Mediating Media Studies – Stimulating Critical Awareness in a Virtual Environment

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Abstract:

Second Life has become increasingly popular with educators and educational institutions, because of the educational possibilities it seems to offer. While there has been a lot of hype and academic publications about educational design or the theoretical framing of teaching in virtual environments, there have been few publications focussing on actual teaching and learning experiences of lecturers and students in Higher Education institutions. This article uses practical examples from an introductory course on Media studies taught at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to demonstrate that even simple tasks in Second Life can be used to great effect if properly contextualised into the course being taught. High levels of technical skills, or extraordinary educational designs are less important to employing Second Life successfully in a Higher Education environment, than a proper evaluation of student learning outcomes, and teaching goals.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Educational involvement in the 3D online world "Second Life" has become fashionable (see e.g. SimTeach, 2009; the recent special issues of the Journal for Virtual Worlds Research – Spence, 2009; or the just published issue of the British Journal of Educational Technology – e.g. Salmon, 2009). Increasing numbers of educational institutions have established a presence in Second Life, and educational activities range from Library displays to hospital simulations, from walks through bodies to physics experiments (see e.g. Kamel Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007; JSMillerRN, 2009, or for the UK, the snapshot by Kirriemuir, 2009). While academics and their institutions in North America and Europe are heavily involved in Second Life, though, Asian institutions have largely remained sceptical of this form of 'virtual education'. When the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) and the School of Design (SD) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University began to experiment with the potential of Second Life early in 2007, they were unable to find any other Asian universities or individual academics from these universities in the virtual world.

Additionally, they found themselves in a very different situation from many of the educators describing their wonderful experiences in Second Life. Firstly, Hong Kong universities are not focussing on distance education, as academic programmes are rarely offered to people not residing in Hong Kong, and the distances within the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong are never too great for student not to travel to the university to take their classes on campus. Secondly, in Hong Kong, just as in most Asian countries, society and the individual learner place great value on 'being in the classroom' to receive education in a traditional manner, and attempts to teach students using new technologies or new teaching formats usually meet with great resistance. Any educational activities involving Second Life therefore had to be part of a blended learning environment, where the virtual teaching was demonstrably providing 'added value' to the teaching and learning in the physical world.

Despite the stunning educational designs and the breath-taking examples of technological possibilities in Second Life, however, academic discussions of actual teaching and learning practices and their results are hard to find. Academic researchers have published extensively about the potential of Second Life, but provided less insight into actual effects of such teaching and learning. Salmon (2009) discusses the potential future of Second Life in learning, but refers to

actual teaching and learning only in a short quote from Bayne's paper (2009, p. 533), while concluding that Second Life is "*the complex marriage of the technological application with the challenging pedagogical drivers that results in appropriate support and learning design*." (p. 535f)

Twining (2009) also explores the potential of Second Life within education, but provides little data on the teaching and learning of students in educational contexts, while concluding "*that virtual worlds seemed to be a good vehicle for providing people with 'lived experiences' of radically different models of education*". The frame of the academic discourse in the UK, and in North America, has so far emphasised the goals of educators and of educational institutions, and a need to reform them within their respective political contexts. Research and publications have largely focussed on the potential for new educational approaches, new techniques, new learning designs, and less on the benefits Second Life may or may not have in teaching and learning (see also Warburton, 2009, p. 422 who complains about having to teach students how to use the Second Life software, or Wheeler, 2009, p. 433 who states that one of the goals of his involvement with Second Life is "*putting the University of Leicester on the e-learning map.*")

The focus of many educational sites in Second Life seems to be the creativity of the lecturer or educational support staff, rather than the support of teaching and learning activities involving students dealing with educational challenges in the physical world or in blended learning environments. While the academic literature is aware of many of the possibilities virtual worlds offer their users in general (see e.g. Zhu, Wang, & Jia, 2007; Childress & Braswell, 2006; as well as Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2007), and educational designers in particular (e.g. Kay, & FitzGerald, 2009; Kemp, 2008; or the educational mailing list at Lester, 2009), there has been a lack of published literature on the usefulness of virtual worlds in meeting pre-existing educational targets. Virtual Worlds allow academics to teach new topics in new and interesting ways, but how useful are they in meeting the curriculum requirements of existing topics and educational goals in learning environments that measure student accomplishments against a fixed list of intended academic outcomes? Powerpoint has become a success in the academic world, not because academics have all started teaching courses on the visualization of educational contents, but because it can be used with little initial training to make the structures of a lecture explicit, and because it offers an easy way to summarise the main points a lecturer is trying to make (see for similar points Van Eck, 2006, p. 16-18; Bell, 2009; or Omale, Hung, Luetkehans, & Cooke-Plagwitz, 2009).

