways researchers have said Second Life could potentially benefit composition.

Second Life can provide composition students and teachers material to work with in their writing. Trevor Hoag and Tekla Schell claim that Second Life has the potential to “radically augment classroom pedagogy” in rhetoric and writing courses, providing opportunities to “visit and create communities, inhabit other perspectives, and rapidly develop a variety of writing responses in a low-stakes environment.” These opportunities, presented to students in an environment that isn't as demanding as real-life equivalents,

provide students with a rich set of resources from which to draw in their writing.

In addition to providing material that students can write about, Second Life can help create a more nuanced way of thinking about meaning and understanding, an important ability in writers. Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie, after specifically referring to Second Life, quote James Paul Gee as saying “games are potentially particularly good places where people can learn to situate meanings through embodied experiences in a complex semiotic domain and meditate on the process.” Writers in particular can benefit from meditating on the meaning created by the way people and places are represented on Second Life.

Concerning the specific kind of meaning composition students can make while analyzing Second Life, deWinter et al. argue that “participating in virtual online communities and cultivating player avatars are particularly fruitful activities for students’ analyses and production of media in the writing classroom because they often make explicit the ambivalences of new media.” They say that games “are imbued with numerous ideologies that are both purposefully and accidentally made invisible for the sake of compelling play,” and, therefore, by participating in Second Life’s community and avatar creation, students can begin to uncover—and even write about—the divergence between the intended purposes and the potential uses of Second Life. Exploring an open, non-directed game like Second Life can lead composition students to question why things were depicted or created the way they were and how they could do differently in their own “production of media in the writing classroom.”

The use of Second Life as an educational tool to effectively engage students, and thus establish its usefulness to engagement theory, has a solid base in both constructivist theory and composition education. What now follows are the methods I developed to gauge and catalogue student reactions to my implementation. The plan I describe below is the initial plan, in theory, as I developed it *before* I started the project—I relate it here to clarify my original perceptions and ideas. I intend to establish a baseline of how I intended the plan to go, then contextualize (in chapters three and four) the ways the methodology changed in practice. By contrasting which methods yielded more insight than suspected and which methods were more difficult than anticipated, my audience will have a clearer understanding of the value and difficulty of using Second Life.

### **Methodology**

I wanted to accurately measure student reactions to the use of Second Life in a composition classroom. I felt that by studying students that I was personally teaching would give me a more personal, nuanced understanding than if I studied another teacher's students. I also was uncertain about the difficulties and outcomes of the project and felt unconfident in asking another teacher to experiment with Second Life on my behalf. I decided to use methods that would allow me to receive a large scope of feedback: general feedback from each student—surveys, course work, and field notes—but also more personalized, in-depth responses via interviews (see Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer's *Becoming a Writing Researcher*). What follows is a more in-depth description of each of these methods.

The surveys I created (see appendix C and D) were designed to register a general context within which the interviews would make more sense. I wanted to get a sense from

each individual student of the specific aspect of Second Life that may have led to empowerment or disaffection by asking questions about their confidence with technology, attitudes towards Second Life at the beginning and end of the semester, and engagement during the use of Second Life. Because I wasn't using the research I currently am, my questions (especially concerning engagement) lacked specificity; still, the questions demonstrate my interest in establishing whether my students fit the "net generation" hypothesis, whether they reported improved engagement, a sense of community, and the ability to collaborate effectively. I followed a customized mixed format—certain statements are followed by multiple-choice options, some by a range of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," some with "true/false," and one with a "yes/no" option. I chose to implement different kinds of questions to give variety, to get a more nuanced set of answers, and to make the survey as easy to fill out as possible. The most common kind of question is the "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"—since students often take university surveys which use this format, I hoped to gain a sense of authority by formatting by surveys in the same way as the official university ones. I also didn't want students to be distracted by a new survey format. I varied the positive and negative aspect of the questions to give the student the feeling that I was not leading them to answer in a certain way.

As well as surveying students twice, I planned to interview four or five students at the beginning and the end of the Second Life portion of the class. This, in my mind, would be the central resource I would use to build my study—partly because I had the feeling that the questions I initially came up with might change radically after the first several weeks of class. I decided that in the interviews I would be better able to guide the

students in directions that were most productive and context-specific to their interests and personalities. Many of the questions addressed the same issues as the surveys, only the interview questions were more flexible and detailed—as part of my IRB approval, I submitted interview questions, concluding with the following explanation about how I view the difficulties and potentials inherent to the interviews: “Student answers to these questions are unpredictable, so I may ask them to follow up on particular points or discuss a particular area in more depth. For example, if a student indicated that they had a particularly strong connection with another student because of Second Life, I might ask why that was.” I enjoy talking with my students, so this was naturally the part of my methodology that I felt most comfortable with and excited about.

My emphasis in this study was mainly focused on feedback generated by the students themselves; however, another resource I decided to use to analyze student reactions were my observations and field notes. I planned to take detailed notes after each class—I set up a wiki site that I would use to make daily entries. These would consist of descriptions of group discussions, Second Life interactions, and pre/post class behavior. In addition to field notes, throughout the Second Life portion of class I knew I would receive large amounts of student work—unit projects, free-writes, emails, and in-class assignments. All of the sources I have just discussed (observations, class work, field notes—as well as the interviews and surveys) would yield information about how my students demonstrated features of engagement or knowledge construction individually; collectively, they were sources to gauge how effective Second Life was as a vehicle for engagement theory and the constructivist framework represented by Honebein’s goals.

## Thesis Organization

The following chapters detail my rationale in setting up the class, the ways in which my study effectively or ineffectively follows the components of engagement theory and the goals of the constructivist framework, and the findings of my surveys, interviews, and observations. Chapter two begins by comparing and contrasting my course and assignment design with others' and with my previous assignments and courses. I describe in much more detail each feature of the course, starting with my overall learning goals for the students in the class. I also mention the goals that my implementation of Second Life be zero-cost, hybrid, and only function for half the semester. I also describe each assignment in more depth—the avatar creation assignment, the interview assignment, and the organization analysis assignment—and show how their structure enables (or does not enable) a collaborative group environment, creative project-based learning, or an authentic focus. I quote from my assignment sheets, cite previous iterations of assignments, and refer to course outcomes that I wanted the assignments to still address.

While chapters one and two describe the stages of planning before I started the course, the last three chapters detail how the course unfolded, either in predicted or unpredicted ways. Because of the rich material generated during my interviews with students, I draw extensively on student voices in chapters three, four, and five. Chapter three focuses on the students' positive experiences—its thematic thread is one of success. I start with showing how the course description engaged students before they even knew exactly what it meant. I then illustrate how each assignment worked in complex and blended ways towards helping the students become more engaged and aware: I interpret

Miriam's avatar notes, Katelyn's interview struggles and eventual breakthrough, Matthew's enthusiasm about Second Life's worldwide audience, Karen's impressions of Harvard's Second Life island, and the overall improved class dynamic as demonstrated through the interview assignment. I compare my successful experiences with other researchers and discuss the similarities and differences in our approaches. I also analyze the ways in which the assignments—and Second Life as an educational tool—support an appreciation for multiple perspectives, the use of multiple modes of communication, and a self-awareness of the knowledge creation process.

In chapter four, I draw on student accounts of frustration and apathy to detail how my pedagogy didn't affect student engagement or awareness in ways that I anticipated. The most common thread is one of frustration with technology. I show how each assignment had its own technological difficulty: I illustrate how the avatar creation assignment was limited by students' lack of time preparing to use Second Life, how the internet connection in our classroom hampered students' in-class work in the interview assignment, and how Second Life's privacy settings decreased the effectiveness of the organization analysis to challenge students' critical thinking. In this chapter I also trace the less favorable reactions to the work—how some students were apathetic about or openly frustrated by the assignments themselves. I compare my experiences with other researchers who had similar frustrations in their Second Life implementations. Throughout chapter four I focus on how the class and each assignment could be redesigned to more effectively reach its goals.

Finally, in the last chapter I draw overall conclusions about my study and how future research can build on the work I've done. I weave the threads of chapters three and

four together by examining the complex survey results. I show that the survey results, while not clearly positive, reveal a divergence around student frustration with the technology and approval of the underlying potential of Second Life. I show how these results are similar and different than the results of another composition teacher, Jerome Bump, and his student surveys. I conclude this reflective portion of this concluding chapter by providing a concise list of best practices, a distillation of the lessons learned as described in chapters three and four. I then describe where the borders of my work are and where future researchers can extend those borders. I list variations in assignments, course structure, and tools (including thoughts about the pedagogical possibilities of a future update to Second Life), and give thoughts about how those variations can help us better understand and assist student learning. I conclude that notwithstanding technological and cultural difficulties, Second Life can potentially be a valuable tool for teachers to help increase student engagement and broaden their rhetorical and self-awareness.

## CHAPTER TWO: COURSE STRUCTURE AND GOALS

*“Gaming, viewed from multi-disciplinary perspectives, has the potential to highlight for students (and faculty) both the importance of rhetorically-based approaches to communication and the diversity of literacies that students are confronted with—and asked to develop—in their college careers. That is, the multi-disciplinary study of gaming offered a rhetorically robust and engaging way for many students to develop a meta-cognitive awareness of the complexities of literacy and literate performance, particularly across and through disciplinary boundaries; such meta-cognition, we argue, should serve students well as they approach other discipline-based ways of knowing and communicating, both inside and outside the academy.”*

Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh

The overall goals for this section of English 101 were much the same as they were for any other section or teacher of English 101: to facilitate high-quality student learning experiences that resulted in them being better-prepared to effectively write in their future classes and careers. The premise under which I designed this course was that such a high-quality educational experience was possible using Second Life with these particular students at this particular institution. I was comforted by assurances that games in general and Second Life in particular had the potential to offer such experiences (such as the quote by Alexander and Losh cited above) but the initial decision to use it in this course felt like a step into uncharted territory. In this chapter I describe the specific assignments and course structure that I hoped would provide the students and me with the best chances of educational success, which I gauge by their adherence to the components of engagement theory. I detail my rationale behind such design features, and I describe the attributes of Second Life that I hoped to draw upon. This focus on assignments, rationale,

and uses of Second Life sets the stage for my account and interpretation of student reaction in subsequent chapters.

### **Course Features**

Designing three specific assignments for this course meant choosing between countless possible and viable options. In his article, “Four Ways to Teach with Video Games,” Max Lieberman overviews four general uses of video games in education: 1) games that teach content, 2) games as texts, 3) students making games, and 4) game-like motivation systems. Here are some examples of how teachers could use Second Life in each of these ways: Second Life’s ability to teach content is described by Simon Ball and Rob Pearce—they recount how literature teachers created an interactive recreation of Dante’s *Inferno* in Second Life they could use to teach about the book (54). Certain games can be used as texts to be analyzed—specifically, games in which “the plot and its presentation (through such elements as writing, voice acting and animation) merit analysis” (Lieberman). Keith Morton describes the possibility of using films created using video games as texts in the classroom to be analyzed “through existing theories of film, games, [and] media.” Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh work with the idea of students making games as they describe researchers’ claim that the most beneficial uses of games will teach students how to read and write lines of code, the original “language” of the medium. Finally, other teachers use game-like designs—with point, grading, and reward systems based on those used in games—as models on which they base their own courses (Keramidas). My own use of Second Life is most closely aligned with the games that teach content and the games as texts approaches, although it was an option to use Second Life in significantly different ways.

Even within Second Life there are a number of ways to effectively design assignments that use Second Life as a text: Maggi Savin-Baden, in her book, *A Practical Guide to Using Second Life in Higher Education*, describes 12 practical uses of Second Life—lectures, seminars, problem-based learning, demonstrations, film and video, simulations, visual performance, virtual debates, identity reassignment activities, replayable podcasts and debates, and non-player character interactions (50-61). While some of these might fall more under Lieberman’s “games that teach content” category, each provided potential benefits and drawbacks that I would need to choose between.

Each approach—games that teach content, games as texts, students making games, and game-like motivation systems—could potentially have supported engagement theory’s three components (a group context, a project base, and an authentic focus) and the constructivist framework with which they operate. However, I choose to use Second Life as a text which students would construct and analyze for several reasons. In the following section I detail the most significant of them—my desire to have a zero-cost implementation, a hybrid/half-semester structure, and a basis in previous assignments.

The zero-cost implementation makes adopting Second Life as a teaching medium easier for both students and teachers. Trevor Hoag and Tekla Schell claim, “The fundamental obstacle to using *SL* in the classroom is institutional. Using *Second Life* to teach is an enterprise that relies upon adequate funding for computers and often the purchase of land within *SL*, as well as the willingness of departments to support non-traditional methods of teaching.” While others, even another department at Boise State, use Second Life for a wider variety of Savin-Badin’s 12 listed uses, I wasn’t in a position to do so for cost reasons. Additionally, I wanted my implementation to meet President

Kustra's request for cost-effectiveness as given in his address to the faculty: "The private and proprietary sectors of higher education are not standing still and their use of new learning technologies both to reach new students and to teach existing students more cost-effectively suggests to me that life in public higher education will get more competitive" (10). I wanted this use of Second Life to push the limits of the competitiveness, both in terms of cost-effectiveness as well as accessibility. Unfortunately this meant not having a dedicated space or customizable construction options, which I acknowledge may have negatively affected student learning and my understanding of Second Life's full potential as a tool for engagement theory.

