SECOND LIFE
Creating Worlds of Wonder for Language Learners

By Michelle A. Ocasio, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Second Life is one of many three-dimensional virtual environments in which you create an avatar for the purpose of socializing, learning, developing skills and exploring a variety of academic and social areas. It is not a social media forum that posts status updates; rather, it is a space for people to gather in real-time using technology. Since its inception in 2003, Second Life has been used by educators to build and foster innovative learning environments and simulate real-life experiences. This virtual world has also been the subject of intense scrutiny since many view it as a decadent den of mischief and danger. The following is based on my own experiences with Second Life in my Spanish and Linguistics courses at Valdosta State University, as well as on my personal use of Second Life for meeting with teachers, professionals, and students from around the world. It is my hope that this article will assuage any fears about virtual worlds and invite more educators and students to be a part of this exceptional and wonderful learning community in their early language learning endeavors, especially for students ages 13-15.

By creating a free account at www.SecondLife.com, an individual also creates an avatar to represent him or herself in the virtual world. This avatar can be customized to have a similar physical appearance to its user, or it can be a robot, a tree, a gargoyle, a Boston Terrier, a fairy princess, a superhero, or any object – human or otherwise – of one's choosing. Younger learners, in particular those in middle school, will be fascinated by the opportunity to come alive on the screen as a walking, talking and flying character from their imagination with the ability to interact with others in real time. Despite its noticeable game-like façade, Second Life is not a video game. Upon entering Second Life, you should have an objective in mind; otherwise, it is like walking aimlessly into an everyday park. Do you wish to practice a foreign language? Would you like to take a peek into Paris as it was in the 1920s? Are you interested in modern art or have a fondness for indie music? Of course, Second Life welcomes anyone who wishes to enter and explore all there is to see and do.

In an effort to enhance the interactivity in my online courses, I have been using Second Life with my Spanish and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) students for over five years. I was introduced to Second Life during my second semester as an Assistant Professor during a conference on online teaching and technology. As I was an avid video gamer, I was curious about how virtual worlds could be useful in teaching, especially where everything (from buildings and vehicles to people and gardens) had to be designed and constructed by its users. Creating spaces for any use (educational or recreational) in Second Life is not intuitive; thus, I attended online training workshops throughout the semester following the conference. At the time, I did not yet know how I wanted to use Second Life in the classroom, only that I was keen to use this extraordinary and wonderful technology in some fashion. Teachers of younger learners are encouraged to create an avatar and jump right in, because in this case, you must learn by doing, rather than by reading about it. By doing an inworld search of "G-rated" areas and educational Sims, there are numerous fascinating places to be discovered! What to do in these newly found locations is only limited by one's imagination.

HOW NOT TO APPROACH LEARNING IN SECOND LIFE

I am always enthusiastic to inform others on how Second Life can be used in the classroom, but its use comes with a few caveats.

Second Life
www.secondlife.com

Second Life Destination Guide
http://secondlife.com/destinations

Second Life Education/Resources
https://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Second_Life_Education/Resources

Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum
http://latino.si.edu/LVM

Teacher Tool Kit (for Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum)
http://latino.si.edu/LVM/TeacherToolKit?slide=0

Often, teachers have the idea that Second Life is equipped with places and people already available to engage in role-play or to guide with learning skills. They ask about the possibility of arranging field trips to Mars to study geology, visiting a café in Paris to practice ordering a meal in French, or even simulating a frog dissection. While these ideas would surely bring an air of excitement to any classroom, some details are important when considering ways to make effective use of Second Life. First, Second Life is made up of areas (called "sims") that are hand-made by people just like you and me. That Mars is a location in real life does not mean that it exists in Second Life; it is a location that must be built by someone who has enough fascination with Mars to painstakingly recreate it, at his or her own expense, for use by the public for free. Although it is free to use Second Life, renting a space and acquiring the materials in which to customize it comes with a nominal fee. Some of the most interesting and detailed sites are sponsored by universities or institutions that hire professional builders to recreate their vision. For example, Texas A&M and Florida State University have collaborated to create a space in which to teach virtual chemistry, Nova Southeastern University of Florida has created a location for virtual health adventures, and "Live and Learn," a German-based non-profit organization, has recreated a virtual African village to help raise money for poverty-stricken children in Nairobi.

