Second Life and Language

Fred Dervin explains how an online community using Web3D has made virtual immersion a possibility for language learners

"It's as if we all went somewhere new, to the moon for example, and needed one another's help to survive and thrive."
Bransford, J. & Grawel, 2006: iii

Many language teachers are already using LMS (Learning Management Systems) such as Moodle in their classes. Though these systems allow interactive and independent teaching/learning (if they serve other purposes than document repository), new developments on the Internet will certainly allow more "real-to-life" teaching/learning experiences. The Internet has recently witnessed two waves of renewal: Web 2.0 with the birth of technologies such as Skype, MySpace, YouTube... and Web3D, which allows online three-dimensional virtual worlds. The latter could be one of the most important revolutions in language learning and teaching.

Virtual World, Active Worlds, There, Cyberpark and Second Life are some of the applications that use Web3D technology. These "virtual worlds" offer "networked desktop virtual reality in which users move and interact in simulated 3D spaces." (Dickey, 2005: 439)

Second Life (SL) is the application that has probably received the most media attention. It is expected that 25 million people will be using SL by the end of 2008. (Fetscherin & Lattemann, 2007)

The virtual world is not a proper video game as it has no levels, no scores and no game over. (Fetscherin & Lattemann, 2007: 6)

SL is a Massive Multiplayer Role Playing Game (MMOG) which needs to be downloaded onto a computer linked to the Internet. Users first need to create an avatar. These avatars become the representation of who the players want to be in SL. Players select their sex, age, sizes, hair color, clothes... and as their avatars take an orientation "course" on Orientation Island before being able to circulate freely in SL. The orientation period allows users to explore various aspects such as navigating (using arrow keys and the mouse), teleporting, using objects, flying, discovering avatars' display of emotions, etc.

SL is open-ended and needs to be constructed by Second Lifers (or residents) in order to function. SL features land and sky, day and night, trees, islands, sand, buildings, etc. There are even boutiques that sell fancy clothes and accessories for avatars. To construct parts of SL, residents can buy land, construction material, etc. by means of Linden dollars (around 240 Linden Dollars per $1U.S.D.). At the moment, there are over 100 institutions of education that have a space on SL and use it for teaching. There is a Campus on Second Life where educators can set up a course: http://tinyurkl.com/jnafl (direct link to the campus on Second Life). This is free for the first timers who want to explore the educational possibilities of SL. A course plan and objectives must be submitted to Second Life (http://www.simteach.com/wiki/) who decides twice a year who gets a free spot on the Campus.

Very little research has been done on the effects of the use of SL in education. Some of the potential benefits are detailed below. First and foremost, the main difference between SL and learning management systems like Moodle is that the students and teachers are virtually represented (through avatars), which renders the whole thing more real and gives a better sense of community. It also limits mere text-based communication. (Peterson, 2006: 81)

Immersion, experimental learning and engagement are some of the biggest motivators as far as teaching and learning are concerned and SL seems to be doing just that. (Dickey, 2005: 440)

All this can lead to constructivist-based learning (Vygotsky, 1978), whereby knowledge is a social activity rather than an individual cognitive process. In SL teachers and learners can make use of co-constructing activities such as problem-solving, and decision-making. (Dickey, 2005: 449)

What is more, as SL is full of opportunities for residents to communicate with each other (even strangers) through text messaging, chat, and even voice now, the main language competencies can be worked upon in SL: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Combined with these can be work on the development of savoir-faire such as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2005): collecting data (language forms, dialogues, aspects of intercultural communication), interviewing others and strangers, observation/participation, reflecting on identity, etc. For example, cities like London, New York, Barcelona, Moscow, Venice and Paris have their own locations on SL, and can be explored by students.

Before starting planning activities in SL, teachers should consider the following questions:

What are the course objectives in terms of language learning, intercultural awareness, savoir-faire...?

What types of activities could be used to implement these?

What do the students know about SL?

How do I assess the students' activities and learning?

What could go wrong?

What will the students need in SL? (e.g., buy a space in SL?)

When introducing SL to students, it is important that they spend a lot of time exploring possibilities offered by it, e.g., the appearance options of avatars. A questionnaire on these issues could be filled in and handed to the teacher. A map in SL allows users to select locations and be teleported to them. Also, a search function (by keywords) can help residents to find locations that may interest them. Once students are acquainted with SL, it is important to spend some time with them discussing the terms of use laid down by Linden (basically intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure, indecency, and disturbing the peace are forbidden), and various ethical issues (What am I allowed to do and not do? How do I respect others' privacy?). Tools for observation should also be presented and developed.

Here are some examples of activities that students can do in SL:

Observe people's behaviors in different SL locations (e.g., non-verbality which is possible in SL);

Converse with other residents on various topics;

Interview residents about their choice of appearance;

Compare reproductions of cities in SL and reality.

Peterson (2006: 86) also suggests: jigsaw tasks ("six pictures depicting a series of events were mixed up and divided into two task sheets containing three pictures"), Decision-making task ("the subjects [are] requested to discuss a variety of possible options in the selection of a gift"), etc.

Being in SL for the first time definitely feels like being on the moon. This is a whole new world to explore, with endless possibilities, especially for education. Of course, as with any innovation, some problems remain, such as the feeling of alienation that people can have at first. (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002)

The technological side can also be strenuous for both teachers and students as SL is updated on a weekly basis, which means that updates need to be uploaded on computers all the time. This can be difficult if computers are maintained by administrators. Besides, as SL is an open world, anyone and anything can happen: assault, intolerance, indecency, etc. Although this is monitored by Linden representatives in SL (users may also complain), teachers need to reflect on how to prepare students for such events.