Another factor in narrowing down how I would use Second Life was my desire to have the class be hybrid and half-semester length. I felt strongly that the group context of the assignments would be stronger with an emphasis on face-to-face interactions, but many consider Second Life to be ineffective if not used as long as it possibly can be. For example, another instructor who had used Second Life many times in educational settings (mostly online-only classes) told me she believed it takes students nearly a full semester to become comfortable, and thus fully engaged, in Second Life. Dudeney and Ramsey say, "courses seeking to take advantage of the socialization potential of Second Life must develop a longer term strategy for the participants to benefit from the platform" (17). They don't specifically define what they mean by "longer term strategy," although Jarmon et al. express a similar idea: "Depending on the number and frequency of their visits to SL, the probability increased that they [the students] experienced a sense of fuller participation, agency, and co-presence with others. This discrepancy of degrees of participation in SL influenced how informants responded to questions and impacted the

research findings accordingly” (223). The idea that many of these sources seem to be indicating is that the more students use Second Life, the more comfortable they are with it and the more effective it will be. I was therefore as careful and intentional about my use of Second Life as I could be. The class Jarmon et al. used as a positive example in their study only lasted for six weeks, which was shorter than my use of Second Life.

My hybrid design was meant to bridge two extreme patterns: exclusively using Second Life in place of face-to-face meetings or using Second Life *in addition* to normal face-to-face classes. I wanted to keep engagement theory’s group atmosphere by developing student/student and student/teacher relationships through meeting face-to-face. Students would be able to ask questions, share reactions verbally, and get to know people in the class in person in addition to working with them online. I also wanted to keep the workload practical for a first-year writing class. Meeting face-to-face three times a week as well as meeting online would be more of a commitment than I thought was reasonable for the students to handle. To mitigate the workload, I planned to cancel one day out of the week while we were working on Second Life.

### **Course Assignments**

While the above factors limited the ways in which I would use Second Life, I felt strongly that I needed to have a writing component in conjunction with each assignment. Because I was using Second Life as a text, I viewed the writing assignments as a necessity for students to decode meaning and become more self-aware in their knowledge construction process. This idea is powerfully expressed by Nicola Whitton and Paul Hollins:

While gaming environments may provide experiential learning spaces, they do not necessarily provide students with scope for reflection and application of their

learned knowledge and skills to the real world. Activities such as debriefing and structured reflection are essential to ensure appropriate mastery of specified learning outcomes, and these activities can be structured outside the virtual world. (Whitton and Hollins 224)

While throughout the following descriptions of my assignments I focus on Second Life's experiential learning spaces, the assignments from which I've adapted the Second Life versions provide the reflective backbone with which I hoped to encourage student self-awareness, a key aspect of the constructivist framework on which engagement theory rests.

### The Avatar Creation Assignment

It's customary at Boise State University to structure English 101 with four units, each with a culminating unit project. The goal of the first unit is to get the students thinking reflectively about their personal backgrounds with writing—this is a standard goal and organizational structure across nearly all English 101 classes at Boise State. When I taught this unit previously, I had tried to get the students thinking reflectively about their writing by assigning an exploratory essay. Their basic goal was to write about their previous experiences with writing, positive or negative, as well as their current writing habits and future writing goals. I left it all very open, stressing that they think critically and creatively, hoping that they would take the assignment in interesting directions. Often they would, but when I was designing this unit, I wanted to give this assignment more solid grounding. I decided to merge part of the Second Life tutorial material with this introductory “who I am as a writer” essay: they would create their Second Life representations, or avatars, to symbolically reflect their writing experiences, habits, and goals. This added creativity and solidity that would, I hoped, increase student engagement and motivation. This way of using Second Life's introduction would

counteract one of Gavin Dudeney and Howard Ramsey's complaints about the program: "New users to Second Life are led through a time-consuming induction, which, although a useful exercise for self-motivated students, is often ignored by a significant number of users motivated more by attendance at a seminar than by the novelty of the medium" (17). Dudeney and Ramsey acknowledge that the avatar creation process can be beneficial in itself, yet they don't appear to make room for approaches that make a creative project out of the process. In contrast to their complaint, Trevor Hoag and Tekla Schell use a similar assignment in their class. They say that "because one cannot visit *SL* without building an avatar, our ideal syllabus began by including activities that involved making modifications to avatars well beyond the initial options provided by Linden Labs" (Hoag and Schell). Their version involved finding free third-party modifications that students would explore, but still uses this initial process constructively. Both of our versions of this assignment overcome Dudeney and Ramsey's indictment against the initial process of Second Life, though they do it in different ways. Because this assignment focuses on customizing avatars, I call it the "avatar creation assignment."

The avatar creation assignment takes advantage of the signing-up process of creating a virtual representation. There are default avatars, but I wanted the students to use the creative process of customizing avatars to express more concretely how they perceived their writing. The avatar editor in Second life hosts an impressive array of customizable features: "body parts," "skin," "hair," "eyes," "shirt," "pants," "shoes," "socks," "jacket," "gloves," "skirt," and "tattoo." There are also ways to change other features of the avatar, including customizing size, color, texture, and pattern on almost any of the above features of the avatar. I made three categories of changes the students



**Figure 1 Avatar Editing in Second Life**

would need to make: their writing experiences, their writing habits, and their writing goals. By “writing experiences” I meant that they could pick an influential person, book, or project from their past and symbolically represent that on their avatar. In their instructions, I wrote: “for example, if you had an influential high school English teacher that wore red socks, you could give your avatar red socks. In your essay you would describe how this teacher affected your writing.” The second feature of their writing selves I wanted students to create and write about was habits: “If you have a habit of writing in an easygoing, informal manner, you might give your avatar a Hawaiian shirt. In your essay you might describe how your writing style is like a relaxed holiday shirt.” Finally, I wanted the students to not just reminisce about what they’ve done as a writer, but actually think ahead to what they want to do and who they wanted to become: “if you have a goal of creating more concise writing, you might give your avatar really short hair. In your essay you would describe why you gave your avatar short hair, and how you hope to accomplish more concise writing.” I wanted to give students a specific number of

customizations that they would have to make, so I assigned six customizations, two from each category.

The avatar creation assignment is meant to fit into the project-based component of engagement theory by being a creative, purposeful, and open project. By including a purpose to the signing-up process and a creative visual element starts I hoped to fulfill Kearsley and Shneiderman's description of this component as a "creative, purposeful activity" (20). However, they continue their description by pointing out the more direct role students play:

Students have to define the project . . . and focus their efforts on application of ideas to a specific context. Conducting their own projects is much more interesting to students than answering sterile textbook problems. And because they get to define the nature of the project (even if they don't choose the topic), they have a sense of control over their learning which is absent in traditional classroom instruction. (20)

While I don't necessarily agree with their condemnation of the "traditional classroom instruction," their general point—that students will be more interested in and have a sense of control over projects they define and focus—seems to be a valid one. The avatar creation assignment may not have fit into their description because students aren't able to completely "define" the project, but the freedom the students had to customize their avatars in a wide variety of ways was meant as a step in that direction.

### The Interview Assignment

While the avatar creation assignment is meant to take advantage of Second Life's avatar editor, the second assignment, which I call the "interview assignment," is meant to take advantage of Second Life's international community. Not only did I have one new resource, Second Life's worldwide audience, but I also was able to adapt an assignment that already existed. At Boise State, some teachers do an assignment during the first part

of English 101 where they send their students in pairs around campus to interview strangers about perceptions of writing. The real-world praise and criticism the strangers give about writing seemed to ground, and occasionally surprise, the students. I thought this assignment would complement the avatar creation assignment nicely—the students would first look at their own perceptions of writing, then compare them to the opinions of others. The benefit of the interview assignment in Second Life, though, was the much broader audience: the interview participants for my new version of the assignment would be people from all over the world, with a huge variety of experience with English and writing.

I initially wanted the students to go out in pairs, for a few reasons: that is how the in-person variety of this assignment is conducted, and it didn't occur to me that it might be more effective to do it differently in an online environment. Also, I didn't want students to be irresponsible and do something else (or nothing at all). I was hoping that the "buddy system" would ease their nervousness, keep them on track, and help them avoid unsafe or awkward situations. Finally, the benefit of interviewing complete strangers in an online environment is that there are no physical safety concerns—there may be dark alleyways and questionable characters, but it's not possible to get mugged or murdered like it is in real life. I expected that this increased safety would make the students more comfortable and willing to stretch themselves in their interactions with and perceptions of other writers.



**Figure 2      Approaching a Group of Second Life Residents**

The component of engagement theory most closely aligned with the interview assignment is the authentic focus component. The interviews are the kind of outside interactions in line with the authentic learning environment described in the theory. Kearsley and Shneiderman maintain that “the authentic learning context of the project increases student motivation and satisfaction,” which should lead to a more meaningful learning experience. The biggest difference between their theory and my implementation is that they intend engagement theory’s end audience to be outside the classroom: “The third component . . . stresses the value of making a useful contribution while learning.

Ideally each project has an outside ‘customer’ that the project is being conducted for” (20). Their use of the word “ideally” indicates that the outside “customer” isn’t essential to every successful assignment; however, the interview assignment (as well as the other two Second Life assignments) may have been more effective if they could have been directed towards an outside audience. Additionally, Second Life definitely has the potential to provide an out-of-classroom final audience.

Also, this assignment’s collaborative aspect relates to the “group context” engagement theory component. I hoped that by accompanying each other, even digitally, that students would be able to rely on each other to work through some of the interview difficulties, just like I had done in the real-life version of this assignment.

#### The Organization Analysis Assignment

The avatar creation assignment and the interview assignment comprise unit one, which is entitled, “Writers Writing about Writing.” In the first two assignments students analyze writing on an individual level. They start with their perceptions of writing (the avatar creation assignment), then move outward to look at Second Life residents’ perceptions of writing (the interview assignment). The third assignment is a further step outward—students analyze how groups of people rhetorically situate themselves in a virtual world’s discourse community, which is why I entitled the unit “Rhetorical Questioning.” This step outwards in the second unit, even outside the university walls, is common at Boise State University—the instructions for new teaching assistants states that there are “three potential options for unit two,” two of which are “A Writer in Context” and “Communication Practices Beyond the University” (“Unit Two”). Both of these options involve describing a specific community, often outside the university. In

classes using the “Communication Practices Beyond the University” option, students have analyzed the rhetorical choices of organizations they’re involved in: a movie theater, martial arts studio, yoga group, etc. The goal of this unit is to get students to think critically about how individuals and organizations have communicative goals and present themselves rhetorically to achieve them. In this assignment students customarily look at and record word choice, location features, and images the community uses to communicate. Essentially, the students’ main task in this community examination assignment is to analyze the organization’s social construction of ideas. I designed the second unit to accomplish this same type of analysis, only to also take advantage of another feature of Second Life: organizations that operate a Second Life island. Even though the assignment takes place online, students still use the same kind of observations as the real-life equivalent—word choice, location features, and images.

The benefit of adapting this assignment for Second Life is that there are a surprising number of organizations, universities, companies, and groups that operate an island in Second Life that students can analyze, which is why I call this assignment the “organization analysis assignment.” By using Second Life for this assignment, I could allow students to choose a wide variety of organizations or college institutions that they would like to analyze. Each organization rents digital space of a certain size and creates an “island” for others to visit. Using Second Life’s powerful island-editor, organizations have tremendous flexibility in how the island looks and how the users experience their organization. Because of its highly customizable nature, Second Life, even more-so than real-life companies, affords a more obviously constructed reality for the students to analyze. Companies are limited in their real-world construction by surroundings and

financial barriers. For example, a university may have a small hill running through the southern end of its campus. It may be possible for them to remove it, but the costs would greatly outweigh the benefits of doing so. In Second Life, a university can remove or add mountains, rivers, and other geological features to their island that wouldn't be practical in real life. Similarly, structures in Second Life have nearly unlimited possibilities: because the laws of physics don't apply in this digital space, companies could design buildings that are composed entirely of glass, hovering in the air, or covered in glitter. There are difficulties in designing Second Life islands, just like designing in real life; however, as long as the programming works, the cost of programming isn't too steep, and the island has a reasonable load-time, there is a huge array of options for organizations. The constructed nature of Second Life resembles the constructed nature of knowledge described in the constructivist framework I'm using. In the words of Trevor Hoag and Tekla Schell, the goal of this assignment is that "students come closer to that moment when it hits them that the 'digital' is, in fact, already part of the 'actual'—that *Second Life* is part of the so-called 'real world.'" This realization hopefully also works the other way, that students realize that the "real world" is also constructed—and interpretable.

While this assignment could be related to any of the components of engagement theory, it's most compelling connections are to the three constructivist goals mentioned in chapter one. Firstly, it increases the appreciation for multiple perspectives by allowing them to evaluate why an organization constructed their island in the way they did. Honebein, whose goals I'm using, states that "students must engage in activities that enable them to evaluate alternative solutions to problems as a means of testing and enriching their understanding" (11). The problem that the students are analyzing, in this

assignment and in the real-world component of this assignment, stems from the question *why are the organizations portraying themselves in this way, rather than another?*

Thinking about the alternative solutions organizations have will enrich students' understanding of communication practices at the university. Secondly, the organization analysis assignment encourages the use of multiple modes of representation. Honebein writes that "learning with only [oral and written communication] limits how students see the world. Curricula should adopt additional media, such as video, computer, photographs, and sound, to provide richer experiences" (12). While I agree with this assessment and feel that Second Life does add to the students' richer experiences and view of the world, I also need to acknowledge that many of these outcomes are also applicable to the real-world equivalents of this assignment. Students go out *into* the real world, viewing the organizations they're analyzing. Also, even in the Second Life version of this assignment, students still need to write their analyses in paper format. Finally, the organization assignment helps to instill more self-awareness in the students. Honebein describes this self-awareness as a "key outcome in constructivist learning." The organization analysis assignment hopefully helps students "to analyze their construction of knowledge and processes" (12) by the analogy between the constructed nature of Second Life and the constructed nature of reality, as mentioned earlier. This assignment is perhaps the weakest when it comes to directly supporting the components of engagement theory, but its alignment with the constructivist framework on which engagement theory rests indirectly supports the success of Second Life as a tool for engagement theory. While I only mention the three constructivist goals on this last assignment, it is only for the purpose of convenience because they relate to each

assignment and Second Life in general.

