# "Let's meet in the grove!" – creating communities in virtual worlds

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# Abstract

The Virtual University of Edinburgh (VUE) in Second Life (SL) has become an integral part of several courses in the MSc e-learning, including the course in "Language, Culture and Communication in Online Learning". Participants met in SL on various occasions, and then used the transcripts of the meetings to consider the development of the community through analysis of the discourse. This presentation will share some of our findings and explore the language and interactions of students and tutors in virtual world discussions.

**Keywords:** virtual worlds; discourse analysis; text world theory; identity; virtual communities; virtual campus

# 1 Introduction – Second Life as a venue for teaching and learning in Higher Education

Second Life (SL) has become one of the most widely-used virtual worlds, and the university of Edinburgh has bought some "land" and created the Virtual University of Edinburgh (VUE). While studying a course in "Language, Culture and Communication in Online Learning" (LCC) participants were encouraged to meet virtually on several occasions in VUE, to have discussions about the course and to create dialogues which could be used for analysis of discourse. This presentation will share some of the experiences, and explore some aspects of language and interaction in virtual world discussions.

Second Life is one of the many virtual worlds that have been created and developed in recent years, but it is probably still one of the most popular. It is free to join, and when you sign up you create your own name (you must choose a "surname" from the list provided but the choice of first name is completely open). The world environment is created by the users, and the development of land requires some payment. There is therefore an economy for Second Life and there have even been some people who have given up "the day job" and have chosen to buy and trade in Second Life for a living. It has been estimated that over $1.5m is spent each day in Second Life, making it a very worthwhile project for the shareholders of Linden Labs, who own the concept.

I joined Second Life out of curiosity, and later discovered that there is land being developed by staff in the University of Edinburgh. Second Life is also used for business, entertainment, social networking, gaming, pornography, creativity. The VUE group is a virtual educational and research institute bringing together all those interested in the use of virtual worlds for teaching, research and outreach related to the University of Edinburgh. Within the land available for the university, we have an area called "Holyrood Park", which has been developed mainly by my colleague Fiona Littleton. The MSc E-learning staff regularly use this site as potential educational spaces, to explore the potential for e-learning and also to research the possible uses of virtual worlds in education. The LCC course is part of this programme, and the participants on the course have already had experience of working in Second Life and perhaps also some other virtual worlds; as part of the Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning course they explore the range of environments to evaluate their potential use for education (Twining, 2009).

In Holyrood Park we often meet in an area known as "the grove", which has a campfire and logs to "sit" on. There are several other "learning spaces" that have been developed; the freedom to be able to create an ideal space conducive to learning is one of the reasons for exploring the creation of different areas, such as the "garden of learning", a tent on the beach, and a cloud for meditation. Staff not in the School of Education have also developed areas which mimic real-life buildings and rooms; in the MSc e-learning there is a more pronounced effort to try to "think outside the box" and so creating what could be a standard classroom space with walls, chairs and tables is not generally considered.

# 2 Identifying the "worlds" and texts for research

When we decide to meet in Second Life (SL) for a discussion session we contact students on the course to find out what date and time would be suitable, or we arrange regular sessions in advance throughout the course. On the LCC course we have had either three or four sessions in Second Life. Some students are not able to attend, either through other commitments (the MSc e-learning is fully e-learning and so allows flexibility for participants; some choose this method of study because their own timetables would not permit regular class attendance) and the session is always considered to be an extra session and not an essential part of the course. However, the transcripts from the session are posted to the course online discussion areas so that all students on the course can benefit from the experience. At the beginning of the course all participants are asked to sign a research agreement, so that everyone is aware that transcripts could be used for research purposes. The LCC course is an introduction to analysis of language and the transcripts from the SL (as well as from discussion boards and chat rooms) are used to provide data for analysis as part of the course.

If we were to construct a diagram of the location of the texts created, we could identify the learning/teaching discourses that would be part of the LCC course, and there is also the SL discourses. At the point where these intersect we would position the SL course discussions:
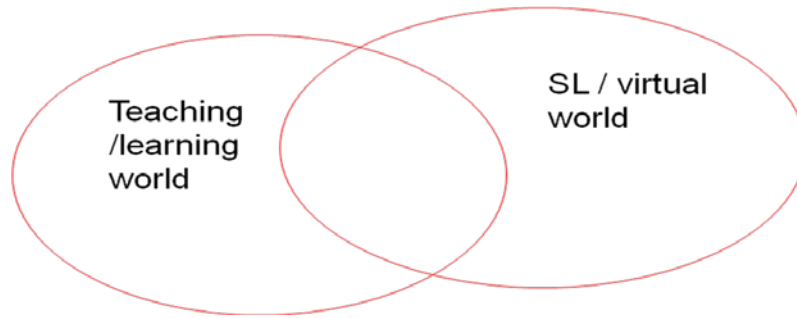
Figure 1: the discussion worlds