Another important challenge is that while Second Life is ideal for role-playing simulations such as recreating the customs counter at an airport or practicing a language with native speakers, one must provide the characters for both sides of the conversation. For example, if an instructor would like to have students practice speaking Arabic to check into a hotel (greetings, spelling one's name, asking for locations, and so on), then the instructor must provide not only the hotel and the décor (inside and outside of the hotel) that identifies it as a hotel in an Arabic-speaking country, but an Arabic-speaking hotel staff must also be provided by the instructor. Luckily, there is a vast number of existing locations in which to design a simulation; one only needs to check the Destination Guide on the Second Life website to find categorized lists of different locales, or more specifically, review the Second Life Education/Resources page for universities and museums. Creators of a location are not required to provide avatars
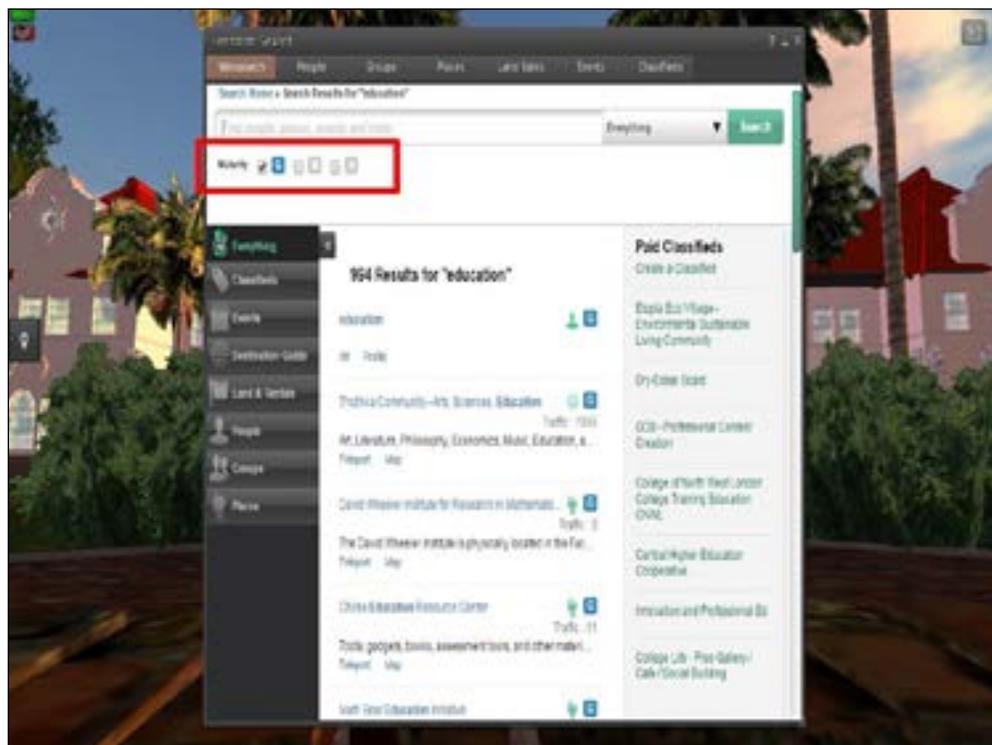
to engage in your project but collaborations are almost always welcome. Locating an area's designer and sending a message to inquire about academic partnerships is as easy as looking at someone's profile.

Finally, and most importantly, effective use of Second Life in the classroom takes some creative thinking and exploration on the part of the instructor. Instructors eager to use virtual worlds with their students might initially use Second Life for activities that can easily be accomplished in the

classroom. There are dozens of amphitheaters, classrooms and conference rooms in various locations in Second Life, and asking face-to-face students to meet in one of these spaces for a lecture and slide presentation with audio on Cuban music would not have many advantages over performing the same activity in the classroom. Apart from the "coolness effect" that students may feel upon entering this virtual environment, it is, after all, still a simple lecture with music samples. Today, language learning now

focuses more on second language use in real life contexts more so than second language learning in classroom environments (Wang and Vásquez 416), but care must be taken with the actual use of realia. Nonetheless, by visiting the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum, one can listen to Cuban music, learn about Afro-Cuban musicians by viewing a video, and see photos of their instruments. For other activities, students can visit the Day of the Dead cemeteries, take a guided tour of ceramics in the museum and play on the Ball Court of the Sun against other classmates while learning how it was played by ancient Mesoamericans. The Smithsonian LVM website provides a Teacher Tool Kit for instructors to design a lesson plan based on this location. The cemetery, which has tombstones of famous Hispanic musicians, is clickable and leads to websites that celebrate their life and talent. Nearby, there is another cemetery in which students learn about and build their own Day of the Dead altar with gifts and food.