In addition to designing assignments for my class, there were two more physical preparations that influenced my plans. One was applying for a new classroom, ILC 313. This classroom featured advanced and flexible educational technology—including a laptop for each student, movable seating, and a variety of display options. The other major thing I did was change the class description the students would see when they registered (see chapter four). I wanted students to understand what the class would involve, and I wanted the classroom to be the best it could be when we actually got into it. With this rationale in mind, I contacted the students a few weeks before the class in order to, as I wrote in my email, “welcome [them], and to give [them] some heads-up about what to expect while schedules [were] still fairly fluid.” I included the phrase, “while schedules [were] still fairly fluid,” as a subtle request: “feel free to drop this class if you don’t think you’ll like it.” In my email, I described the classroom as a reflection of the work I hoped to do with them: “the cutting-edge technology of this classroom really reflects my interest in working together as a group to share, demonstrate, and practice important writing principles.” I also described the virtual world nature of the class. By describing the classroom and the nature of the class, I hoped to start the class off as clearly and positively as possible.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the implementation of Second Life adds an interesting layer to the existing structure of English 101. The same unit goals are addressed, but include an additional dimension: in the avatar creation assignment students still think reflectively about themselves as a writer, but have the ability to express themselves in a fun and visually engaging way. This expression fulfills the project-based

engagement theory component. The interview assignment still allows the students to broaden their view of how audiences outside the classroom view writing, yet they get to interact with a safer, worldwide audience to do so. This assignment addresses the authentic focus and group context components. In the organization analysis assignment, the students still look at a community and how it presents itself, but the Second Life version allows more varied organizations and more obviously constructed representations. While all the assignments are supported by the constructivist framework, this assignment in particular matched all three. This chapter details the choices I made about the class in theory—the rest of this thesis will analyze how this implementation worked in practice. In chapter three I detail how it played out in expected—and unexpected—yet positive and productive ways that fulfill the constructivist goals and that underscore Second Life’s value as a vehicle for approaches that use engagement theory. Then in chapter four I address how this implementation did not function as expected in negative ways and how it could have been better designed to reach my goals. I conclude with an overview of results, best practices, and possibilities for future research (chapter five).

### CHAPTER THREE—CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

*The constructivist perspective . . . holds the idea that students learn better by undertaking an active role in the learning process, by exploring and experiencing authentic contexts for themselves and discovering their own meanings from the experience.*

Nicola Whitton

*We argue that engagement with virtual worlds in a course setting: (1) contributes to the facilitation of life-long learning that extends beyond the confines of the classroom, (2) has the potential to generate feelings of co-presence and connection among participants in and outside of virtual worlds, and (3) provides a context for considering how new technologies have the potential to enrich the lives of older adults. (221)*

Leslie Jarmon et al.

As I described in the previous chapter, designing three specific assignments that would use Second Life meant discarding countless other possibilities. I designed the three assignments intentionally, basing my decisions off a desire to re-design previous assignments, to use a hybrid and half-semester model, and to make the course zero-cost. This chapter recounts and analyzes the instances during the semester of Second Life's positive potential as an educational tool, especially as it relates to engagement theory. The student reactions, while not always overwhelmingly positive, reveal instances of engagement and improved student learning as hypothesized and reported by the designers and users of engagement theory and constructivism (like those by Whitton and Jarmon above). I believe these examples can best be illustrated by relying on the voices of the students themselves, so throughout this chapter you will read their actual words. Because I've described the assignments and their rationale in the previous chapter, I move from

example to example without detailing each assignment. I do not intend to give the impression that these learning experiences were universal in or unique to the class. I recognize that experiences like the ones I showcase in this chapter happen in composition classes worldwide and are due in large part to the exceptional students that I interviewed. However, this chapter explores the ways in which Second Life supported and challenged students in their English 101 assignments.

### **Shifts in Methodology**

As described in the previous chapter, I began the semester with specific plans for recording student reactions during my study. While many of my plans were altered due to unforeseen difficulties (as described in chapter four), there were a number of unexpected positive outcomes that I will briefly recount here. If the rest of the chapter is about student reactions, this is a brief section that will provide a few insights into a *teacher's* positive reactions to the use of Second Life in the composition classroom.

The most effective method I used to gather information about the students' attitudes and opinions, and the most revealing of their positivity, were the interviews. I was impressed during the interviews by how honest and positive the students were—there were frustrations about Second Life and technology (again, see chapter four) but the students were definitely more positive about Second Life and their experience than the students of one English class that used Second Life, described by Jerome Bump as nearly universally disagreeing that “it is a good idea to use SL in a literature and writing course.” There are numerous factors behind the difference between the two, but the students' positive attitudes in the interviews allowed me to ask more in-depth questions than I had originally intended.

Another method I used to gauge student response that I hadn't originally planned on were in-class discussions and personal conversations. I hadn't realized how much information I would be able to get from the students and how clear a picture I would be able to get about how they were reacting to an assignment. Were I to redo this project, class discussions, questionnaires based on the difficulty at the time, and personal conversations would have played a more prominent role in my gathering of information.

### **Pre-Semester Interest**

For the most part, students were intrigued by the prospect of an introductory writing class that used a virtual world—the students' interest in a class that uses this kind of technology demonstrates one of Second Life's advantages as a tool for engagement theory. Many students later reported that they were excited about the class before they even knew what it was about. As I mention in chapter two, I changed the class description to more accurately reflect the course content. Here is the descriptive addendum that students saw as they signed up for the class: "Please note: This is a pilot hybrid course; 20-40% of class time will be spent in an online 3-D environment. Basic computer literacy and an interest in digital writing is expected." Students reacted to this note in a variety of ways: most of the students did not really know what a "pilot hybrid course" was, or what spending time "in an online 3-D environment" entailed, but many of them were interested to find out. For example, Katelyn enjoyed English and was good at writing, but her last few years of English courses had "plateaued" in challenging her. Her scores were good enough that she could have tested out of English 101 and moved straight on to English 102, but she decided to take the class anyway:

When I found out it was going to be more of an interactive learning class...I thought it would be really interesting...So I wanted to stay in 101, rather than just

get through it. Because I could have. I could have just taken that test and they said my scores would have been fine, but I kind of wanted that challenge of learning a different way.

For Katelyn, at least, the prospect of learning to write in a new way shifted the trajectory of her college career. Not only did her decision change which classes she took, but later she revealed that her decision went against some perceived peer-pressure—she said that she originally did not want to take the class because “everyone tests out and goes to 102.” For her, signing up for this class was choosing to leave “everyone”—the popular crowd—and pursue a worthy educational goal: an engaging challenge.

I do not think she was the only student who craved a challenge and something engaging when signing up for the class. Karen described her reaction to the class description simply: “I thought it was really cool. I showed it to my mom and she thought it was cool too.” Karen later admitted “not really” knowing what the description meant until the name Second Life came up on the first day of class. Her father and brother were in the military, which uses Second Life for communication purposes. She had heard about Second Life from her dad and brother, but she did not know what the program entailed. She did not say whether she connected the description of an “online 3-D environment” with what she’d heard about Second Life from her family, but she was still interested in the class, based on the fact that it was something new and digital. This initial interest seems to support the concept of a net generation that I mentioned in chapter one. While this positivity about technology wasn’t universal among the students I talked to, there still appeared to be a definite appeal to the course that wasn’t typical in the other more traditional courses I’ve taught.

### **The Avatar Creation Assignment**

After the first few weeks in the class, students had positive reactions to the avatar creation assignment. The creative nature of the assignment puzzled some students at first, but, besides the frustrations due to technological difficulties (see chapter four), students were challenged by being forced to negotiate between the visual creation on the program and the composition of their essay. Savin-Baden gives a reason that might explain both the puzzlement and the positivity: “‘being’ in Second Life prompts us and our students to engage with issues of embodiment and questions about positioning and power” (16). The issues of embodiment that students grappled with (“how can I create an avatar that metaphorically embodies who I am as a writer?”) were unsettling and stimulating for many students. For example, when I asked Katelyn whether the assignment would have turned out differently without the avatar creation portion, she said, emphatically, “Yeah! Because I’m not an artistic or creative person, so having to put it on an avatar and say ‘this short hair represented this,’ my mind wouldn’t normally work like that if I were to write a paper about my writing. So, it was definitely challenging, but it changed it, to think outside my little box.” Her high school writing, which frustrated her by not being challenging, apparently required analyses of a particular format and purpose—the analogical and artistic thinking required by this Second Life assignment forced her out of this “little box.” The assignment’s multiple modes of representation required her to think in ways she did not normally think, and she appears to have appreciated and learned from this challenge. Katelyn created another version of herself, which may have made her more aware of the constructed and social nature of reality. She was excited about and engaged by the assignment because it addressed her pre-semester desire to be challenged.

After interviewing students, I discovered that they took one of two general approaches to complete this assignment (although some students employed a combination): students either created an avatar taking inspiration from the program while thinking about how each of the customizations related to their writing history, habits, and goals; or they brainstormed a list and considered how they would represent those qualities on their avatar; they then went and executed their plan. Both approaches require creative and independent thinking and problem solving, the impetus behind engagement theory's project-based component. Miriam is a great example of creating a complete outline before even starting the customization process on Second Life (see Figure 3—her creation notes). When she started to customize her avatar, she worked hard on every

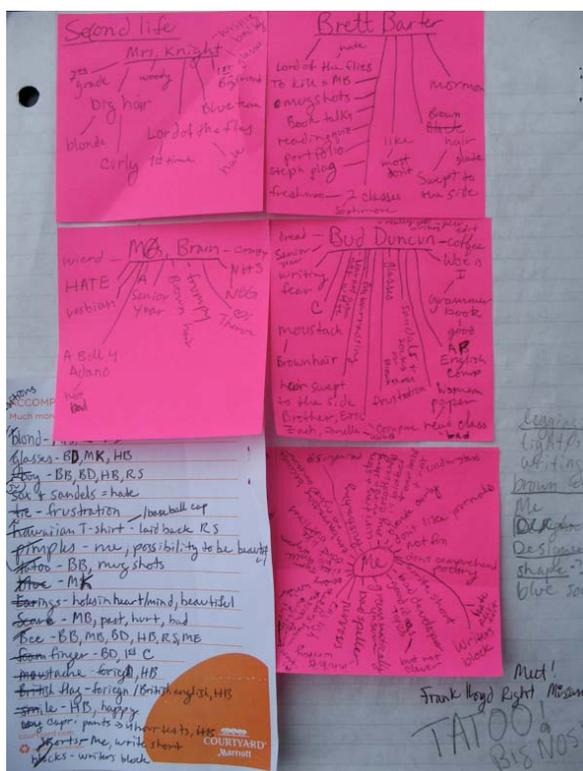
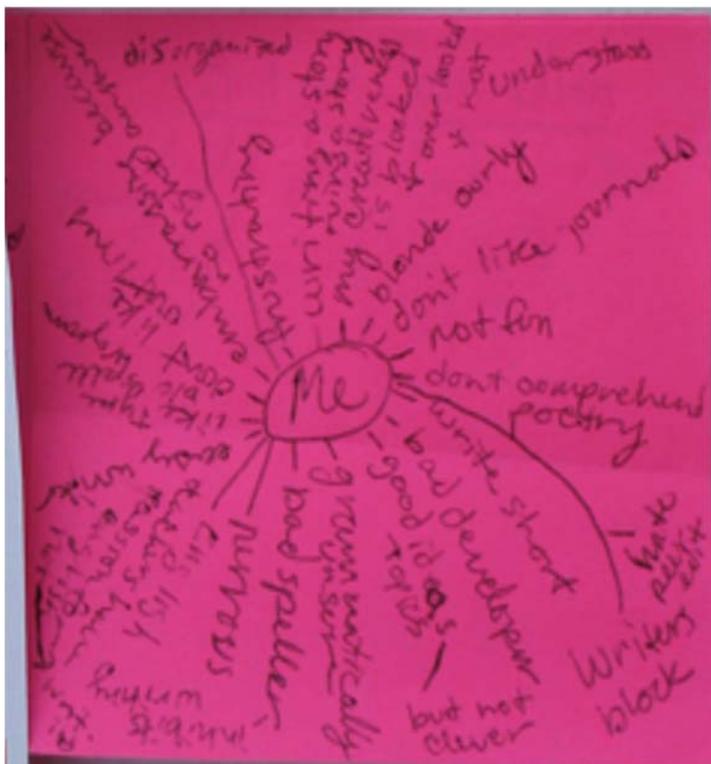


Figure 3 Miriam's Avatar Creation Notes



**Figure 4** Enlargement of Miriam’s Avatar Creation Notes

feature of the clothing, rather than just selecting pre-formed clothing. She said she enjoyed the process of, as she said it, “modifying the pants to your mind” rather than “modifying your mind to the pants.”

Karen described the other approach—creating the avatar *while* making connections to the writing self: “As I was creating I would think of other things and then I’d have too many things, and I’d have to categorize into what we needed.” She was in the “creativity mode,” as she described it earlier, making connections, getting ideas, and eventually categorizing and reigning back. She claimed to find the assignment “mostly frustrating,” although later she admitted, “as frustrating as it was it was still kind of cool.” She was frustrated by being forced to make rhetorical decisions between different representational features, particularly while trying to wrestle with an unfamiliar program. Finally, however, she said that she felt successful.