Virtual worlds, such as Second Life, OpenSim, or even World of Warcraft, are very valuable venues for educational activities, and the articles by Salmon, Twining, Warburton, Wheeler, and many others are highly valuable as pointers towards necessary reforms of the educational system. For the efforts of introducing Second Life at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University or other educational institutions bound by strict teaching and learning regulations, though, these approaches to the discussion are not very helpful. The question remains, whether Second Life is worth the investment in time and money for courses primarily set in the physical world. If all the students on a course are on campus, and the course is an introductory course for Media, or for Urban and Popular Culture Studies (or indeed any other course) following a set curriculum, then the question that needs answering is, whether Second Life is contributing to student learning, or providing 'only' an added value, or represents just a motivational gimmick to engage the students.

This article argues that virtual worlds can be useful to help students achieve pre-set educational goals and objectives, if the activities in the virtual world are sufficiently contextualised and integrated into the offline course (see also Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo, & Prosser, 2008). Using a number of examples from a Media Studies course taught to undergraduate students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, this article shows that Second Life offers many starting points for academic learning that do not require far-reaching reforms of the educational system. Second Life can be used as a valuable addition to a blended learning environment, and provide benefits to students that would be hard to duplicate in the physical world. In keeping with this introduction, the article will begin by outlining the objectives of the Media Studies course, and specifying what challenges were to be met with tutorials held in Second Life, before discussing the educational activities that took place.

2. Teaching Media Studies at the HK Polytechnic University

2.1 Course Background and Requirements

The course "Media Studies and Everyday Life" is one of the General Education Courses on offer at the HK Polytechnic University. Students have to take two General Education Courses outside their own department during the course of their degree programme to ensure a more rounded education. The course assumes no prior knowledge of the subject and is delivered as a 1+1 (one lecture plus one round of small-group tutorials per week) over the 15 weeks of a term.

The aim of the course is to introduce students to basic media theories and concepts, and to stimulate a more critical approach to media consumption in them. Additionally, the course

attempts to encourage the students, most of whom have never left Hong Kong for any extended period of time, to engage critically with the media context in Hong Kong by using media from other countries, e.g. UK, USA, China as comparison.

For students, there are mainly two desired outcomes, one is the acquisition of knowledge about Media Studies theories, concepts, and approaches, the other an intellectual and attitudinal shift towards a more critical engagement with the media. The former can be transmitted, deepened and practiced through lectures, assigned readings, graded papers, etc. The critical engagement with media, though, requires the active participation of the student in its learning and application, as it aims to shift the student's perspective of the media surrounding him/her in his/her daily life (see e.g. Tsui, 2002, Greenlaw, & DeLoach, 2003; Van Gelder, 2005).

To achieve such active participation of the student, lectures are not the ideal venues. The student numbers involved are too large, the time too limited, the lecture theatre not set up for an interactive teaching and learning session, and the amount of content that needs to be covered is too voluminous for much student input. Consequently, the acquisition of greater criticality by the students has to happen during student tutorials, when smaller groups of students can be encouraged to focus on some of the points raised during the lecture and to develop them through debates in a more interactive environment.

The interactive environment does not guarantee the acquisition of a critical perspective, though, especially in an Asian setting, where many tutorials turn into mere question and answer sessions. The students ask for clarification of points in the lecture, or the lecturer asks questions that the students answer to show they have understood the lecture (see e.g. Barron, 2002; Wang, 2006).

In order to shift the students' perspective it is necessary to encourage them to ask **critical** questions, and to become critical of different forms of presentations and representations. This requires an alienation of the students from presentations they are used to, either by placing them in a new, and different media environment, or through a critical comparison of different representations of the same content (Ruben,1999, p. 499).