This does not, however, adequately explain the position of the participants as they can in fact participate on different levels while engaged in SL discussions. We could conceptualise their course discussions as part of a "discourse world" that would include the accepted practices of all the discourses that have become part of the course. It would be legitimate to argue for the existence of this kind of discourse world on the grounds of creating a discourse community. However, the same participants can engage in various ways in the SL environment one of which is the adoption of a particular persona/avatar as part of the course work. To put this into a diagram we could suggest:
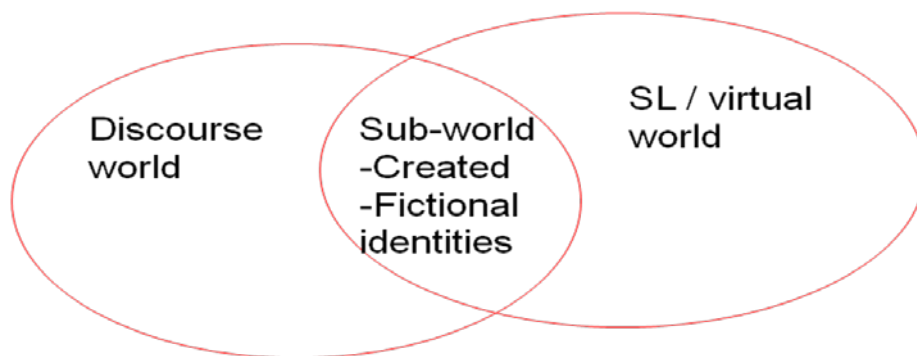


Figure 2: suggested discourse and participatory worlds

This is similar to the conceptualisation we have used on the course, where one of the objectives is to argue whether or not we create a discourse community. This also indicates an area that I will continue to develop: the application of text-world theory (Gavins, 2007) to the SL / virtual world context.

Researching SL discourse patterns is helped by the ease with which we can collect the transcripts of the discourse; while voice interface is possible we tend not to use this in the course discussions. This enables a wide range of research techniques related to using corpora, for example, both collecting texts and comparing them with other examples of similar discourses (Adolphs, 2006). Your avatar can "see" the immediate world and also the conversations that are going on within "earshot", and to contribute you type in the conversation line on screen.

Figure 3: screenshot showing the "view" and the conversation line for contributions

The texts can be analysed with familiar discourse analysis methods. The students on the course have been considering themes for research related to the social context of computer-mediated communication (CMC); the creation of community discourses; the forms of identity that are possible in a virtual world; ways of building group solidarity and support; what discourses are considered appropriate. These are areas that are currently being examined by a number of researchers (Nesson & Nesson, 2008, Salmon, 2009) .

In addition, a survey of typical ethnographic research topics and areas related to virtual worlds reveals two large "areas" of research: the "authenticity" of interactions in a virtual world; and the boundaries between "online" and "offline" identities (see Hine, 2000; Hine 2005; Jarmon et al, 2009; Pagnucci and Mauriello, 2008). In this presentation I will focus on three areas within these broad possibilities of research:

- The context and the co-constructors of text and context
- Issues of identity and politeness
- Creativity in texts

## 2.1 Constructing and co-constructing texts and contexts

One of the interesting features of engaging in discourse in SL is that the participants are actively constructing the texts but are also constructing the contexts. It is possible to make things appear, and to change shapes and forms. It is also possible to have more than one identified context. In the following example some of the participants refer to contexts outside the immediate discourse context:

> [9:59]  Watson Millar: Great - see you all in the messageboards!
> [9:59]  Jet Lavando: yes - best latte ever :)
> [9:59]   Cat Tiffany : :)
> [10:00]  Cat Tiffany is thinking it's time for dinner
> [10:00]  Watson Millar is Offline
> [10:00] Jet Lavando is figuring out where i parked
> [10:00]  Cat Tiffany : Jet is hilarious
> [10:01] Jet Lavando : bye all
> [10:01]  Cat Tiffany : Bye!
> [10:01]  Sasha Santiago shouts: bye

Extract 1: latte and cars

The "latte" that is described is fictional and only exists in the SL environment. The "dinner", however, is in the "real life" of the participant and not in the SL environment. There is reference to a further completely fictional idea: Jet refers to "where I parked", which does not exist in SL (the avatar is not looking for a car) and does not

exist in the "real life" of the student known as Jet in SL (he is sitting at home on his computer); the reference is to an analogy with coming to a tutorial meeting on a university campus where physical transportation would be required. The construction of these multiple contexts is problematic if we are using standard discourse analysis to explain how the participants are creating these texts. There is a strong possibility that text-world theory would be able to give a better account of the different worlds that the participants inhabit and create. I am currently reviewing the potential for text-world theory to provide this kind of account.

### 2.2 Identity and politeness

An examination of the texts produced by the SL discussion participants reveals a clear sense of building the group norms and creating ways to interact with each other that preserve a sense of individual identity. The students on the programme (on another course, not on LCC) have been encouraged to keep a log of their experiences, and they have noted:

> "One of the advantages of avatars is the increased sense of presence I think. It's different imagining the presence of your other classmates in a chat room compared to seeing their virtual representation in Second Life environment. … .The possibility of gestures and facial expressions as opposed to emoticons also contributes to more direct communication and to the feeling of stronger physical presence and also deeper sense of team spirit and collaboration."
>
> <div align="right">Extract 2: student weblog, October 2006</div>

and

> "I find particularly interesting the potential of role-play, of consciously experimenting with your avatar in ways that could prove invaluable for fields such as social sciences or just to explore issues of racism and inequality within the classroom. Changing age, sex, race can be thought provoking, revealing and can provide useful lessons"
>
> <div align="right">Extract 3: student weblog, October 2006</div>

It seems that in contrast to the minimal information given in discussion board topics about individual information, it is important for participants to be able to create an identity in SL. This is evidenced in the LCC discussions:

> [11:42] Cat Tiffany : Another convention different here - we all say hi to everyone as they turn
>  up - wouldn't do that in a f2f class
> [11:42] Cat Tiffany : (more polite?)
> [11:42]  Zadie Street: But we might nod or smile
> [11:42]  Cat Tiffany nods and smiles
> [11:42] Zadie Street : :-)
> [11:43] Cat Tiffany : Maybe it will change as we get more used to media like SL and learn to
>  put in actions i.e.
> [11:43]  Cat Tiffany waves hi to everyone
> [11:43]  Bubba Solero: I might if there were only 5 people in face-to-face
>
> <div align="right">Extract 4: nodding and smiling</div>

The discussion here suggests that the creation of group norms, and understanding the kinds of social practices that would be acceptable, are important issues. In fact, there is the suggestion that this is done more in the SL environment than would be normal in a face-to-face discussion meeting. The discussion of the "conventions" is curious as these participants are all familiar with Higher Education courses (many teach themselves). There is clearly some value in participating in a new context and environment to raise awareness of the conventions of meetings (whether face-to-face or email discussions or SL) and in this way to re-examine what is considered "normal" social practice in educational settings.

This defamiliarisation is valuable in examining an area of discourse that has been topical in discourse analysis for some time: politeness principles. The incident recorded in the following example demonstrates that there

is an understanding of body space, an appeal to the conventions of being polite, and expectations of reactions and actions from the participants:

> [9:00]  Barbara Baker: I am writing a piece about Second Life and higher education\
> [9:00]  Cat Tiffany: Now's not sucha great time - we have a class about to start. Can I recommend you get in touch with Sian Bayne, the MSc E-Learning Programme Director?
> [9:00]  Cat Tiffany : Not trying to be unfriendly! :)
> [9:01]  Barbara Baker : Is the class on SL?e class
> [9:01]  Cat Tiffany : Yes it is
> [9:01]  Barbara Baker : Can I attend?
> [9:01]  Slippy Brugges: hi!
> [9:01]  Cat Tiffany: It's our first class together - so I'm not sure that would be appropriate. Again, chat to Sian and you'll get an invite to a class I'm sure
> [9:02]  Barbara Baker : Do I need to talk to him in RL?
> [9:02]  Cat Tiffany: Hi Slippy. Barbara is a reporter, interested in HE and SL. I've suggested she contact Sian.
> [9:02]  Cat Tiffany: You can, Sian's often in SL too. Try her email sian.bayne@ed.ac.uk
> [9:02]  Slippy Brugges: Hi Barbara. Yes - it would be ideal for you to contact Sian
> [9:02]  Sasha Santiago: hello
> [9:03]  Slippy Brugges: hi
> [9:03]  Barbara Baker : OK - but I am on a deadlien - I have to write somethign tpday
> [9:03]  Cat Tiffany: Hi SashaSantiago (Wow that's ahrd to type!) :)
> [9:03]  Barbara Baker : So it wouldbe great to get some good material here
> [9:03]  Cat Tiffany: I'm sure she's still onine Barbara. Send her an email.
> [9:03]  Sasha Santiago : just call me Sasha
> [9:03]  Barbara Baker OK
> [9:03]  Cat Tiffany: Thanks Sasha!
> [9:03]  Barbara Baker : Thanks

<div align="right">Extract 5: gatecrasher</div>

The gatecrasher consistently ignored the subtle and also direct requests from Cat to leave the area; she continued to demand participation. In a real-life discussion this kind of situation would very rarely happen; the walls and doors containing the group would keep out intruders. In the SL spaces in VUE there are no such boundaries (although the person owning the land can, if desired, set up a wall so that only designated people can enter). In email discussion boards it would also be very unusual to have an intruder. The particular social situation encounter here is therefore unique in many ways. The participants have appealed to what could be considered normal behaviour patterns, and the discourse reflects the use of  modality (particularly "can") and vague language on the part of various participants to indicate politeness. Incidentally, the technique was not entirely successful as the intruder simply moved a little bit away and continued to listen to the conversation.

### 2.3 Creativity in texts

One further area that I have been investigating is the use of creative language. This can be seen in the examples already quoted (the construction of fictional worlds, for example). The creative elements in the discussions often have elements of humour:

> [9:19]  Sasha Santiago: I find the most intersting part is trying to explain to people who don't know what second life is
> [9:19]  Sasha Santiago: what we do here
> [9:19]  Slippy Brugges: do you think this adds a dimension
> [9:19]  Sasha Santiago: I think there's the 'game player' element
> [9:19]  Slippy Brugges: apart from watching clara drinking tea
> [9:20]  Jet Lavando: what's the 'game player' element?
> [9:20]  Cat Tiffany: Latte! :) Anyone want one? or I've got champagne!
> [9:20]  Sasha Santiago: but the fact that we have a physical presence to concentrate on makes a difference
> [9:20]  Sasha Santiago: champagne - would be lovely

[9:20] Sasha Santiago: an canapes?
[9:20] Cat Tiffany: I think there's a different turn taking approach than in Skype too
[9:20] Slippy Brugges: a latte would be nice
[9:20] Jet Lavando: i've got to drive later
[9:20] Cat Tiffany: Uno momento por favoure Sasha as I work out how to send it to you
[9:20] Cat Tiffany: he heh Jet
[9:20] Sasha Santiago: indeed
[9:21] Sasha Santiago accepted your inventory offer.

*Extract 6: canapes*

The handing out of (fictional) alcoholic drinks is contrasted with the statement by Jet "I've got to drive later". The humour has been created here by using two methods: there is reference to fictional existence that the participants are all co-creating; and this also has elements of incongruity, an important feature of developing humour (Simpson, 2003). The creation of the champagne has an anarchic side: one would not normally hand out champagne in a course tutorial. The participants join in this fictional creation, and Jet refers to this at one level when he refuses on the grounds that he has to drive later. The participants do not know, however, if this statement is true or not: perhaps Jet really does (in real life) have to drive later. While all participants have been invited to react to this statement, he is the only one who is actually able to verify the truth of the statement. He is, in text-world theory, creating an enactor-accessible world.

The use of humour in discussions has an important part to play in the creation of group norms and practices (Shatz & Loschiavo, 2006) and the acceptance of particular forms of humour can help to create social cohesion (North, 2007).

## 3 Conclusion

It is not possible or even advisable for all Higher Education courses to consider group discussions and tutorials in an environment like SL. However, the experience can be valuable for research purposes, and can also illuminate our understanding of features of discourse by a process of defamiliarisation – revisiting familiar concepts and methodologies in an unfamiliar setting. There is also the potential to explore the ways in which both readers and writers create a joint fictional world. As a theoretical construct, text-world theory would seem to offer scope to bring together the elements of analysis of discourse, creation of contexts, and fictianl constructs in a way that will illuminate our understanding of the participation of both readers and writers.

The brief exploration I have done in the creativity and humour in the SL texts has revealed interesting areas for further study. The use of humour as a means of social cohesion in SL discussions is something that I would like to pursue further.

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