Regardless of which approach students used to complete the assignment, they generally demonstrated an increased engagement in the form of a willingness to work collaboratively, which was one of the engagement theory components that I feel, unfortunately, was least well incorporated into the course design. On a few occasions I gave students class time to work on customizing their avatar. While much of the work that went on was simply trying to figure out the program, some students learned from decisions others were making. Miriam, for example, appreciated the feedback of her classmates: “Hearing other people’s experiences helped you get to know what you need to watch out for or what you needed to look for. Even with the characteristics, it was like ‘Oh, you’re doing that? Well that’s a good idea. Maybe I could do this.’” This comment is especially interesting in light of her characterization of herself—“hate peer edit” (figure 3). While this wasn’t quite a peer-edit, teachers hope students will approach peer-editing with a collaborative mind set, as Miriam learned to do. A handful of students were intrigued (or frustrated) enough by the nature of the assignment to turn to their neighbors for feedback and inspiration. Even those disaffected by the program were still engaged by it through a group context.

### **The Interview Assignment**

Part of the reason students turned to each other for support was that they had developed a bond through the shared experience of learning Second Life—the group context engagement theory component was particularly strong in the interview assignment. The hybrid nature of the class allowed students to band together, although they did not attribute this unity to Second Life: only 15% of the students surveyed agreed that they “felt a sense of community in Second Life that improved [their] educational

experience.” Students cited the lack of expression in the avatars and difficulty in typing, as disrupting the sense of community. However, about 85% of the students surveyed thought that “the face-to-face classes made the Second Life experience more enjoyable” to some degree. The significant number of students that felt the face-to-face classes added to their Second Life experience indicates that the online nature of the class worked together with the Second Life assignments to increase their engagement—the enjoyment they describe suggests they were more engaged than they might have been without the online portion of the class, as demonstrated by their willingness to stretch their comfort zones and talk about aspects of the assignment with their classmates.

Not only did the face-to-face interaction of the students increase their enjoyment (and likely investment and engagement), but John C. Sherblom, Lesley A. Withers, and Lynnette G. Leonard describe features of Second Life that might add to the advantages of the hybrid format by contributing to easier “group communication processes”—they claim that

The characteristics of interpersonal uncertainty reduction, communication apprehension, interpersonal expression, and group conversational participation are influenced by the medium. Much of this influence can be perceived as positive as the medium facilitates a degree of anonymity, reduces some types of apprehension, and increases the possibilities for collaborative learning and participation. (Sherblom, Withers, and Leonard 33)

Student anonymity in Second Life, according to this quote, can allow for greater possibilities for collaborative learning because of the more relaxed communicational environment. This idea, of Second Life providing a safe environment for students to experiment in, is a common theme in researchers’ praise of Second Life. One researcher describes an advantage of Second Life as providing a “space in which experimentation can occur in ways that are not possible in real life” (Savin-Baden 7). Another claims that

Second Life allows “for richer interaction over distance and provides settings (i.e., a retail store or a factory floor) that cannot be duplicated on most campuses” (Love, Ross, and Wilhelm 67). Still another lauds the benefit of having opportunities for “experimentation without real-world repercussions” (Gu et al.163). While these benefits apply especially well to classes other than first-year composition, the safer, more anonymous communication environment certainly was a reliable resource that facilitated a group context for the students.

Karen is a perfect example of a student who was engaged by this safe environment. She described herself as a shy student (and I would definitely agree after getting to know her): “I kind of have to warm up to people.” I would also describe her as a student who is intelligent and talented, though unconfident. It also took her a while to warm up to Second Life as well, especially since the avatar creation assignment was frustrating to her. By the end of the class, though, she was probably the student who was most positive about Second Life, even commenting in class about how she thought it was an effective medium. In the interview, she said, “when you assigned us the random partners, it was kind of nice to be able to type up something and send it ...It is easier to type something and to send it than to say it out loud.” Part of the reason she came to like Second Life was just due to its nature—she said that she agreed with a study she read in her organization analysis about how Second Life gives shy students “a way to talk to people” that is less intimidating because the lack of a physical presence and need for vocal expression.

Even though these quotes praise the potential of Second Life to improve student communication, many of the students I interviewed didn’t find this to be the case. When I

asked if they thought Second Life helped to improve social relations in class they initially said that it didn't: "facial features are important, and expressions, and body language talks a lot; and you miss that entirely by a virtual connection," "it's harder with the avatars because you can't tell their expressions," and "there was not that physical connection—it was like online dating." The students in my class may not have agreed with a participant in Jarmon et al.'s study, who said concerning the online relationships they built, "Yeah, I thought of [the Second Life residents] as real people, even the one with tails" (238). However, when I asked more specifically about how Second Life affected the face-to-face relationships with their classmates, they acknowledged an improvement. After I asked Miriam if she felt like the newness of Second Life helped her create a connection with her classmates, she said, "Definitely. I was always like 'Oh, you have no idea what happened.' Every day you came to class, you had a story to tell. In that aspect it was really good. I miss my table-mates." Katelyn also responded with the word "definitely" when I asked if her relationships were improved by Second Life, particularly the interview assignment:

Yeah, definitely. . . That was like our big conversation in class, our weird interview stories. I had SO many people who would say the craziest things, it was like, "you'd never believe what this person said yesterday!" . . . it was good to get back in our groups and be like "oh this girl was crazy! She told me *this* about English!"

This attitude was pervasive throughout the whole class, and was one of the most compelling ties to engagement theory. While there were students who were shy, Karen for example, who did not get so actively involved with their table mates, the results of the survey (about 85% of the students valued class time) accurately represents how they valued the social interactions made possible by Second Life. The social openness of the

class largely stemmed from the interview assignment and was an important indication of Second Life's ability to increase group connectivity.

While the interviews were a great way to build a healthy classroom environment, many students struggled to get helpful interviews. I discovered that the difficulty was partly because of technological issues (chapter four), and partially because students did not know how to appropriately adapt their approach to the Second Life audience. In a few cases, however, their struggling helped them construct a greater appreciation for other perspectives and a greater understanding of how to effectively tailor their message to reach their intended audience. For example, Katelyn mentioned repeatedly throughout her interview that she was frustrated by the interview assignment. At one point when she was talking about how unhelpful the Second Life audience had been, we discussed her expectations and how she could have approached the assignment more rhetorically:

Richard: ...It may have been an interesting angle if you could have not just been looking for just the positive things, but if you could have asked, "ok, what do the negative things tell me about writing?"

Katelyn: Right, and I did not really look at it that way, I was mainly looking at "ok, what are the good things you can tell me about English, can you tell me what was your most beneficial class? Or how it helped you?" I never said...I could have said something like, "what was your experience?" instead of right off the bat, first question, "what was your most beneficial class?"

Richard: Yeah, "tell me why English is good."

Katelyn: Yeah! And that could have been another approach, "what was your experience with English 101?" That would have been a good idea. That may have gone better.

Katelyn was beginning to understand the leading nature of her questions as we were talking. I pointed out that it was positive that she realized her lack of audience awareness

and understanding of assignment purpose, even if it was after the fact. Students may be used to teachers who are resistant to their ideas, but when the resistant audience is an online one, students “gain a clearer metacognitive understanding of themselves as writers and participants through their audience members’ feedback . . . , what the other members will accept as a valid contribution, and why it is important to take those readers into account” (Magnifico 180). Her increased appreciation for others’ perspectives is not only part of the constructivist framework, but is also closely linked to the authentic focus of engagement theory.

Another student, Joan, was able to more successfully adjust her interviews to meet the Second Life audience. She was able to incorporate the class discussion about being flexible and asking new questions, and she seemed to really enjoy doing so. When she handed me her assignment, which was supposed to be around three pages, I was a little confused about what it was because it was so long. She ended up giving me twelve pages worth of material, detailing how she initially was not having luck getting anyone to talk with her. Then she changed her approach and decided to try finding a Second Life island that would more likely yield helpful answers. She looked in libraries, universities, and “Philosopher’s Island”; she was much more successful after changing her approach, even meeting and interviewing a teacher. At one point, upon discovering this teacher taught in both Second Life and real life, she asked, “So, having taught in both venues, what are some advantages and disadvantages of SL?” This question, unprompted by me or anyone else, shows she was flexible, curious, and connected to the topic. Their discussion—about teaching, Second Life, and English—lasted for over half an hour. The digital nature of the assignment gives me a permanent record of who said what when, but

also allowed Joan to think critically about her audience and the best way to reach them. She thought of how to reach a different type of audience, tested her hypothesis, and met more success as a result.

### **The Organization Analysis Assignment**

In Second Life, students and teachers have the freedom to use locations in whatever way they want, including as an educational lesson or backdrop. For example, while I didn't have a dedicated land to use as my own, I was able to go to the Frank Lloyd Wright museum on Second Life and meet with all my students there (as a sort of "home base," although we could have used it as a site of direct online education). It was refreshing to have open options to where we met as a class. Savin-Badin describes this freedom as follows:

The ability just to use an interesting space, to provide learning as a visual environment is appealing. This is because it brings a sense of freedom from the often bounded university systems and restrictions. In Second Life it is not necessary to book a room and it is relatively easy to find or create space not normally used for teaching, such as a wild space or a beach. (10)

This learning as part of a visual environment was the main focus of the organization analysis assignment. This assignment's appeal is partly due to an authentic focus—locations are created by someone outside of class for purposes outside the course curriculum. A compelling aspect of the assignment was when students were not only able to analyze structures, but were able to work with others, as demonstrated by one student, Miriam, and her experience analyzing her organizations.

When she found out the organization she initially wanted to work with was unavailable on Second Life, Miriam did some searching on Second Life to find other organizations she could work with. She eventually stumbled upon an island that was a

collection of non-profit organizations—each had an area with an office they could customize. Miriam was so impressed with this site that she recommended that I send all the students to this island in the first place, and based on her reaction to it, I agree with her that this island would have been a great resource for students.

Miriam had found an organization named Kiva that she had decided to work with. As she was taking notes about Kiva in their main office, another avatar approached her and started to talk to her. At first she thought this avatar was an automated program, but when she discovered otherwise, she asked this person, Jenelle, if she was volunteering for Kiva. Jenelle was volunteering for Kiva, but also had another non-profit organization that she represented. Miriam asked what it was, and when Jenelle responded, “the Transgender American Veteran’s Association,” Miriam responded hesitantly: “oh...alright.” But Miriam talked more with Jenelle, who eventually took her to TAVA’s office and showed her all the material on the walls and described more about the organization. Miriam decided to switch her organization analysis in the middle of working with Kiva because the opportunity presented itself—an opportunity that presented itself due to the unique nature of Second Life. When I asked Miriam at the end of the interview what stood out to her most about using Second Life in our class, this is what she said:

I guess the one experience that really stands out to me the most was the TAVA one. I think because I actually spent time with her, and got to know her program... not only did I have to research the Second Life office and their website, but I really had to do background research to really figure out what they were. Because I’ve heard about transgender before, I mean, I am not naive, but I mean you kind of need that extra, “ok, what is the exact definition?” ...I probably would have never researched a program like that, but the information that she gave me was invaluable, so it was definitely worth it.

I was very impressed with Miriam’s experience with TAVA; based on the way she shared

details, statistics, and general knowledge about the LGBT community without consulting her notes, she obviously internalized a lot from this experience. Her involvement and connection continued over into her rhetorical analysis. She made a very effective comparison between her two organizations' rhetorical decisions. I am sure student work in other classes lead to a broadened world-view and higher quality of work, as this did for Miriam, but the ease with which these interpersonal connections and work enhances can be made in Second Life really make me respect it as an educational tool.

Not only did Second Life and the organization analysis allow students the freedom to explore authentic locations and organizations and interact with others, as Miriam's experience illustrates, but the organizations themselves on Second Life encouraged the students to think more critically about the constructed and social nature of communication. For example, the polished technology and high-profile nature of Harvard Business School and IBM really impressed Karen: "Harvard was really cool...You could meet with a professor during his office hours, either online or in his office. It was actually really cool—they had it where you could see the [real life] class in the [Second Life viewer]. So if you were on Second Life, you could watch the [live] presentations and things from class." I am sure, as a shy student, she enjoyed the idea of "going to class" without physically being around people, but another factor is the show of technology—being able to access a live video feed from the class from anywhere, within a Second Life classroom designed to look like the real life version. Karen pointed out another reason she enjoyed the organization analysis—the ethos of Harvard being associated with an online virtual world. When I asked her which assignment of the class was the most helpful, she said, "I really liked the one about the organizations. . . . [I]t was interesting to

me to learn more about it. I mean, I did not have any idea that some of these companies, big companies like Nike, IBM, actually used an online world.” She even recommended that the assignment come sooner in the semester (see chapter 4) so students would come to respect Second Life earlier in the assignment sequence.

In addition to being impressed by the reputations of Harvard and IBM, Karen came to think differently about the nature of virtual worlds. Ironically, she said that one of the reasons she liked Second Life and the organization analysis assignment was “because it kind of made Second Life more real—I guess it kind of made Second Life make sense more.” She did not say anything about the constructed nature of reality and I am sure she partly meant that Second Life became more real because she understood its uses better, but it is possible that she also saw similarities in the artificial communication of Second Life and the communication we use in real life. Hopefully she saw both communication methods as more closely related, with a common link being their decipherable nature and their ability to be intentionally crafted.

While there are numerous assignments and approaches I could have taken to implement Second Life, my experience has revealed a number of positive things about its use in the composition classroom: assignments like the avatar creation assignment can have a creative, student-directed project-base; assignments like the interview assignment build class camaraderie and a group environment and become more realistic and authentic because of the real-world audience; and, assignments like the organization analysis assignment give opportunities to interact with others and provide an authentic backdrop for students to work in and analyze. Second Life in a beginning composition course has great potential as an educational tool and as a vehicle for engagement theory.

## CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTIONS AND REDESIGN

*When the evaluators came at the end of the semester to do focus groups on SL in class the students expressed their frustration, as we saw when their notes were assembled. There were various causes of this frustration. SL was often down for maintenance. Even when it wasn't, almost every time the students logged onto the program, they had to download and install a new desktop client. One time it was shut down completely for days to deal with a security breach and a change of passwords. Also, with a rapidly growing site with hundreds of thousands of users, permissions and other matters were difficult to resolve at a distance.*

Jerome Bump

Previous chapters describe what I intended this project to accomplish and how it would do so; they detail reasons why I hoped the assignments would positively affect student learning and be a suitable tool for engagement theory. As can happen with even the most carefully researched and developed plans though, this project didn't go as planned. This chapter stands as an attempt to provide insight into what technological difficulties could have been mitigated, how the assignment design could have been improved, and how the class could have been better structured. This chapter will stand in contrast to the previous one, which highlighted the more successful aspects of the study; however, I do not feel that the difficulties I describe in this chapter stand as sufficient reason to reject Second Life as a viable teaching tool. The challenges my students faced weren't as severe as those mentioned by Bump in the quote above, and by avoiding some design issues even more could be avoided. It is my intention to give a realistic view of the complexity of the students' experiences, in order to provide warning-signs about what did not go well with some ideas about why. Many of the issues I will discuss are related to

technological failures and most directly affected the students' engagement. I will also look at the ways in which Second Life seemed to inherently fall short of its intended role and suitability as a vehicle for engagement theory.

### **Shifts in Methodology**

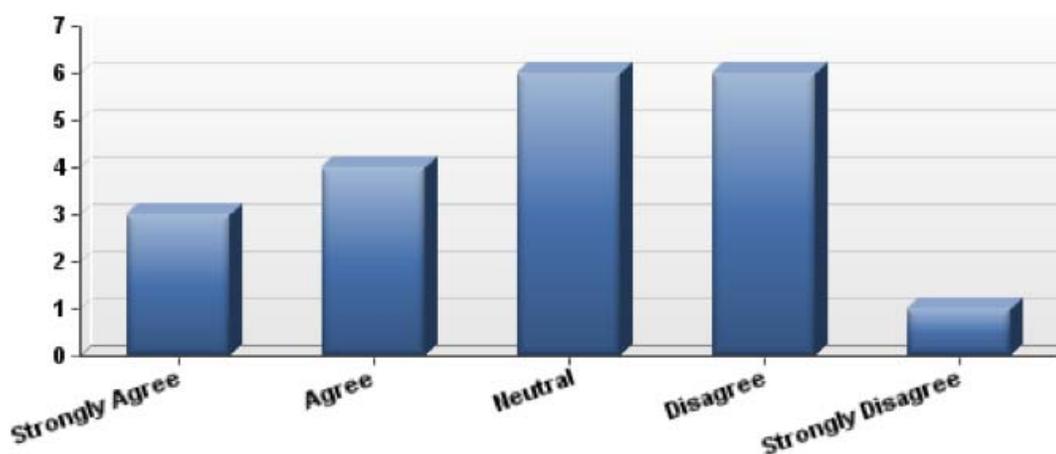
Almost immediately I discovered that my plans for how I would collect information about my students' reactions to the use of Second Life in the class were more difficult than I anticipated. Some of the reasons for this difficulty were undoubtedly due to my own style as a teacher and my unique situation (I didn't receive IRB approval until far after the semester had begun, etc.); however, I came to learn that "Second Life was not a neutral space in which to conduct a research study" (Morse et al. 194). I found that one of the strongest benefits of Second Life is also one of its greatest difficulties—you never know what you're going to get. This freshness can lead to refreshing, intriguing educational experiences, but can also bewilder and confuse students, and, therefore, their teacher, who has to facilitate their experiences. In the first few weeks I felt overwhelmed and unprepared for working with Second Life and the technology involved. For example, during the first few weeks of the semester I intended to interview four or five students before we began working with Second Life. However, I was so busy getting to know the students, explaining to them the reasoning behind what we were doing, attempting to secure the IRB approval and coping with technology difficulties that I was not able to. The observations and initial survey were challenging for similar reasons. I realize that not all teachers who decide to incorporate Second Life into their classes will study student reactions with the methodology I used or to the degree I was planning, but the shifts in

methodology I made demonstrate the need to prepare more carefully than I did to use Second Life.

### Challenges Getting Started

Even before the class started, students, as well as being curious and excited, were concerned about the implications of working with this “online 3-D environment.”

According to my survey, 45% of students were concerned, to some degree, that Second Life would “distract from learning how to write.”

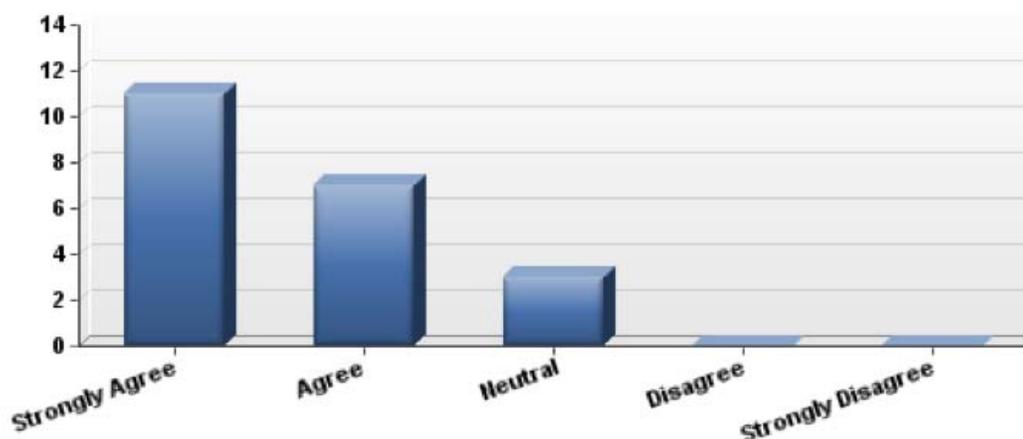


**Figure 5** Survey Results—“I Was Concerned That the Second Life Experience Would Distract from Learning How to Write.”

This is not just a technology concern about not being able to use computer programs, but these students were concerned about how Second Life would relate to writing in a more general sense. Factoring in the stress of registering freshmen, I am surprised that 55% were not concerned about an online 3-D environment, but I wish I realized this concern at the beginning of the semester. I feel that these concerns were exacerbated by the technological difficulties we experienced throughout the project.

Another factor affecting how students viewed the class before it even began was how confident the students were in their use of technology and writing. The survey

indicated that the vast majority of students, 85%, had confidence in their ability to use technology. The remaining 15% were neutral in their confidence level.



**Figure 6** Survey Results—“I Feel Confident in My Abilities to Use Technology Effectively”

The results about the confidence in writing were not as positive but were still quite good: only 60% of the students felt confident in their writing ability, with 10% feeling decidedly unconfident.



**Figure 7** Survey Results— “I Feel Confident in My Writing Skills.”

Recognizing the trends of how students felt before the class started (they were concerned about how writing fit into the class, yet they were confident in their technology skills and somewhat confident in their writing skills) would have changed how I spent some of the

initial hours of the class. I spent a lot of time explaining how writing was a skill, describing what technologies we would be using, and clarifying what was due when, but I could have spent more time establishing the pedagogical solidity of what we were doing—the why behind it all. Also, I could have explained how the assignments would help them practice their writing skills and the ways in which technology would be a struggle (as well as the steps they could use to solve their technological difficulties). If they had been better prepared for the technological difficulties, they could have focused more on the rhetorical and critical implications of the assignments.

As any teacher who has used computer-mediated education knows, students inevitably have technology problems. Using Second Life was no different—when students began the avatar creation assignment, there began to be technology-related difficulties.

Here are a few examples: on August 28th at 10:06 PM, Jean sent an email to me:

I'm still trying to work with it but I do not think I will be able to use the Second life software [sic] at home each time I've used it so far it's caused my comp to freeze, malfunction, or just in general freak out. Tha[t] and the second life 'game' itself is VERY confusing. I am still trying to work with it so I'll let you know if I continue to have issues, or if I can figure it out.

Some of Jean's frustrations with learning the program may have stemmed from frustrations with getting it to work (although she was still willing to struggle with it).

On September 2nd, Miriam wrote:

Dear Mr. Samuelson, I'm still unable to create a second life profile. Every time I use the program on my personal computer it crashes and I have to restart my system. I've tried the library computers and they are unable to download the program. Do you have any ideas as to a resolution to my problem? Thank you!

Three minutes later she wrote a more positive email: "Dear Mr. Samuelson, I got it to function on the Library computers." And, finally, six minutes later she wrote a defeated, though polite, email:

Dear Mr. Samuelson, My appologies, [sic] but no[,] second life will also not work on the library computers. Only administrators are allowed [sic] to download the program. So, I am back to square one. Do you know of anywhere that I can access the second life program on campus? Thank you.

These are the only emails that I got expressing the difficulty getting Second Life started, but there were numerous more students that expressed similar issues in class.

### **The Avatar Creation Assignment**

Besides the technological difficulties with the avatar creation assignment, some students did not feel like they benefited from the assignment itself. Maybe their opinion was worsened by the frustrations of being unable to get the technology to work easily, but it may also have been a problem in the way the assignment was presented or designed. When I asked Miriam if she felt that the avatar creation assignment (where students described themselves as writers) turned out better because she created an avatar in conjunction with writing about it, she said, “not really . . . um . . . I like to be creative, but when I write I like to be straightforward, and I think it would have been easier if I could have made my outline and just gone through it because I think the creative part about it was just fluff, like, ‘Oh, I have a big nose because of this person.’ It just did not seem like it fit the paper.” It’s interesting how she used the word “easier”—a student struggling can often be as productive, from an educational standpoint, as a student who considers an assignment easy. However, her view that the creative part of the assignment was just “fluff” may have been partially due to a lack of assignment-scaffolding. Perhaps if I had more clearly explained the rationale behind the assignment, its purpose and how they would accomplish it, Miriam would have felt differently.

Another example of a student who did not connect with the avatar creation assignment was Matthew. When I asked him how the assignment would have been

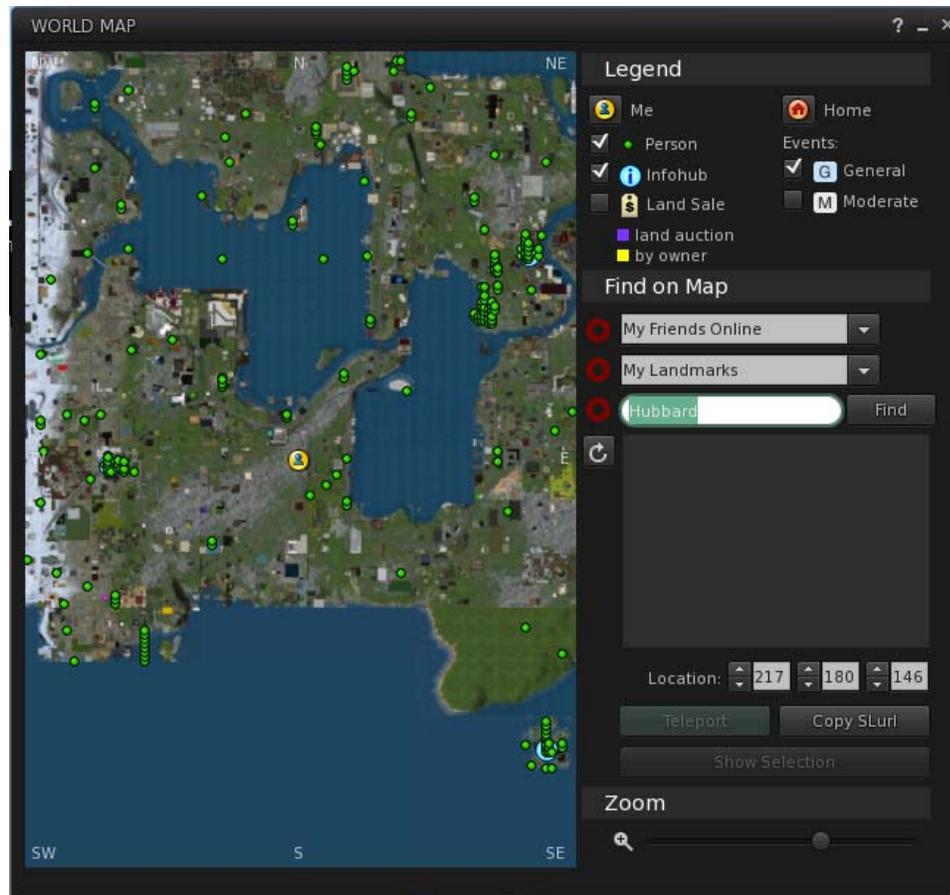
different without the Second Life component he said, “I think if you had said just ‘tell me about your writing history’ it probably would have been a lot longer and I probably would have used more details and differences. Because when you said we only had to use three, I kind of kept it to three, and that’s all I used . . . I do not know if it would have been necessarily different.” His difficulty with the assignment was not necessarily because of the nature of the assignment, as much as it was his own lack of motivation—he sensed that he could have written a lot more, although he chose not to. He admitted earlier in the interview that in high school he “coasted through everything,” relying on his writing skills, so possibly his apathy towards the avatar portion of the assignment was due to his confidence in his writing ability. However, if I had changed the requirements to give students an incentive to make more customizations, Matthew might have stretched himself more and been able to definitively say whether or not the assignment “would have been necessarily different” with or without the avatar customization component. Tweaking the way I introduced the assignment and the requirements the students would need to complete may have given the avatar creation assignment more of a creative, project-based feel that suits engagement theory.