Within the constraints of a university programme it is rarely possible for a lecturer to place students in an entirely new environment, unless students are taken on study trips, or on work placements or internships. As a result, the preferred method of teaching critical awareness, is the exposure of students to comparisons of similar contents in different representations. The arrival of virtual worlds, though, changed the situation, and enabled lecturers to substitute physical

environments with 'virtual' ones, thus allowing students to be placed in a new setting without the need for expensive field trips.

2.2 Media Studies in a Virtual World

The Media Studies course was chosen as a frame for the incorporation of Second Life into a Blended Learning programme, as the virtuality of Second Life could then be problematised to further the goals of the Media Studies course. The choice of this particular course was not predicated upon assumed cognitive benefits of Second Life for students, but rather on the suitability of exploring a simulated world using the Postmodern approaches contemporary Media Studies employs.

During the 1980s and early '90s, educationalists debated the introduction of literacy into preliterate societies and the consequences this would have for the newly literate individuals' cognitive abilities. Jack Goody (1977 and 1986) argued for definite cognitive consequences of the introduction of the technology of literacy, while Brian Street (1984 and 1993) and others suggested that cognitive consequences, and the meaning of literacy itself, depended on the context of its introduction into people's lives. Goody's arguments were largely theoretical constructs based upon his interpretation of European history, while Street's arguments were presented with a large variety of case studies from different societies in the developing world. Although Goody's arguments were based on an in-depth analysis of European history, and theoretically sound, Street's approach was ultimately more helpful for people working on literacy or early education projects around the world. Within debates of virtual worlds in education, the current emphasis on the cognitive benefits of virtualisation (technology) as a reason and means to change education bears a striking similarity to Goody's arguments about the inherent cognitive benefits of literacy as a new technology.

Given the concerns raised in the introduction to this paper about the lack of empirical data on the educational or cognitive effects of virtual worlds in many of the papers published about Second Life, a certain amount of scepticism seems appropriate towards claims of inherent cognitive benefits of using Second Life or any other simulations or virtual worlds in education. Following Street's argument, the proper embedding of a simulation in a blended learning context can improve student learning. While it would be impossible to deny that simulations and virtual worlds do have some impact on teaching, there is not enough evidence, yet, to confirm a definite cognitive impact independent of embedding and context. To put it differently, a bad teacher won't

become a good teacher merely because he/she uses blended learning, and a good teacher is still a good teacher when limited to the use of chalk on a blackboard.

Within the context of a Media Studies course attempting to engage "the Media" critically using postmodernist and poststructuralist theories, the similarity of Second Life to other forms of animation consumed by students, was used to embed Second Life in a negative frame of reference. Students began the course with a negative attitude towards the benefits of Second Life for their learning ("This is just a game"). Once they had been exposed to the theories of Baudrillard on simulation, Derrida on difference and deconstruction, Lyotard on deconstruction of meta-narratives, and Foucault on power and knowledge, the exercises chosen for tutorials encouraged them to remain critical of the virtual environment of Second Life, but from a Media Studies perspective, i.e. to develop a 'virtual criticality' that could then be extended and reapplied to the physical world. The similarity of Second Life to the physical world was good enough to allow parallels to be drawn between phenomena observed and discussed in the virtual world and the media that students encounter in their daily lives. Second Life was, however, close enough to 3D video games that students initially felt it was an inappropriate venue for educational activities. This attitude could then be transformed into a media-critical distance from the virtual world that enabled students to discuss Second Life and their avatars with detachment, i.e. to get closer to Derrida's concept of "différance"(1982).

3. Ideas that work - Virtual Criticality

3.1 Avatar Design and questions of identity
Except for a few exchange students, the students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University are almost exclusively East Asians, mostly of Chinese origins. Consequently, the students are all of very similar height and body-build, similar skin-tones, hair colour, etc., which does not, however carry over into Second Life.

At the beginning of the term, after an introduction to Second Life and its software, as well as to several places in Second Life that offer skin, hair, clothing, accessories, etc. for free, students are asked to work on their avatars with the express purpose of creating an online representation of themselves. This task is given after a lecture on representation and the messages representational choices send out, and students are asked to submit a screen capture of their avatar together with a paragraph explaining why and how they made the design choices for their avatars.