PRIVATE CONFERENCES IN SECOND LIFE

Creating office space in Second Life offers a safe, private and convenient way for instructors to convene with other instructors, parents and students. One of the advantages of having one's own space in Second Life is to maintain control over the immediate environment. For example, if you build (or purchase) a quaint garden cottage to use as your virtual office, you can manage the area so that only one person (or more, at your choosing) may enter at a time. Furthermore, by creating private groups to which your students belong, the virtual office can be configured to allow only members of that group to enter. These settings are not only for structures but for entire areas as well. If you set your area so that no one outside a group may enter, then a person who walks (or flies) up to your perimeter would be met with an invisible wall. Private voice or chat conversations are possible to regulate privacy, and if the chat feature is used, you can configure the settings to keep a written log of all conversations. Screen sharing is also useful, provided it is a website that is not fully protected (such as a university LMS, student records or any site containing student information). Through the use of media screens that one can purchase or build, the instructor and student can listen to and view "regular" websites, watch videos linked from YouTube, or display PowerPoint presentations. For example, you can design an area with permanent slideshow viewers displaying student work that only parents

have permissions to view. These settings can be essential for use with younger learners as they allow them to share work in a safe manner. This section can be open from 5pm to 8pm on a Thursday evening, for example, for parents to pop in, view their child's work and chat with teachers and run into other parents. Another area can be constructed to show photos from the latest field trip. Mailboxes can be configured such that if a student arrives at an area and has questions, he or she can click on the mailbox, type a message into the chat box, and the message can be delivered directly to your personal email. An entire department could have a row of mailboxes with their photos, so that students and parents may send mail and make inquiries directly to the school teachers and administrators. The possibilities for instructors and schools to increase and maintain focused communication with parents and guardians regarding a student's language learning progress have very few boundaries.

CHALLENGES WITH USING SECOND LIFE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Linden Labs, the creator of Second Life, recommends that users be at least 18 years old. Sexual and violent content does exist in Second Life and in the past, Linden Labs created a special "Second Life Teen" area just for young people. This area was removed in 2010 to allow everyone access to the main Second Life grid. Nevertheless, there are safeguards in place to prevent young people, 13 to 17 years old, from viewing and purchasing adult content.

At ages 13 to 15, one may create an account only through an affiliated organization (such as a school) and thus is restricted to the "G-rated" area created by the organization. The organization is responsible for configuring the settings so that the area remains private, prohibiting the entrance of anyone over 15 years of age. The "G" rating in any given area means that all content (spoken or displayed) must be free of any and all sexual or violent content. At ages 16 to 17, an individual may have a "regular" account to visit other locations, however, he or she is still restricted to those areas in Second Life that have the "G" rating. Thus, it is important for educators who would like to use Second Life to carefully review all district and school policies for implementation and maintain open channels of communication with members of the administration and parents to ensure clarity regarding how safety measures are being addressed. Some districts may require

specific forms for parental consent as well as an in-depth explanation of how learners and content will be protected while maintaining access to the benefits of Second Life.

SUMMARY

Used wisely, Second Life is an exciting and innovative way for young people to experience learning and development in a variety of academic fields. Instructors can create their own space to be used for parent-teacher or distance conferences and students enjoy the social context of seeing their classmates in a virtual world. Language learning is taken to exciting heights as students visit user-created replicas of real-world locations. Whether discussing the content of a classic foreign-language book or simulating a medical emergency, Second Life offers a unique method to engage in the target language that cannot be achieved in the classroom. Language learners are immersed in the location, walking through gardens, hospital hallways or down ancient, dusty roads, experiencing the sights and sounds as if they were there. Second Life offers enhanced interactivity and adds dynamism to learning provided that the technology is used skillfully and with an objective in mind, rather than using virtual worlds simply because they exist. Teachers need not be skilled technicians to use Second Life in the classroom; small steps can be taken over time as collaborations are formed with existing Second Life enthusiasts and new ideas materialize. It just takes a few interested people to get together and create a whole new world and a new learning approach for students.

WORKS CITED

Wang, S and Camilla Vásquez. "Web 2.0 and Second Language Learning: What Does the Research Tell Us?" CALICO Journal. 29 (3) (2012): 412-430.

Michelle A. Ocasio is an Assistant Professor of Spanish and TESOL at Valdosta State University, as well as the campus director for Second Life. Although Dr. Ocasio's primary research interests are historical linguistics and contact languages, she has been involved in Second Life since 2012 and is always eager to collaborate in Second Life with foreign language professionals from all over the world. Feel free to come and visit by executing a search for "Valdosta State University" in Second Life.