### **The Interview Assignment**

The interview assignment, while it provided some very positive outcomes also provided some unforeseen complications. For example, it was not until this assignment that the internet connection issues in the classroom became apparent and problematic. I had considered the technological features in the classroom, ILC 313, as a great asset to the class. As I mentioned in chapter two, it had individual laptops available to each student, great projection options, and flexible seating. However, in order to avoid internet

congestion issues in the building, ILC technicians had routed the classroom through its own server—one that was unable to handle the bandwidth-hungry Second Life interview assignment. On September 10th, one of the days class was officially cancelled, quite a few students came to the classroom to work. The load of all of the computers on the internet was too much for the server to work properly—by the time I tried connecting to Second Life after helping students, the connection was so slow I could not even log on. The ILC technicians did not have any idea the connection would be overwhelmed so easily either, but in the future I would make sure the room I used was a computer lab with a very solid internet connection.

Another example of unforeseen complications with this assignment was that students were unfamiliar with how to navigate the Second Life space. Katelyn said, “it was hard because it was one of the first [assignments] for all of us. It was hard to try out Second Life AND the interviews.” One of Katelyn’s difficulties came when she was trying to find her interview partner. She could chat with her partner, but did not know where she was. Here’s how she describes what happened: “We chatted a little bit, but neither of us really knew where we were. She said, ‘Where are you?’ and I said, ‘I hit the home button’ then she said, ‘I hit the home button too!’ Our homes were not the same, so we realized afterwards that everyone’s home is different.” If they had known how to navigate Second Life, they would not have had such a hard time finding each other.



**Figure 8 The Second Life Map and Navigation Feature**

Another common difficulty with the navigation system was locating people to interview. The Second Life navigation system shows where people are located on the “world map,” but students were either unaware that the little green dots meant people, or the map was simply inaccurate. Students went to where the green dots were on the map, but nobody was around. Although I had initially required 5-6 interviews, I had to send an email lessening the number because students were having a really difficult time:

Hello all,

So, that was an interesting class period. Obviously there were technical issues (I was not even able to open Second Life—and I am sure it was because of the internet in the classroom), but there were also some very interesting encounters. Here are some thoughts/revamped requirements/announcements:

I suspected the 6 interview requirement was going to be difficult—I think it turned out a little more difficult than I even suspected though. The new requirement for interviews is 3-4 rather than 5-6. You may need to spend time on your own trying to get interviews.

Interviews may not have turned out how we hoped. Most of this was probably because the audience we envisioned was not the audience that was there (there were even more weirdos than I thought). However, I'd like you to write a little about how you might have done things differently. For example, one Second Life person misunderstood one of us and thought we were asking if they WERE English. If you got thrown into the ocean, how might you have avoided that? Also, you may have to look at each interview creatively. An apathetic interview is not necessarily a failure.

I'd like you all to post something to today's Class Recorder section. Samantha will post the word of the day and language principle, but I'd also like each class member to post something under the "Top Non-English Related Moments of Second Life" on that page (go to the Google Site, then "Class Recorder Information," then today's date). Just write some of the crazy things that happened (but keep it PG). For example, Miriam might write about how someone asked her if she wanted to be a vampire.

I have emailed someone in The Zone—in the bottom floor of the ILC—and I have requested that Second Life be installed on 5 computers. You can go there and work on Second Life stuff. Let me know if 5 is not enough.

That's all I can think of. I may email again if I think of something else. Otherwise, good luck and have a good weekend.

Richard Samuelson

**Figure 9**      **An Email to the Class on September 10th, 2010**

I tried to tell the students about the navigation system (it was even in my video tutorial), but it was not until the students had actually tried to navigate that they noticed a problem. From this experience I have learned that it is preferable to have a separate assignment that familiarizes them with navigation, rather than expecting them to learn navigation skills as they are completing a difficult assignment. Perhaps taking more time on the first unit could have lessened the frustration many students felt trying to accomplish their interviews and could have allowed them to concentrate more on the rhetorical implications of the assignment, but the difficulty in learning the program stands as a barrier to engagement theory and potential teachers using Second Life.

More than just technical or navigational issues, though, the interview assignment presented communication challenges. While communicating on Second Life provided some shy students, like Karen, with new and comfortable ways to express themselves, it also provided a challenge for the students in my class and for many of the students described in publications about using Second Life as a teaching tool. Sherblom, Withers, and Leonard state that “the communication medium can present a challenge for group communication” (33). Morse et al. described the dissatisfaction many of their students had communicating in Second Life: “Many participants felt that the communication opportunity was not rich enough to encourage engagement with their manifest representation in-world in the way that we had wished and speculated.” Some of these same sentiments were expressed by some of my students, as described in chapter three.

Also, the interview assignment presented a more ethical problem—the danger of reinforcing stereotypes. Students met a wide variety of people for their interview assignment. Often the Second Life population would challenge the students’ views of

writing (see chapter three); however, perhaps just as often these people's attitudes and backgrounds could be used as evidence that supported the students' preconceived stereotypes. For example, when Katelyn started talking about the interview assignment she said things like, "a lot of people said that they dropped out of school." She was careful to use a qualifier, "a lot." But later on in the interview she dropped the qualification words: "nobody really stuck out and said 'oh, I did this in English.' [Instead] they said, 'yeah I took English and it was horrible.'" She talked about one woman in particular who "had horrible things to say about [English. She said] she was so much better now that she was not doing anything with [it] . . . it was just a hassle with her life." Eventually Katelyn figured out that this negative attitude is not ubiquitous in Second Life, that part of her problem was the way she was interviewing, and that she had some control over the type of audience she contacted (see chapter three), but until that point she had difficulty overcoming the generalized conclusion that only "college dropouts go to Second Life."

Even positive examples can be used to generalize. Matthew had the opposite experience from Katelyn. Almost all the people he interacted with were positive about writing. He said he was "amazed at how many people actually liked writing." He never said that everyone in different countries feel a certain way about writing, but he implied that his handful of interviews were solid evidence that other countries have vastly more positive perceptions of writing. Whether other countries have more positive views of writing or not is outside the scope of this project, but his thought process in getting to this conclusion is problematic. On the other hand, his experience challenged his already held inaccurate perceptions: "Maybe it's just Idaho or something, cause it always seems like

people are like ‘aw, writing... it’s horrible.’” There are many who would call this a clear win—a student left the class thinking that a large percentage of the world enjoys writing more than he formerly suspected—but it’s kind of a hollow win because he used flawed reasoning to reach that conclusion.

A more obvious example of how students had a hard time avoiding stereotypes in the interview assignment was Miriam’s perception of what a professional writer was like. After telling about how helpful she had found the interview assignment to be because she talked to a published writer, Miriam described how she viewed writers, how this avatar embodied those views, and why she held generalizations based on those views:

Richard: so did some of the things that she said change the way that you viewed writing?

Miriam: Um . . . she was actually pretty negative about writing.

Richard: . . . Ok. Did that surprise you though? . . .

Miriam: I mean you think of a writer, I do not know, I never think of a writer as waking up every day and being like, “oh, yay, let’s go write!” I have never thought of it that way. I always think of it as the mysterious type who’s sad and goes sit on a bench or goes to his study and is like “let’s write deeply and seriously.” You never think of the writer who’s like “the deer are frolicking in the meadow.” You only see the serious black writer, with black clothes. And she was definitely that writer.

Richard: Yeah, you got that feeling from her?

Miriam: Yeah, she was my stereotypical writer. “Yeah, life sucks. This is my second life and this is the best world I can live in because the world sucks that bad.” She was telling me, “yeah, my second life boyfriend just cheated on me.” Oh. Ok. Alright. (laughing) How do I respond to that?

Notice, again, how her language changes from the generalized “you think” to the more cautious “I never think,” then back to the generalized “you only see.” She was trying to localize her conclusions about writers, but ended up trying to support a wide-sweeping

generalization. It's also important to note that she did not mean anything racial when she referred to the "black writer," only her somewhat gothic image of a professional writer. When I asked what the avatar of the writer was wearing, Miriam responded, "She was dressed normally, like in jeans and heels." This writer's "darkness" did not translate onto the appearance of the avatar, but Miriam still used her interaction with this individual as confirmation of the "mysterious," "sad" writer. Students in a wide variety of classes need to be careful that they do not perpetuate or rely on stereotypes, but interaction with Second Life's diverse user-base presents numerous occasions for students to categorize entire continents, ethnicities, or races in narrow ways. Because the authentic focus provided by Second Life can be a two-edged sword, I would be much more careful when describing this assignment to students in the future to make sure they avoid stereotypes and use sound reasoning when they interact in new rhetorical situations and with new audiences.

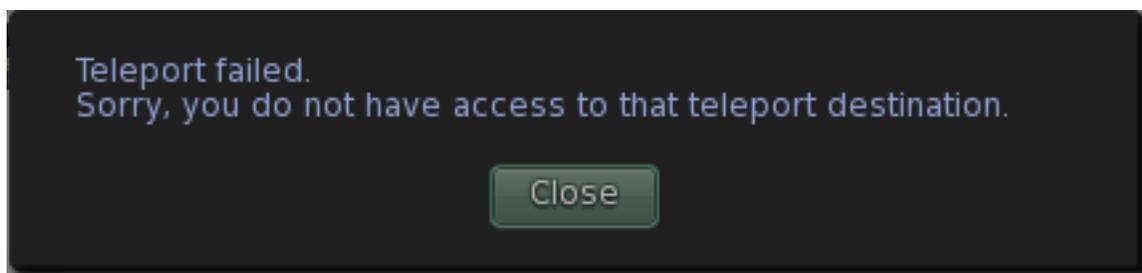
### **The Organization Analysis Assignment**

The organization analysis assignment had a different set of difficulties. As I began to research how I would introduce this portion of the class to the students, I was really impressed with the number and quality of organizations that operated an island on Second Life. The Wikipedia page I would eventually share with my students listed 72 specific organizations and businesses on Second Life—including Adidas, Cisco, Dell, Disney, IBM, Mazda, MLB, MTV, Reuters, Sun Microsystems, Toyota, and Wells Fargo ("Businesses"). I shared another list with my students that had 202 specific schools and universities on Second Life ("Institutions"). The lists of Universities in Second Life represented countries from all over the world: six in the United Kingdom, six in

Scandinavia, five in Australia, five in Germany, as well as Brazil, Spain, Mexico, France, and Portugal. I was really excited to present this information to the students because I suspected they would also be impressed, but I did not realize how difficult it would be for me to effectively introduce these organizations and for the students to choose appropriate organizations to analyze. A more limited number would have allowed me to handpick and recommend high-quality ones. However, I did not want to limit the students, nor did I want to sift through all 274 possible Second Life groups. I took a chance that these two lists, and any others that they may have found on their own, were reliable and would help them find appropriate groups.



**Figure 10** The Error Message when Attempting to Teleport to a Private Island



**Figure 11** The Error Message Enlargement

As I was researching, I did not realize how many organizations were private and inaccessible. This information was not openly posted on these websites. After receiving frantic emails from students and realizing the difficulties students were having actually getting onto the islands, I changed the requirements, allowing students to do online research in place of going to the island of the organization. I wrote: “If you can find some high-quality, credible secondary source material about the organization, go ahead and use that (think of the CNN article I mentioned). It may give interesting insights into the organization's rhetoric . . . Also, recognize that it's ok to change organizations.” Almost every student supplemented or replaced their Second Life observations of the organization with the online research. While the research facilitated learning and growth (see Karen’s experience in chapter three), the assignment may have been more effective if the students had been able to complete the assignment as originally designed. Both of Katelyn’s organizations were set to private, and she felt she missed out on something interesting by not being able to access them: “Both of my organizations had either an activity or a game to help you learn about their organization. So I did not get to do their games, which I think I would have learned a lot if I had done those, but, I did all the information from the website that was specifically about the[m].” Many of the students did not get to experience moving their avatar through an organization’s island, exploring the way the organization presented themselves. The “physical” presence in exploring Second Life was an important part of the authentic focus I wanted the students to have; not having it reduced experiencing Second Life to merely looking at Second Life. I recognized this shift in the email I sent: “I want to emphasize that it would be a good idea to look at how the organization's use of Second Life changes their rhetoric. What can

they do with Second Life that they could not do (express, etc) otherwise? I don't want this to be a 'Second Life is awesome' assignment." I was concerned that without the physical presence of their avatar on the island, students would be unequipped to adequately interpret the constructs of the organization. The students were generally able to write some fairly persuasive rhetorical analyses, but based on the interviews, surveys, and unit work, I do not think their experiences yielded the nuanced thinking about communication and writing they would have been if all the students had been able to explore an organization with their own avatar.

### **Additional Redesign Recommendations**

As I mentioned in chapter two, I planned ahead for tech and access difficulties—I applied for a special tech-rich classroom, offered the students to come and use the classroom on Second Life days, made custom video tutorials, and offered to meet one-on-one with students. However, in hindsight I think I could have done three more things to be more thoroughly prepared for the difficulties my students would have: 1) I could have set up a few optional evening meetings, 2) I could have made my students more aware of the several computer labs that are available around campus, and 3) I could have spent more class time making sure everyone was getting their profile started and functional.

#### Evening Meetings

The 15% of students who considered themselves unconfident in their ability to use technology, and probably many of them who marked “neutral,” would likely have appreciated an optional meeting to work out difficulties with Second Life. Miriam, who described herself as “not one of your technology-savvy students,” recommended such an optional meeting: “maybe [we could have] an extra, outside-of-class [meeting.] Like,

‘hey, if you want some help outside of class, I will be meeting here at this time’ – . . . setting up an account beforehand would be the [only] prerequisite so that when you’re there it was like ‘oh ok, this is how we’re doing it.’” Miriam, and probably other self-professed non-tech-savvy students, would appreciate an informal, instructional meeting to build up their confidence in “how we’re doing it.”