The lecture provides students with a simplified overview over theoretical approaches to representation, before explaining postmodernist notions of individuals who constantly engage in representations and projections of new identities, created to fit specific situations. Using Baudrillard's ideas of simulation, hyperreality, and the disappearance of the real, students are introduced to the concept that the 'true self' of individuals is often forgotten, in favour of the roles they play, so that when asked who they are, individuals often produce references to situations or context in which the individual becomes identifiable through the roles they assume, e.g. "I am a student", "I am from Hong Kong", "I am Chinese". The question "Who are you", has become almost unanswerable without the use of such situational referents.

In designing and outfitting their avatars, students are encouraged to consciously decide on the image they want to project of themselves within this new (virtual) environment. The virtual world offers them the possibility of choosing a role for themselves, and to design their avatar's body and appearance to match the chosen role. Through tutorial discussions, they are able to reflect upon the link between the representation chosen and the message it conveys, which provides a useful starting point for later topics in the Media Studies course.

The choices students made for their avatars proved very interesting, and demonstrated a desire among the students to differentiate themselves from their peers. None of the students opted for an Asian looking avatar, and while the majority preferred tall avatars, there was a significant number of students choosing short avatars. The most surprising feature of many avatars was the dark skin colour chosen by students, despite Asian preferences for 'whiter' skin tones. In their explanatory paragraphs, many students demonstrated that they had chosen their Second Life appearance after much consideration, and were making conscious representational choices in the design of their avatars:

> "*I'm a boy in first life and always curious about a lady's life, so I try to be a female in second life. When it comes to the avatar, I try to make it charming […].As for the clothes, […] I try to make friends with some women whom I think good-looking and consult them*."

> "*Light brown hair is chosen because I like people with this hair colour. My avatar wears black shirt and black trousers because people who wear black clothes can make them look more slim. In my opinion, yellow and black is a perfect match which can make people look smarter, as a result, a jacket with yellow in colour is chosen. Since I love girls who have two sides, that's passive and active, therefore on the one hand, long hair is chosen to make it looks girlish; on*

the other hand, I would like to make my avatar more muscular because it looks healthier. All in all, my avatar isn't sexy or stylish, it is because I want to make it look more reliable."

"*1. My avatar wears watch because I am punctual.*

2. My avatar looks gentle and educated just like me.

3. My avatar has red hair but wear black clothes because I am in fact passionate but I look rather cool.

4. My avatar wears a pair of high-heeled shoes because I would like to be taller.

5. My avatar has wings because I want to be free and look around the world.

6. This photo is taken in a beach because I like sunshine."

"*I gave my avatar a look like a rich and elegant lady. I made the avatar this look because I think that a lady's packaging is very important. And people usually makes friends or give opportunities for a person who dress up lovely and in a nicely way. That's why I create my avatar in such a way that can attract others to get to know me.*"

The representational choices students made for their avatars and the reasons they gave for their choices were employed as examples for the following week's lecture on Media and Identity. The examples focused on the direct links students had mentioned between specific representational features of their avatars and the meaning they were trying to convey, e.g. "long hair" and "girlish", "wings" and "free", "elegant looks" and "making friends". They were used alongside examples from Facebook, Chat software (ICQ, MSN, etc.), blogs, and movies to demonstrate how different forms of media facilitate the creation, adaptation, and destruction of roles assumed by individuals, and served as further examples for students of the application of the theories of Baudrillard about hyperreality and the disappearance of the real.

3.2 China - Representation of Symbols

The idea of 'China' is something rarely questioned among Hong Kong students. It includes traditional buildings, traditional clothing, furniture, art, architecture, etc. as well as traditional music, martial arts, tea, etc. To encourage students to question their implicit beliefs in the 'truth' of such representations of China, they visited several sites in Second Life that purported to portray 'China', and were asked to discuss the differences between the representations. In a short written task, students were asked which of these representations, if any, could be called a 'better' representation of China, and why.

While a similar exercise could be organised with pictures or videos, Second Life offered several benefits over combinations of pictures and videos. Firstly, the density and diversity of (moving) images is greater in Second Life, which means that students are exposed to a more extensive and intensive representation than could easily be put together in the physical world. Secondly, the representations in a single area in Second Life are controlled by one person or group of people through the 'ownership' of the virtual space, which allows for an easier interpretation and analysis by the students, as they are not faced with multiple representations from different sources. Thirdly, the lecturer does not have to provide the students with large numbers of electronic files for students to revisit the representations discussed during lectures or tutorials, as students are able to log in and re-visit the spaces in Second Life on their own as often as they want.

