



Reflections on Self and Presentation of Self in Second Life®, a Virtual Life Course Perspective in the Context of Language Teaching

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Abstract

Understanding the sociology of the Metaverse implies an awareness of current issues, controversies and trends in this area. One way of research is using one's own experience as a benchmark to evidence reflection on such experience, using sociological imagination, research findings and theoretical statements to discover whether they match the experience or not. The aim of this research was to attain deeper understanding of my own experience over the past seven years as a language teacher in Second Life® (SL) and the physical world by applying social knowledge and analysing the impact these findings have on language learning.

My experiences in 3D virtual worlds are mapped against those experienced in 2D and physical environments, comparing similarities and difference between interaction processes, community building and presentation of self.

Based on my knowledge and experience in numerous activities carried out as a language trainer, course designer, moderator, course participant and machinimatographer in virtual worlds the paper will highlight the impact the various stages and processes had on language teaching and learning.

My reflections include the highlights and pitfalls encountered from starting as a newbie to becoming a more sophisticated user of virtual environments from a sociological perspective, considering the influences on beliefs, values and language teaching during these developments.

1. Introduction: Digital Learning Experiences

Before getting involved with 3D virtual learning environments such as Second Life® (SL), I was one of the pioneers of e-learning in my professional field of work. I remember my first involvement with an online platform (FirstClass) during my online trainer qualification course and how excited I was about my first text chat, socialising with other participants. Throughout the course I observed, that from a large number of students originally registered, only a few stayed until the end of the course. I tried to find explanations for the huge dropout rate by analysing influencing factors and identified two key elements responsible for disconnection: Message overload, caused by too many contributions and the lack of responses to people's input from peers and tutors. By analysing what kind of input triggered reactions, I discovered that people who socialised and interacted in private chats or other social networks, developed a personal relationship and consequently supported one another by commenting on each other's ideas in the course forums. I also observed that people who had developed such social contacts appeared more confident in their contributions than others who did not socially interact [1]. In order to foster a sense of community and social presence I chose a design for my own online language training courses, which provided extra spaces for socialising, such as Skype, Facebook and other networks. Another key element in the course design was to work in small groups and encourage learners to take responsibilities by summarising and moderating discussions. It was remarkable to observe that those language learners perceived as shy in the physical classroom were more open in their online contributions and on occasion even took the lead, which they would not have done in a physical classroom [2]. It seemed that the virtual environment triggered a willingness to share more personal information [3] and as a result a more active participation and social interaction.

In summary, key factors of successful online learning are:
that learners

- perceive social presence
- gain a sense of belonging to the learning community
- are perceived as real life people in a physical world
- interact with real people through the computer and not with computers.

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2. Plunging into the Virtual World of Second Life® (SL)

My experience gained through 2D digital teaching and learning could well be applied to virtual learning in SL with regards to community building, social presence and interaction. I got involved in SL through some EU funded projects in which I took part as an observing participant. This included a training course for educators, linked to 2D (Moodle) and SL, two Italian courses for beginners and a Business English course. Though I enjoyed exploring SL on my own on occasion and loved the excitement of visiting new exotic destinations, I had nobody to share my experiences with outside the virtual classroom, and felt pretty lonely and uncomfortable at times when travelling through deserted places. As regards to social presence, the experiences gained in the language courses in-world were similar to those in a 2D learning environment. Pair- and group work helped to socialise with individuals in SL and resulted in an active engagement, mutual support and collaborative course work, which sometimes even led to friendship beyond the courses [3].

I felt very comfortable with my default avatar, *Letty Pienaar*, and its virtual representation. I used to dress *Letty* in the AVALON T-shirt indicating that I belonged to a project community. Even today my avatar sometimes wears this T-shirt to illustrate my affiliation with the AVALON project [4]. Drawing on Goffman's [5] performance theory, *Letty's* appearance could be identified as a symbolic use to convey the information of belonging to a specific or prestigious group.

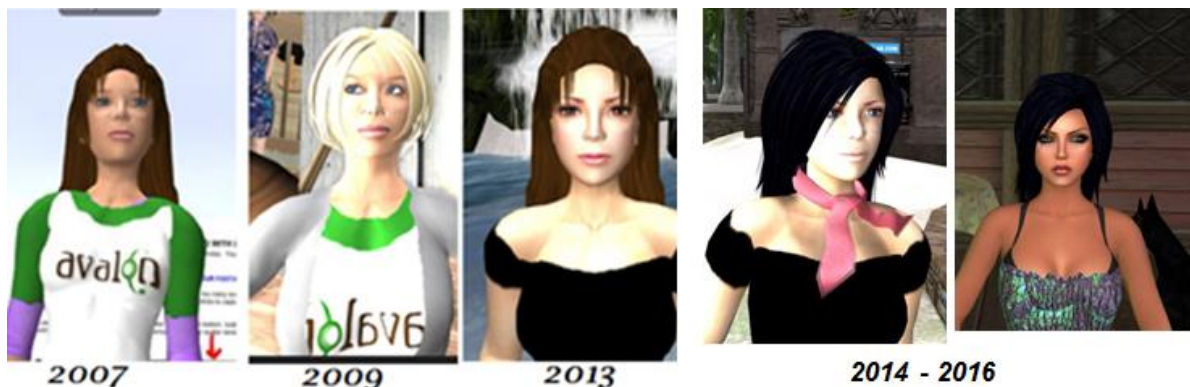


Fig.1. Different stages in *Letty's* virtual life

I only accidentally altered my avatar, when trying to change clothes before going to a project meeting with the result that *Letty* lost her trousers and was left with dotted blue underpants. The funny effect was that when putting the trousers back on again, the top disappeared. As the avatar acted as a virtual representation of myself, I felt I could not let the avatar attend a meeting topless or in dotted blue underpants. I ended up calling a friend who helped me to sort my avatar.

In reflection, the fact, that I was feeling embarrassed about my avatar being half dressed, which nearly made me miss the meeting, indicates that I imposed social conventions from the physical world on the virtual environment [6]. In other words, I became my avatar over time and associated and felt with it [7]. I wanted to make a good impression and present myself efficiently in a decent, positive way, and not make a fool of myself because of my embarrassing outfit. Even though it was only an avatar, I still felt the pressure of social norms and was worried to 'lose face' – or in this case my top – in front of everyone. That is why I asked my friend for help before presenting the new avatar to the group. This scenario can be explained through Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self-presentation [5]. He uses the dramaturgical model of a stage and differentiates between 'front stage' and 'back stage' performance. In Goffman's metaphor the 'front stage' performances consist of scenarios in which a person is presented publicly, in this case the avatar speaking in front of the project consortium, while 'back stage' performances take place in private spaces hidden from the audience, like when I asked my friend for help.

2.1 Changes in my Virtual Life Course Circle

The major change in my virtual life course began with my participation in MachinEVO [8], a five weeks workshop for language educators in SL, where I learned how to create Machinima (film recordings of 3D virtual experiences). Encouraged by winning a number of awards for my first Machinima, 'Why Second Life' [9], I have continued to create more than 180 Machinima of different genres since. These new activities have influenced my virtual life course and presentation of self to a great extent. I began experimenting with new outfits and avatars when realising what influence appearance in SL can have



on people's perception and confidence [5], though I always kept the same avatar and outfit during my language classes in order not to confuse the learners. For filming I often changed *Letty's* appearance or outfit, whereas I used a different avatar for demonstration purposes at conferences, for example.



Fig. 2. *Letty* in her roles as a princess, a grandmother, a child and a caretaker

'Back stage' my physical self manages *Letty's* performance as a prompter, using different timbres of voice, providing *Letty* with all the props and scenarios needed to make her look and perform the way I want her to. When observing *Letty* plunging into different characters I experienced how different roles can affect social behaviour [10]. When moving around with my grandmother avatar in SL, for example, people often turn away. At another occasion, when I appeared as a male avatar at a pirate themed party, looking like Johnny Depp in the film *Pirates of the Caribbean*, I suddenly found my avatar surrounded by female avatars clinging to me, which made me feel uncomfortable, experiencing the virtual as physically real emotions. I have encountered numerous occasions where virtually experienced situations became physically real, a phenomenon referred to as *Hyperreality* [11]. Baudrillard's concept of Hyperreality is a model of reality "generated from ideas" which he considers as "more real than reality" with the effect to break boundaries and transcend into the imaginary.

2.2 A turning point through my MA in Education in Virtual Worlds

Another key turning point in my virtual life course was my decision to study for an MA in Education in Virtual Worlds. I remember how excited I was when the first MA Module started and wondered what a university student would wear on such an occasion. I chose a casual outfit, a plain T-Shirt, sneakers and a pair of jeans. On arrival I found an exotic mix of avatars in the lecture theatre, one with butterfly wings, another with a sexy outfit, somebody was wearing a huge hat and another student appeared as a dragon. The male avatars looked fairly ordinary; some wore jeans or casual suits, others more formal outfits. I then realised how the social norms [10] for dress codes in the physical world had influenced my choice for my virtual appearance and my perception of others. I had wanted to present myself as being one amongst others, being part of a cohort of students. Now after having successfully finished my studies for the MA I am entering a new phase of my virtual life circle.

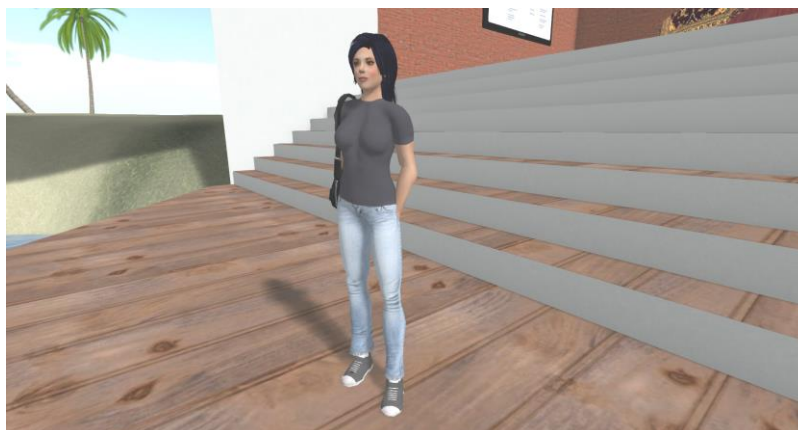


Fig.3 *Letty's* first day as a student at UWE



My experiences with 3D virtual environments as described before help me to understand learners' anxieties and insecurity when first being exposed to 3D virtual worlds in a language class. Reflecting my experience gained during my virtual life circle I am now able to support my language learners by creating 'back stage' and 'front stage' situations to help them find their personal comfort zones in this environment. This includes providing the learners with opportunities to socialise through collaborative project based group- and pair work.

3. Conclusion

My personal learning experiences gained by immersing in 3D virtual worlds described how a social climate can be created in 2D and 3D environments and how users can establish and maintain relationships in both environments. The narrative reflects the significance of social presence in both learning environments for successful interaction and learning outcomes. The pathways with all their transitions may be different for the individual language learner immersing in 3D learning environments, but the impact of social norms and social presence stay the same, as Goffman's dramaturgical model of self-presentation indicates. The self-reflection demonstrated the influence of appearance on perception and behaviour, which is important to bear in mind when teaching, as this can well be related to learners' actions and behaviour in a 3D virtual learning environment.

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