### Computer Labs

As well as holding an optional evening meeting, I could have been clearer about computer-lab options for the students. After some of these technological problems during the first two weeks of using Second Life, I asked students if they knew of resources available where they could access Second Life outside of class. I was amazed—and embarrassed at my lack of knowledge—at how many options were available. Students told about three or four computer-labs that I had never heard of. Miriam had been looking around campus and had found a couple of labs, but during this class she learned about a computer lab in the art building. She used it all semester, saying, “it’s probably the best lab on campus—I got to know quite a few of them.” She broadened her knowledge of campus tools, although I could have researched more options so I could make students aware of these resources even before they had difficulties. After the class when students described more computer lab options I worked with the manager of one of the labs—he set up Second Life on a number of the computers, knowing that my students would be coming in periodically. Contacting and working with more lab directors would have mitigated some technology frustrations that distracted from student engagement and learning.

### Unit One Pacing

While additional meetings and resources would assist students getting started in Second Life, a slower approach would also have helped decrease student frustration. In the early stages of a class it's important to keep a good pace when presenting material; students can get overwhelmed if there's too much material thrown at them, but they can also get bored if there is too little. Considering how new Second Life was to the students, how difficult some of the technology problems were, and how I would restructure the initial few classes (to better explain the rationale behind using a virtual world in an English class), I should have lengthened the class time of the first unit by at least a week. Also, using in-class time to project and go over examples as a class of what I wanted the students to do, like Jarmon et al. did in their study (223), may have helped the pacing go more smoothly. There were some students who did not have problems with Second Life, but there were enough difficulties that the overall consensus was to slow things down—using class time to explain difficulties would have been an effective way to not overwhelm students with too much material too fast.

While there were some excellent learning experiences happening throughout the duration of the project, there were also instances of frustration and distraction due to the difficulty in getting Second Life to work, the uncooperative attitudes of many Second Life residents, and the difficulty in presenting and accessing the organizations. Each assignment presented challenges that I'm confident we could have worked around if we had been prepared, but as it was these difficulties presented barriers to the successful learning experiences that were possible. The lack of student buy-in during the avatar

creation assignment affected the creative, project-based component of engagement theory, the difficulties learning Second Life navigation lessened the authentic focus and group work components of engagement theory during the interview assignment, and the inability to access organizations distracted from the authentic focus component possible through the organization analysis assignment. Each of engagement theory's components could have been addressed, although the difficulties I described in this chapter presented barriers a teacher would need to overcome. As you'll see in the next chapter, these difficulties, or ones like them, soured the experience for a number of the students; however, I believe that overall the students learned diverse lessons from their experiences and that Second Life, assuming these difficulties are addressed, can be a powerful vehicle for engagement theory.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

After introducing the overall scope of the study in chapter one, each successive chapter has detailed the project at various stages and from a number of angles. First I established the rationale behind what I wanted to accomplish by using Second Life and how I hoped to accomplish that (chapter two); then I examined the ways in which the use of Second Life is a viable tool for engagement theory and for improving student learning (chapter three); finally, I explored the ways in which Second Life presents barriers to learning and engagement theory and what I could have done differently to mitigate its ineffectiveness (chapter four). This final chapter concludes this analysis: after synthesizing previous chapter material into overall conclusions and best practices, I will look to the future need for research in the use of Second Life and the ways in which such research would fulfill President Kustra's invitation to "scan the changing landscape in higher education, see what we can learn from those who are blazing new trails...and apply that thinking to teaching and learning" (11).

### **Overview**

Before the semester started, some students were excited about starting an English class that would use a new and challenging program to teach writing. Other students were nervous about the implications of the course description, fearing that the use of a 3-D world would impede their education. While there were others who were unaware or apathetic about the implications of the course description, the majority of the students

reacted in some way before the beginning of the semester—implying that the idea of a Second Life English class got their attention and made them curious, whether that translated as concern or excitement. Their interest in a 3-D world might signal a resonance with engagement theory—Second Life could provide an authentic focus and could facilitate group and project learning.

When the Second Life portion of the class started, most students experienced some kind of difficulty getting the program to work properly. Based on the other reports I've read about the educational use of Second Life, I wasn't the only one to experience these kinds of problems. Technological difficulties diverted time and energy from learning and posed an obstacle to using Second Life as an effective vehicle for engagement theory. Although it was a barrier, there were some positive reactions to the technological difficulties. A portion of the students adjusted their approach and resolved technical difficulties on their own. Some loaded a new version of the program; others tried using a different computer; and others explored the program more thoroughly. However, another portion of students became overwhelmed and were unable to fix the problems by themselves. Some came to me for help; others sought help from a different source; and a few simply got stuck. Most students were frustrated by the technology (to varying degrees).

At the same time, many of the students were exploring the creative nature of the avatar creation assignment to write in unfamiliar and challenging ways. While they struggled with the program, most often it was a productive negotiation that led to rich and creative pieces, clearly demonstrating the capability of Second Life to host creative, student-driven projects as required by engagement theory. A number of other students

reported that they didn't feel that the Second Life avatar creation portion of the assignment added much to the final product, although that might be an example of students not putting much effort into completing the assignment and therefore not getting much out of it. However, the positive reaction most students had to this project, despite frustrations they encountered, indicate that they valued its newness and the creative thinking it required.

The interview assignment was also plagued by technology difficulties. Part of this difficulty in the first few weeks could have been avoided if the course proceeded more slowly, with additional tutorials, in-class work, and practice using Second Life. Without this additional training, the ability of Second Life to support student-to-student group work is thrown into question. As well as being frustrated by the technology, many students had trouble working with the Second Life residents. Some of this difficulty was because students were asking ineffective questions or approaching the assignment in ineffective ways (which, in turn, may have stemmed from ineffective preparation in class). Another difficulty students had was overcoming stereotypes about writers and populations. Despite these difficulties, a number of students were able to think critically enough about their methods to effectively change their approach; some were even successful from the start of the assignment. Most were intrigued by the world-wide audience and authentic focus they encountered. No matter how students reacted, they were all challenged in their assumptions and rhetorical awareness.

The final Second Life assignment, the organization analysis, posed its own difficulties, although not in the form of technology failures. The majority of students were unable to effectively analyze their chosen organizations because of access settings.

This may have been avoided by handpicking the organizations beforehand or better preparing the students to expect this difficulty. While only a handful were able to compose the kind of thorough rhetorical analyses originally intended, most students were still impressed by the quantity and quality of organizations affiliated with Second Life. The powerful ethos this assignment builds may have been more appropriate earlier in the semester, when students were still getting used to Second Life. In a number of instances this assignment was able to support group work between students and Second Life residents that was in harmony with the group work and authentic focus components of engagement theory. The increased awareness this assignment helped foster, as well as the rhetorically sound decisions they made and the people they connected with, had a profound impact on a number of students. The constructed nature of the program, at least in a few instances, caused the students to think critically about the constructed nature of communication.

### **Survey Results**

The results of the final survey illustrate the extremely mixed reactions I just mentioned. Most of the survey results I share primarily indicate how student engagement was increased (by the potential they saw in Second Life) or tempered (by the frustration they felt about the technology difficulties we experienced). The frustration lessened their motivation (see Figure 14), but the survey questions most clearly illustrate student engagement. In reporting these survey results, I combined the “strongly (dis)agree” and the “(dis)agree” results, and give the percentages (whereas the graphs give the number of students) for convenience’ sake.

When the students were asked if they had a positive experience using Second

Life in conjunction with English 101, as many disagreed as agreed:



**Figure 12** Survey Results—“I Had a Positive Experience Using Second Life”

37% to 37% (the rest were neutral). Slightly more students thought the use of Second Life was effective: 42% did and 37% didn’t (again, the rest were neutral).

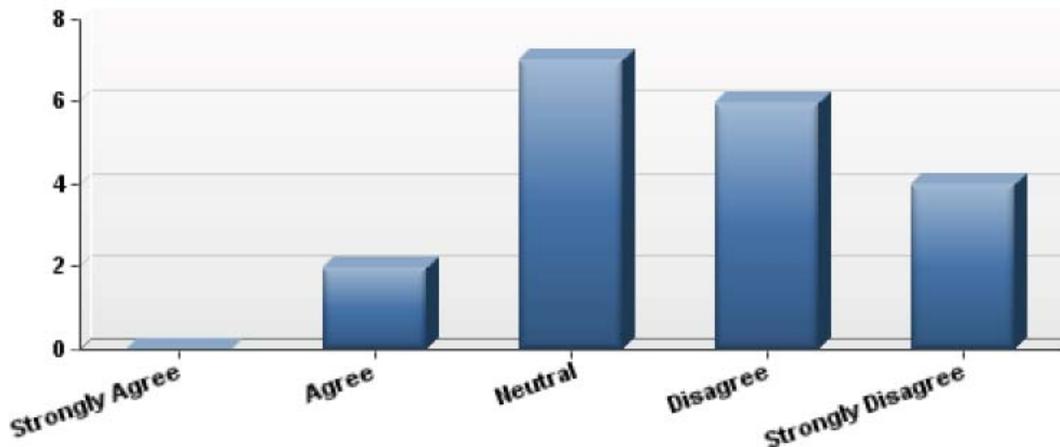


**Figure 13** Survey Results—“I Think Using Second Life Wasn’t Effective”

It’s impossible to say how much their respect for Second Life softened their negative reaction and how much their negative experiences decreased their respect for the program; however, the divergence in outcomes between what they considered “positive” and “effective” implies that some aspect of Second Life wasn’t enjoyable, but they couldn’t deny its overall value. The conflicting results were supported by the interviews,

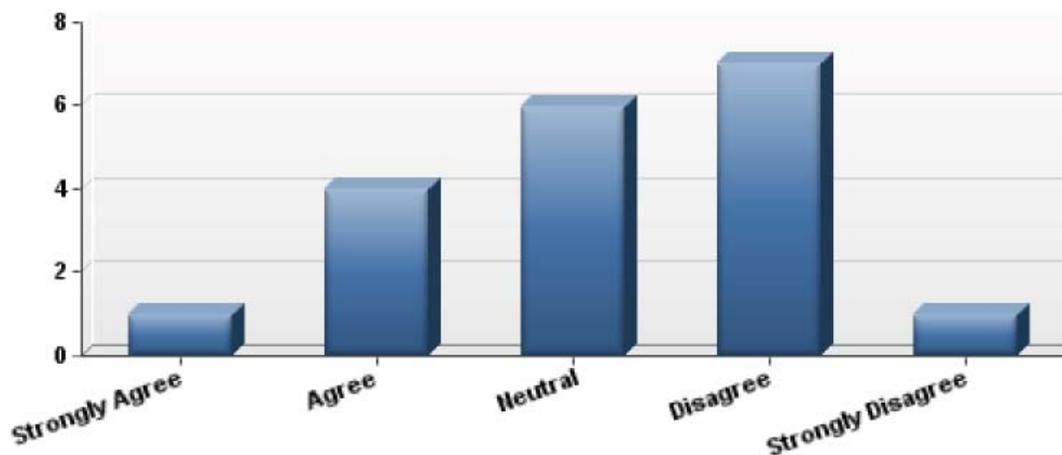
as discussed in chapters three and four. Countless other factors may have impacted the student's opinion of Second Life, positively or negatively, including the following: overall opinions of English, moral or religious values, background with video games, and workload/personal situations.

There was a similar divergence around how Second Life affected motivation and engagement: students felt they were extremely less motivated because we used Second Life—11% thought motivation was increased, compared to 53%, which disagreed with them.



**Figure 14 Survey Results—“I Felt More Motivated Because We Used Second Life”**

However, students felt that they were more engaged because we used Second Life—26% thought engagement was decreased, compared to 43%, who disagreed with them.



**Figure 15** Survey Results—“I Felt Less Engaged because We Used Second Life”

Although the margins are less wide between engagement as between motivation, there may be a similar correlation between the previous results—students’ negative reactions to Second Life may have decreased their motivation; similarly, students’ respect for Second Life may have bolstered or stemmed from their engagement. In addition to the list of factors previously mentioned the students may have been confused by the vague nature of the survey questions. The first question didn’t specify what the motivation was for; the second didn’t specify what the engagement was in. However the students interpreted the questions, there was a difference in how Second Life affected their motivation and engagement.

The final divergence in opinion concerned how the students viewed the beginning of the semester and after the semester: the majority of the class felt that their opinion of Second Life had changed dramatically since the beginning of the semester—60% agreed that their opinion had changed, while only 5% disagreed.



**Figure 16 Survey Results—“My Opinion Towards Second Life Was Significantly Different at the Beginning of the Semester”**

The question doesn't specify if the change was positive or negative, but I would hazard a guess that their opinions were more mixed and complicated than simply “positive” or “negative.”



**Figure 17 Survey Results—“I Would Recommend Taking a Hybrid Style Composition Class That Utilizes Second Life to My Family and Friends.”**

The question concerning their future opinion of the class, “I would recommend taking a hybrid style composition class that utilizes Second Life to my family and friends,” yielded mixed, though mostly negative, answers: 25% would recommend a similar class to family or friends, 25% were neutral (they would probably be apathetic if a friend

wanted to take it, yet wouldn't actively recommend that they do so), while 50% would discourage a friend or family member from taking an English 101 class that used Second Life. While students had drastically different opinions of Second Life after the semester, these opinions obviously weren't positive enough to recommend that everyone take a similar class.