Two extremes were presented to the students, the first being a place called "Chinatown" which contains many references to traditional Chinese culture, from religion to martial arts, from a flying dragon to the typical hills, from traditional-style houses to Chinese opera performances. The second place is a construction by the artist Cao Fei, with the provocative title "RMB City" (RMB = Renminbi, China's official currency).

> "*RMB City is an online art community in the virtual world of Second Life. This project is an experiment exploring the creative relationship between real and virtual space, and is a reflection of China's urban and cultural explosion.*" (Cao, 2009)

RMB City contains iconic buildings like the Beijing Olympic Stadium ("Bird's Nest"), the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen), the new towers of China's Central Television, Shanghai's Pearl Tower, and Hong Kong's Bank of China building. It also displays a flying Panda, a large bicycle wheel, a bottle of Chinese alcoholic spirits ("Baijiu"), and the pollution arising from a large factory. When confronted with these images, especially after just having 'visited' the tranquil and idyllic "Chinatown", the majority of students express shock and negative feelings about this portrayal of China. During their write-up, however, many started reflecting on notions of representation and symbolism, and started appreciating "RMB City" as a 'better' reflection of 'modern' China, thus questioning their own presuppositions about the meaning and typical representations of China. The contrasts between 'old' / 'traditional' and 'new' / 'modern', as well as the political symbolism of the inclusion of images from Hong Kong and Macau in RMB city provided easy starting points for further discussion in the tutorials:

> "*'China Town' shows a […] living style in Beijing. […] It also tells me about the long history and rich culture of China. Beijing traditional courtyard also stands for that Chinese people are*

simple and honest. […] However, 'RMB' is much more the same with the real China. The street, the road, the building are all reflect the real world. Not the art or intelligence of China, ' RMB' city tells me about the state of real life in modern China."

"*China Town told me the traditional Chinese culture […], the classic design and decoration of houses, Wu Dang Kung Fu and the theory of Confucius […], also ancient costumes which Chinese wore in the past.*
RMB City showed me that Hong Kong and Macau are also a part of China, as some HK and Macau well known buildings are located in RMB City. It also demonstrated the real environment of China like the foot massage shops, local markets, factories."

"*I thought RMB city represents the new image of China. […] RMB city shows the young, and fresh side of China. Compared with the traditional [China Town], containing Kung Fu, and traditional houses, RMB city is more attractive to me.*"

3.3 Community - Going to a virtual pub

In Hong Kong, similar to other cities in Asia, the concept of a "bar" or "pub" is closely connected with European or American culture. Most Asians prefer to meet at a restaurant, and to consume alcoholic drinks while also eating a meal, while bars carry many negative connotations and are closely associated with ideas of drunkenness and disorder. Going to a bar in Second Life, seemed pointless to most of the students, as an avatar could not 'drink' anything, and neither could the computer user.

When taken to the Blarney Stone in the virtual city of Dublin in Second Life, students expressed surprise at encountering large numbers of people in the Irish pub, who seemed to know each other, and who often were deep in conversation. They were impressed with the level of detail in the creation of the pub, e.g. bar stools, Irish music, virtual pints of beer, a dart board, etc. and in every group of students who were taken there, one or two students asked whether the people in the bar were also students, whose teachers required them to be there.

The discussions in the tutorials often began with this question, and led to reflections on the notions of virtual or media communities, shared identities, social networking, etc. While many students still expressed doubts over the usefulness of a virtual pub at the end of the tutorial, a number of students became intrigued enough later to return to the pub to interact with the people there, to investigate their motivations for being there.

3.4 News Broadcasting and Values

While many consumers of media get critical of entertainment shows on television, they still assume that 'the news' is 'the news'. Despite differences in the presentation and content of news shows on different channels, news programmes are often still seen as mere transmitter of 'the truth' to all audiences, in particular by students in Hong Kong.

Combining it with a lecture on media and ownership, and the effects of different types of owners on media, one set of tutorials was organised around visits to the Second Life sites of Reuters, CNN, and Sky News. The three news organisations present themselves very differently in Second Life, which provides a very useful example for students to study. CNN chose an outdoor, park-like look, while Reuters looks like a corporate conference center, and Sky News built a virtual TV studio. During the tutorial, students are asked to discuss the differences in self-representation, and in the transmission of 'news' on these three sites. The intended result of the discussions are predictions by the students as to the kinds of customers these three sites target and what this targeting says about the news organisations and their opinion of Second Life in particular, and about their news reporting in general:

> "*In Second life, Reuters is represented as a place to do business with modern buildings built out of concrete and steel. However for CNN, there are swimming pools, beach, colour umbrellas, which are outdoor facilities and attractive to young people. Those representations have nothing to do with the real life situation but reflect the creators' impression to those media organizations through the platform of another media-Second Life, which can also serve as examples explaining the meaning of representation.*"

> "*In second life, CNN, which is a media organization in the USA, was created as a beautiful garden. There are lots of spaces in that land with plenty of flowers and trees. It seems that the creator of that land want to present that CNN is a company with spaces that it allows people to develop their business with freedom. […] However, it may not the real image of CNN. It is just the opinion or feeling of the creator, or even it is just my personal opinion. So, the process of delivering the message to me from the creator is called representation.*"

> "*In second life, there are many news organisations […], however, their representation vary a lot in second life. […] For example, Sky News represents itself as a studio. There are lots of cameras and computers. Visitors may feel that they entered the production studio of Sky News. On the other hand, CNN's environment in second life looks like a recreational place. There are many open areas and an outdoor plaza. [The] two news organisations have two*

very different representations in second life. It shows that two news organizations would like to project different images to the users in second life. The reason may be that those two organisations consider two different groups of people as the visitors of second life. Sky News may think that the visitors are probably the one who interested in media production and therefore represents itself as studio. CNN may think that most of the visitors in second life are young people."

As the student comments show, the visits to the three news organisations in Second Life served to raise the awareness of students that representations convey messages beyond the explicit statements made by their owners. Representational choices can be and are interpreted by recipients or audiences, and influence message reception. The students preferred the CNN site to those of Reuters and Sky News, and were able to analyse this preference. Within the Media Studies course this was used together with examples from personal and company blogs and websites, as well as Facebook profiles to discuss audience reactions, ethical uses of Media (e.g. Facebook profiles or Second Life avatars in hiring exercises), and the effects of representational choices on specific media messages.

3.5 Positionality and Place - Building cities in Second Life

Despite often repeated claims that Hong Kong is "Asia's World City", students in Hong Kong tend to be very insular, and most have rarely, if ever, left Hong Kong, and will often not do so even after graduating from university. Except for short business trips or package holidays, the vast majority of people in Hong Kong never leaves Hong Kong.

Second Life therefore presents a unique opportunity for many students to 'leave' Hong Kong at least within a virtual environment, and to 'see the world'. While not on a par with trips in the physical world, the arguments outlined in 3.2 still hold. The density and diversity of (moving) images produced to create simulations of specific cities from the physical world within Second Life, allows students to evaluate the representations as they would evaluate game scenarios in a 3D game. The claim of the virtual cities' builders that they are representations of cities in the physical world merely serves to validate the representation with the students, similar to the way documentaries are accepted as 'true' representations of 'reality', because viewers see a "*linkage between documentary and the historical world*" (Nichols, 1991, p. IX). During a series of tutorials, a number of virtual cities are visited with the students, and they are asked to discuss the features of the representations chosen as symbols for the cities. Additionally, students discuss the motivation

of the Second Life users who have constructed these virtual cities and who maintain them through their time and money.

In a tutorial towards the end of the course, students visit the island of Hong Kong, which leads to a discussion of the differences in the representation of Hong Kong to the other virtual cities. Hong Kong in Second Life only contains some traditional Chinese houses, and presents itself instead as a well-planned, and very tranquil park, mostly devoid of people. None of the iconic features of Hong Kong in the physical world are depicted in the virtual world. In contrast, other cities in Second Life have been constructed with clear reference to their physical referents. Paris in Second Life contains an Eiffel Tower, a Moulin Rouge, an Arc de Triomphe, an Obelisk, etc., while Moscow displays a large 'Red Square', complete with Lenin's Mausoleum, St. Basil's Basilica, the Kremlin, and the GUM department store. Virtual Dublin displays Christ Church Cathedral, the Irish Houses of Parliament, the river Liffey, and several Irish pubs, etc.

Students usually conclude that while other cities in Second Life have been built to reflect the physical world, Hong Kong in Second Life has been built as a dream of what the physical world could or should be like. This discussion is continued during the following weeks in both lectures and tutorials to include notions of 'face', and how representations can be used to improve on the 'physical', e.g. in retouched photos, in documentaries, in (auto-)biographies, advertising, etc. Discussions on representation and 'truth', or the limits of representation (What is a 'true' representation of a 'real' person, place, etc.) lead to a look at issues of identity, space, and image-building, which allows for a pulling together of many of the topics covered in the lecture series, and their connection with simple examples from the virtual places students visit, as this excerpt of the Second Life logs from a chat during one tutorial shows:

> "*[19:18] Lecturer: Why is HK a garden and Paris like the real city?*
>
> *[19:18] Student A: thinking*
>
> *[19:18] Student B: cos hk is very small*
>
> *[19:19] Lecturer: HK has 7 million people living in it...*
>
> *[19:19] Lecturer: Paris in SL shows you a lot of the beautiful parts of Paris*
>
> *[19:19] Student C: because the real HK is so crowded*
>
> *[19:19] Student C: they would like to have a more peaceful place*
>
> *[19:19] Student D: just like what we talk about last time--the designers like the real Paris but think HK has to change into a peaceful place*
>
> *[19:19] Student A: because the creator thinks HK people need to relax*

[19:20] Student E: I agree~

[19:20] Lecturer: So what kind of people would go to the SL HK?

[19:20] Student F: maybe people who are very stressful in their life

[19:20] Student A: people under pressure

[19:20] Student G: people who want to relax

[19:20] Student H: People who need to relax

[19:20] Student K: the people who stressful and want to relax

[19:20] Student B: someone who want a relax city trip"

3.6 Power and Communication - The presence of the educator

Beyond making use of features of the simulated virtual world, it has also proved to be very effective to discuss classroom power relations through observations of student interactions during class. Given the relatively high computing requirements of Second Life, and university rules regarding the presence of the lecturer in the classroom, a computer lab had to be arranged for the tutorials, and the lecturer was expected to 'teach' students in person inside the computer lab.

This has proved an advantage for the first few weeks during which students are still getting to grips with the virtual environment. It allowed the lecturer overtly to guide students 'into' the virtual environment, instead of expecting them to adapt to it by themselves.

During the later part of the term, the lecturer changed his position in the classroom, by first staying in his office, interacting with the students in Second Life only, while an assistant was in the classroom with the students, and later by sitting at the back of the classroom, again only interacting with the students in Second Life.

The effect of these position changes was to 'free' students to start 'talking', i.e. chatting during tutorials. Even with the lecturer inside the room, his position at the back of the room, as 'one of them' negated most of the power differential and removed the danger of embarrassment through the quasi-anonymity of the virtual world. This was effective mostly because the lack of headsets forced a restriction of the interactions to typed conversations using the Second Life chat interface, which is similar enough to MSN, or ICQ for the students not to find it difficult to use. The 3D environment in Second Life provided the advantage, though, that the tutorials were not restricted to verbal exchanges. Instead, it was possible to have an entire tutorials through one single piece of software by allowing for 'field trips' or tasks that provided students with additional input.

Later in the term, when students started becoming more independent and began exploring Second Life on their own (Richardson & Newby, 2006, p. 32), this lead to a discussion on power relations in the classroom, and the mediation of power, as well as the 'power' of a chat programme to influence the level of discussions in the classroom. These debates were set in the context of Postmodernist debates on power, positionality, and the panopticon , as discussed by Michel Foucault (1995) as the group's perception of the changing status of the lecturer provided a good example for both relative positions of power, as well as for the shaping of perceptions of power through the use of Media. When asked to evaluate the 'virtual' tutorials, students were very positive about the changing position of the lecturer, using a variety of approaches to explain the changes in their behaviour, and in the relationship between lecturer and students:

"*I think the virtual tutorial is a very interesting experience. I have never communicated with a group of people in a tutorial in this way: we are talking with each other in words, just like MSN, but with our presentation.*"

"*In the real class, some students may not be willing to answer questions perhaps because of shyness or some other reasons. In the virtual tutorial, students do not know who is speaking and no one knows I am talking. This gives a chance to students who are shy to express their opinions.*"

"*In the discussion in second life, students are more free to talk and say something. Thinking, typing and chatting will stimulate students' learning passion. Third, students will have more chances to communicate with teachers, and they can see clearly what the teacher have said and what other students have said. These will result in a better learning outcome.*"

"*All of us tended to feel free in the classroom and as we meet online, you seem more to be our friend rather than the teacher.*"

"*I just think we still need to wait ten years that having lessons [online]. Because tutors can see students' reaction directly, they can see whether students understand or not through their facial expression. Besides, the relationship between tutors and students must be better as they can have the interaction in real classrooms.*"

"*For advantages, as we need to give out our speech face to face in usual lessons, it needs a certain amount of courage; it is difficult to ask the shy students to express their opinions. But in Second Life, we can just type out what we want to say, we just feel free to speak and express different views. The interaction is even more than the usual classes as we seen in the seminar.*

For disadvantages, as experienced by this seminar, some students were not following the rules of classes and the instructions given by tutor, […] or not answered the questions asked by tutor, but it seems that tutor could do nothing to stop their behaviour and know what happened in real life. So for my opinion, it may be best that both tutor and students attend to the classroom, but chat in Second Life."

4. Virtualising universities - Where to go from here?

Teaching and learning in Second Life is not vastly different from teaching and learning in the physical world, and should not be seen or presented as such. Neither lecturers nor students enter a new (virtual) world. Instead, they sit in front of a computer and manipulate an avatar within a 3D environment. This environment is not as closed as a traditional computer game that punishes deviation from expected behaviour, but allows for more user input and creativity. There is no conclusive evidence that the environment as such has a huge impact on the teaching and learning process, and the educational use of Second Life should be planned accordingly, by integrating it into a blended learning plan.

The Media Studies course could have been taught without using Second Life, employing other examples, and other techniques to stimulate student criticality. As several of the above examples demonstrate, though, Second Life proved a good setting and source of examples for discussions about Media Studies topics. Additionally, the use of Second Life in teaching Media criticality served to reinforce the idea that representational choices, media manipulation, media power, etc. have to be considered with all forms of Media. The continuous consumption of digital input even in the class room helped students to start evaluating this input critically. Once prodded in the right direction, students were able to dissect media messages, underlying presuppositions, ideologies, etc. – most of them had just never stopped to think about the amounts of data they processed every day.

Additionally, this article has shown that Second Life teaching does not have to be more complicated or difficult than teaching in the physical world to ensure the successful use of the virtual world in education. The course discussed here was held on a campus designed by technicians for the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Second Life (CoreSL, 2009a). Both the lecturer, as well as the students attended introductory sessions to Second Life held, and received guidance booklets supplied by technical support staff (CoreSL, 2009b). The software necessary to access Second Life was installed and set up by the same technicians, who also provided support as

needed throughout the course. The lecturer and students on the course registered for Second Life during the introductory sessions, and merely had to log into and use Second Life during tutorial times, which was comparable in difficulty with using the campus email system. One of the goals of CoreSL at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (2009b) is to ensure easy access to Second Life for academic staff and students, and to make its use as easy as the use of Powerpoint during lessons, which proved successful in this particular course.

The main reason for the success of Second Life as a venue for tutorials was its careful embedding within the course as a whole. The tutorials in Second Life supported a series of lectures in the physical world, and were used to promote student understanding of the issues raised in the lectures. Second Life was not assumed to provide any additional cognitive, motivational, or social benefits to the students, and within the context of achieving the goals of the Media Studies course such benefits were irrelevant. Second Life was used as an educational tool or tool set, and proved to be a valuable addition to the teaching of this particular university course at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. As a result of the teaching of this course and because of a number of other initiatives in Second Life by a team of academics, other staff at the university have become interested in employing Second Life within their own teaching and learning, and the virtual campus of the HK Polytechnic University will be inaugurated officially on September 25, 2009 (CoreSL, 2009b).

This article is meant only as a first exploration of the possibilities Second Life offers for 'regular' teaching and learning in the context of set curriculum requirements. It is neither exhaustive, nor ultimately universally applicable. It calls not for the immediate adoption of Second Life by all academics, but rather for a careful evaluation of the ways in which Second Life can be embedded into specific courses based on the course goals and desired student outcomes. It also calls for more teaching and learning oriented research into the use and effects of Second Life in Higher Education, beyond a focus on educational design, technological possibilities, or educational reform.

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