The divergence in survey results demonstrates that the students had extremely mixed feelings about the class. The overall positive feedback of the interviews, emails, and comments concerning the educational aspects of Second Life versus the overall negative feedback concerning the technological difficulties gives a hint as to why the students were so conflicted. There are numerous reasons why this implementation may have been pedagogically sound, yet not positively received by the class. While students obviously value different things in their college experience, it's not reasonable to assume that the educational value alone will be enough to counteract their frustrations with getting technology to work. The students may not value their new-found knowledge of virtual worlds and their new experiences with writing as much as they value a more traditional class that didn't get them out of their comfort zones as much. Also, the students may not have been in a position to compare this class to alternate versions. Most students in this class were first-semester students. Finally, they may not have viewed the challenging nature and newness of the class in a positive light at the end of the semester when I collected data. Bump attributed the negative reaction of his students to the timing of the surveys: "the surveys were administered toward the end of the semesters when [the students] had become burned out on SL." Perhaps students would have more positive opinions about their Second Life experiences in the long run. A similar but more

longitudinal study would provide more conclusive information.

### **Best Practices**

Although I previously discussed the ways I would have improved my own study, here is a concise, bulleted list with a more general audience in mind:

- *Give the students needed information during the class registration process.* Whether you change the class description before the students sign up, send them a descriptive email a few weeks before the class starts, or both, letting the students know what to expect so they can change their plans in advance if they're not interested.
- *Make sure your classroom can support heavy internet traffic.* Especially if you will be using a wireless connection, don't assume that a computer lab classroom will be able to support the bandwidth needed for over a dozen students to work on Second Life at a time.
- *Know and let your students know your campus's computer lab options and policies.* Contact computer lab coordinators to find out if they would allow Second Life viewer downloads on their computers. Let them know what your plans are. I was surprised at how many on-campus computer options were available for the students.
- *Consider holding optional training sessions outside of or in place of regular class time.* Some students pick up the technology really quickly and will be bored by in-class tutorials, so consider holding another meeting outside of class or canceling class (and meeting then) to let unconfident students get more individual attention and explanations about their concerns.
- *Take the tutorial process slowly, making clear what you're going to do and why.* Don't assume that telling the students a single time why you're incorporating Second Life into your class will sink in (even if you say it clearly and powerfully). Draw out the explanation process and use as many opportunities as you can to clarify the big picture of what you're doing and why.
- *Encourage students to work together to solve problems they encounter.* You could use class time to let students problem-solve as a group, or you could assign students to work together collaboratively outside of class. In either case, great camaraderie and learning can take place when students work together.
- *Research Second Life organizations to know if they're public or private.* If you want students to explore organizations on Second Life, don't assume that the places you'll want them to go are actually accessible to the public.

### **Future Research**

Future studies are needed to provide a clearer understanding of how students react to a hybrid, half-semester integration of Second Life in an English composition class. Variations of the class and study, as I discussed in more depth in chapter four, would provide better results: additional assistance with Second Life, more time for unit one, more clarifications of the educational value of using Second Life, earlier foregrounding of Second Life organizations, more discussions of the dangers and implications of Second Life, altered order of assignments, altered emphasis of assignments, limited choice of Second Life organizations, and more specific questions in the concluding survey. The same basic study with a different set of students would confirm how much the results were swayed by this specific teacher and these specific students.

Not only could future researchers rely on the recommendations/assignments detailed in this thesis, but altering the overall implementation could yield extremely interesting results. These alterations include the following: a longer or shorter portion of the class dedicated to Second Life assignments, additional or fewer cancelled classes, integration of Service Learning, an emphasis on cultural studies, an emphasis on digital rhetoric, and the use of other virtual worlds than Second Life.

Additional studies could benefit greatly from some of the changes Linden Labs are planning for Second Life—in early 2011, they announced the plan to create a browser-based viewing system, rather than their current download-only system (Woollacott). While it's too early to tell how effective its implementation will be, a more stable, user-friendly version of Second Life could greatly improve student learning, enjoyment, and productivity. Issues such as limited access, conflicting version types, lack

of user interface standards/methods, etc., may no longer act as deterrents to student learning. Before this version is released, future studies may rely on alternate viewer versions. Perhaps using a third-party viewing system rather than Linden Labs' version would mitigate some of the problems I encountered.

I've tried to accurately and honestly present the experience of incorporating Second Life in a hybrid, half-semester format, to 23 Boise State first-year writing students. There were frustrations, successes, and everything in-between—for both me and the students. The experience was new and intimidating for all of us but was also rewarding and memorable in countless respects. There are difficulties in reaching conclusions in any study, but here are a number of things that I believe, based on all the information I gathered this semester—informal conversations, interviews, surveys, written work, memory, and emails—students were genuinely intrigued by the newness of using Second Life in an English class. Students came to view the world of communication, and their place in it, in more complex ways. Students' habits of thinking about school and assignments were challenged. And finally, in light of President Kustra's injunction to search out and implement technology at Boise State, I plan on using the things I've learned during this project to incorporate virtual world education into my future composition classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

**Informed Consent Form**

## BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

### A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Richard Samuelson is conducting research on student reactions to a hybrid English 101 class that utilizes the online virtual world program called Second Life. This study is concerned with how students view writing in various contexts, and how such contextual diversity affects student performance. It is intended to help writing instructors better understand how Second Life and other virtual worlds can assist students and teachers in the education process. I am being asked to participate in this study because I am enrolled in English 101-010.

### B. PROCEDURES

If I agree to be in the study, I understand the following will occur:

1. If I volunteer, I will participate in 2 interviews of between 1 to 2 hours each. These interviews will take place in a public location at the university, and will take no more than four hours total.
2. I will participate in 2 in-class surveys.
3. I will be asked to bring copies of my essays to my interviews for discussion.
4. I will allow Richard Samuelson to make copies of my essays for further analysis.
5. I may be observed participating inside my English 101 classroom.
6. If I volunteer, I will be asked to photograph the workspace surrounding the computer I use to access Second Life.

### C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. The emphasis of this research project is on understanding students' perspectives and understanding. Responses from all participants will be treated with the utmost respect.
2. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, my records will be handled as confidentially as possible. Rather than my name, a pseudonym will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.
3. There will be no grade ramifications should I choose to withdraw from the study at any point.

#### D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. I will have the opportunity to talk about my experiences in English 101 with an instructor, and will thus have time to reflect on my own development. Composition instructors may benefit from the information I provide.

#### E. COSTS

There will be no costs to me as a result of taking part in this study, other than the time spent to participate.

#### F. QUESTIONS

If I have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, I should first talk with Richard Samuelson at 208-515-1062 or richardsamuelson@boisestate.edu. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-

1574 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Administration, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1135.

#### H. CONSENT

I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as a student in this class and at Boise State University.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

Signature of Study Participant

Date

I give my consent to have my words quoted in this study:

Signature of Study Participant

Print Name

Signature

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

THE BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HAS  
REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS  
IN RESEARCH.

APPENDIX B

**Interview Questions**

1. Review the purposes of my study with the students, and address any questions they may have.
2. Review the purpose of my interview with the students: to better understand student reactions to a hybrid class that utilizes an online virtual world.
3. Questions are split in two general areas; not all questions will be asked during each interview. Questions will be designed either to collect information about the student's understanding of their classroom context, or about their experiences using Second Life for assignments.

3.1. Background questions include:

- Tell me your thoughts about writing in general; what are your goals as a writing student?
- What was your experience with writing instruction in high school; what type of feedback did you receive?
- What were your expectations coming in to English 101; did you notice the class description?
- If you say the class description, why did you want to take the class? If not, what do you think your would your reaction have been?
- Do you feel comfortable using technology? What background do you have with technology?
- What kinds of online media have you used to communicate with teachers? (Email, Instant Messaging, Blogs, Webpages, Discussion Boards, Wikis, Photo Sharing, Chatrooms, or 3D Virtual Worlds) What has worked best?

- What was your reaction when you found out your English 101 class was utilizing Second Life? Why?
- What's it like being in the English 101 classroom? What do you like or dislike about it?
- What techniques have past English teachers used that have been most effective in helping you improve your writing?

3.2. Second Life-based questions include:

- Had you ever used Second Life before? If no, had you ever heard of it?
- Did you have any technical problems using Second Life? How did that affect your feelings towards the class?
- What do you like most about using Second Life in English 101? What did you like least? Why?
- Which Second Life assignment was the most helpful?
- Did you feel more connected to your classmates as a result of using Second Life, or less? Why?
- What specific experiences stand out most in your mind from your time using Second Life?
- Did using Second Life in an English 101 class change the way you think about writing? About your classmates? About English? About College? Why/why not?

- As a result of using Second Life in this class, do you feel your writing improved more, less, or as much as it would have in a traditional face-to-face class? Why?
- Did you use your time in Second Life efficiently? If not, what were the main causes you got off track?
- What could have been done by the teacher to help you feel more responsible in Second Life?

4. Student answers to these questions are unpredictable, so I may ask them to follow up on particular points or discuss a particular area in more depth. For example, if a student indicated that they had a particularly strong connection with another student because of Second Life, I might ask why that was. Or if they indicated a particular aspect of their background that was influential to their experience in class (computer programming, photo editing, etc.) I might ask them to describe their skill or experience more in depth and how it helped or hindered them.

APPENDIX C

**First Survey Questions**

1st Week Survey Fall 2010 for English 101-010

In-class Qualtrix survey administered to all participating English 101-010 students.

Recruitment script (initial screen of survey)

Greetings! This survey is designed to gather more information about how you view first year composition, online virtual worlds, and the combination of the two.

Participation in this survey is voluntary, and your anonymity will be protected by the use of pseudonyms rather than your actual name.

Risks and Benefits:

If you choose to take this survey, risks are minimal. Responses from all participants will be treated with the utmost respect and will be combined to search for overall patterns.

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. However, current and future students will benefit greatly from your input. The study of the educational value of online virtual world is blossoming, and your contributions will be greatly appreciated by future students and teachers.

Confidentiality:

The data in this study will be confidential. Any work quoted in research studies will be quoted using pseudonyms. You may also choose to leave questions blank if you believe your answers to them may reveal your identity. The online survey results are password-protected, and will be destroyed within one year. All copies will be destroyed after 10 years or after the data in them becomes irrelevant, whichever comes first.

Participation:

Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue the survey at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty and your student status will not be impacted in any way.

Contact:

This research is being conducted by Richard Samuelson. You may reach him at 208-515-1062 or richardsamuelson@boisestate.edu.

You may also contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00AM and 5:00PM Monday through Friday by calling 208.426.5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise ID 83725-1138.

1. By continuing with this survey, I acknowledge that I have read the introduction, I am at least eighteen years old, and I am participating voluntarily. Y/N
2. I feel confident in my writing skills.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
3. I feel confident in my abilities to use technology effectively.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree

- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

4. I have used the following forms of media to communicate with previous teachers

(select all that apply):

- a. Email
- b. Instant Messaging
- c. Blogs
- d. Webpages
- e. Discussion Boards
- f. Wikis
- g. Photo Sharing
- h. Chatrooms
- i. 3D Virtual Worlds

5. I have used the 3D virtual world called Second Life before. True/False Yes/No?

6. It is inappropriate to utilize recreational platforms (games, etc) in a University setting. True/False

7. I am concerned that the Second Life experience will distract from learning how to write.

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

8. I am excited to use Second Life in an English 101 class.

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neutral

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX D

**Second Survey Questions**

7th Week Survey Fall 2010 for English 101-010

In-class Qualtrix survey administered to all English 101-010 students.

Recruitment script (initial screen of survey)

Greetings! This survey is designed to gather more information about how you view first year composition, online virtual worlds, and the combination of the two.

Participation in this survey is voluntary, and your anonymity will be protected by the use of pseudonyms rather than your actual name.

Risks and Benefits:

If you choose to take this survey, risks are minimal. Responses from all participants will be treated with the utmost respect and will be combined to search for overall patterns.

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. However, current and future students will benefit greatly from your input. The study of the educational value of online virtual world is blossoming, and your contributions will be greatly appreciated by future students and teachers.

Confidentiality:

The data in this study will be confidential. Any work quoted in research studies will be quoted using pseudonyms. You may also choose to leave questions blank if you believe your answers to them may reveal your identity. The online survey results are password-protected, and will be destroyed within one year. All copies will be destroyed after 10 years or after the data in them becomes irrelevant, whichever comes first.

Participation:

Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue the survey at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty and your student status will not be impacted in any way.

Contact:

This research is being conducted by Richard Samuelson. You may reach him at 208-515-1062 or richardsamuelson@boisestate.edu.

You may also contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00AM and 5:00PM Monday through Friday by calling 208.426.5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise ID 83725-1138.

1. By continuing with this survey, I acknowledge that I have read the introduction, I am at least eighteen years old, and I am participating voluntarily. Y/N
2. I had a positive experience using Second Life in conjunction with English 101-010.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
3. I think using Second Life in English 101-010 was a waste of time. Why is this so informal when the other questions are so formal?

- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
4. I felt more motivated because we used Second Life.
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
5. I felt less engaged because we used Second Life.
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
6. I felt a sense of community in Second Life that was different and helpful.  
“different” and “helpful” seem a little vague.
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree

- e. Strongly Disagree
7. I felt unable to express myself effectively in Second Life. Maybe “couldn’t” or “wasn’t able to?”
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
8. The face to face classes made the Second Life experience more enjoyable.
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
9. The face to face classes made the Second Life experience seem unnecessary.
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
10. I would recommend taking a hybrid style composition class that utilizes Second Life to my family and friends.
- a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neutral

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

11. My opinion towards Second Life was significantly different at the beginning of the semester.

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neutral

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree