

Second Life Ghost Towns: Questioning Discourses of Learning Artifacts in Higher Education Islands

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Abstract: *Second Life* presented new opportunities for curriculum innovation in higher education. At its peak, over 171 colleges and universities from around the world were using this online virtual world as a cost-effective way to create customizable, media-rich environments for distance and online education. However, the use of *Second Life* by colleges and universities in the United States began to drop significantly, particularly as initial studies and evaluations of learning outcomes and experiences produced mixed results (Inman, Wright & Hartman, 2010). Steep learning curves, connection issues, social disruptions, and other barriers emerged that began to temper the initial enthusiasm for the learning platform. This paper uses the frameworks of Dwayne Huebner (2000) and Karen Ferneding (2004) to further theorize the possibilities and limitations of the space. By limiting themselves to technical and political language frameworks, educational users of *Second Life* often missed out on the rich possibilities of this virtual world.

Introduction

The use of digital technologies in higher education has increased in recent decades. The proliferation of online virtual worlds offers new possibilities for curriculum design and the delivery of course material. Linden Labs' *Second Life* is a space where players (or "residents") create digital avatars and interact with others. *Second Life* allows players to lease "islands" or tracts of virtual land for numerous purposes including selling virtual and real products, conducting classes and conferences, doing research, and hosting social and community events (Linden Labs, 2007). Proponents have argued that the use of this new technology as a course delivery method, particularly in the context of distance learning, may provide a way to create a more substantial feeling of "community" among distance learners. This lack of community is often cited by distance education program evaluators and researchers as a major contributor to high incompleteness and dropout rates in distance learning courses (Coffman & Klinger, 2008). Many supporters position virtual worlds as a superior, more immersive method of content delivery because of more visual interactions. *Second Life* offers text and voice chat functions in a virtual world combined with scripting and building capabilities that together, have the potential to enhance educational interaction. Many universities and colleges across the US took the leap into *Second Life*, with over 171 virtual campuses in existence by the end of the first decade of the new millennium (Jennings & Collins, 2008). However, if you visit these campuses today, many have become virtual ghost towns.

The utilization of online virtual worlds in educational contexts has not been without its problems. Educators and researchers cite steep learning curves in negotiating the new interfaces for both faculty and students, lack of broad access to the adequate technological hardware needed to access this medium (especially for students and school districts in low income areas), as well as ethical and legal concerns about exposing faculty and students to potential harassment and assault known as "griefing" in online communities (Rufer-Bach, 2009). In addition, critical concerns have been raised as to the effectiveness of course delivery in these venues and their potential to increase the impersonal character of interactions in the classroom mediated by technology (Foley, 2007). When these barriers arise, educators will often default back to familiar methods to teach concepts.

Slota, Young and Travis explored many of the barriers that have posed challenges for educators in virtual worlds (2013). When comparing *Second Life* to their examinations of four technologies, which consisted of *Logo*, *The Adventures of Jasper Woodbury*, *HyperCard*, and *Operation BIOME*, similarities around barriers arise. Despite the opportunities presented for student-driven computational learning in *Logo* (an artificial intelligence-like program where students were able to learn about programming through interaction with an AI turtle), educators returned to familiar methods, using worksheets to drill programming concepts first, then allowing students to practice programming on *Logo*. *The Adventures of Jasper Woodbury*, the second initiative discussed, was based on anchored instruction and situated cognition. Involving a series of videos where students would be given a baseline of mutual understanding to work with before delving into the learning, the series was soon used improperly. The videos turned into a supplemental resource, completely mitigating their purpose and leading to their eventual demise (Slota, Young, & Travis, 2013). Analysis of the *Operation BIOME* program revealed time barriers experienced by educators. Despite researchers' attempts to provide opportunities for connection and mentoring of educators by scheduling meetings to talk through issues they may have using the program, *Operation BIOME* usage by educators declined. Many of the research participants admitted that they simply did not have the time necessary to

flesh out the program, having to cut out certain aspects of the program and preferring to stick to the comfortable methods of teaching that they had used throughout their careers.

Understanding these misuses by teachers is paramount in the discussion of why *Second Life* is no longer at the forefront of learning-based technologies. While *Second Life* allows for an interactive education mixed with new aesthetics, many of the campuses explored did not take advantage of the tools offered to them. Instead, *Second Life* higher education islands are littered with doll house aesthetics, mimicking real world classrooms without incorporating the new technology whatsoever.

Karen Ferneding (2004) provides an additional point of critique that can help provide a deeper understanding of why some of these initiatives fail. She argues that technology is often used as evidence of learning and educational progress in and of itself. Instead, she interrogates the role of technology in delivering a message that simultaneously limits the possibilities of the learning process.

Consideration of some of these issues leads to several important questions. How does the language used to discuss educational promises of virtual worlds both structure and possibly limit critical analysis of how they could deliver educational opportunities? How does this language structure values and learning in virtual worlds? How might there be a discourse of inevitability (Ferneding, 2004) driving the conversations about the promise of these environments in higher education, one that may “effectively close down the spaces for alternative perspectives, voices, and interpretations regarding the naming of the nature of public education’s general condition and the imagining of its future?” (Reynolds & Webber, 2004, p. 13). Are higher education institutions utilizing these virtual worlds able to deliver on the promise of educational innovation and change?

To explore these questions, we first searched the list of universities and community colleges that have a presence on *Second Life*, listed publicly on the *Second Life Education Directory*, accessed through the *Second Life Wiki*, which is run by Linden Labs (*Second Life Education Directory*). Despite being updated as of 2013, only 44 of the 106 universities and one of the 17 community colleges listed in the directory still had *Second Life* virtual locations or, “Islands”. Of those campuses that were still accessible, none showed evidence of recent or ongoing use. Instead, most were ghost towns where no users were present.

Though part of an overall trend in the declining popularity of *Second Life*, to understand why educational users in particular moved away from the platform requires specific theoretical lenses. Huebner’s (2000) frameworks are useful for exploring specific messages embedded in the language of curricular design. These frameworks sensitize us to value orientations within curriculum regardless of educational setting and apply equally well to educational endeavors in virtual spaces and face-to-face contexts.

As a case study illustrating many of the missed opportunities, we will analyze an advertising video created by Ohio University to promote their virtual campus environment within *Second Life*. In doing so, we use Huebner’s (2000) frameworks to examine the advertisement’s discourse about the promise of online virtual worlds for educational practices and illustrate how institutions of higher education often approached virtual worlds with significant limitations in how they understood their potential uses.

Huebner’s Analysis of Language Systems

Dwayne Huebner provides a compelling critique of the role of language in structuring and directing inquiry in the field of curriculum studies. Based primarily on conventional wisdom that serves to trap curricular workers into prescribed, often uncritical modes of thinking, curricular language creates and sustains myths which become dangerous “because they remain nonrecognized and unchallenged” (Huebner, 2000, p. 218).

In particular, Huebner calls for curricular workers to attend to their language in order to prevent it from predetermining what should be considered and defined as educational activity and what then, is to be valued in these activities. He identifies five value frameworks that curricular workers may be able to consider when evaluating language and curricular work. These include the technical, political, scientific, esthetic, and ethical value frameworks (Huebner, 2000, p. 223). Huebner makes the case that much of current curricular work and design centers primarily on the technical value framework with some emphasis on the scientific and, though less overtly, political frameworks. He argues that esthetic and ethical value frameworks are seen far less widely than other frameworks. Huebner suggests that while these categories are not meant to be prescriptive or fixed, they provide a starting point from which to interrogate current uses of language around curricular projects to further critical inquiry into how learning may be taking place in various areas. Huebner’s frameworks may be a useful starting point from which to interrogate the use of technology in higher education.

Historical Promises of Educational Innovation: Examining Ohio University's *Second Life* (OUSL)

The virtual world *Second Life* is designed and maintained by San Francisco-based company Linden Labs. The virtual world allows users to create avatars (a digital stand-in character on screen) and build virtual spaces by utilizing simple programming functions in order to create their own online communities. This virtual world features its own in-game economy with a direct relationship to real world economies, as players can exchange real dollars for virtual dollars called Lindens and *vice versa*. While anyone with an Internet connection may sign up and create an avatar for free, much emphasis is placed on participation in the in-game economy and many of the advanced scripting features for creating objects, particularly in a leased land space, are available only by earning or buying Linden currency.

Ohio University began its exploration into virtual world instruction in February 2007 with the purchase of a virtual island within *Second Life*. The university's development team began to structure the space, designing the campus and virtual buildings in which to hold classes (VIRTUAL LAB, 2006). Spearheading the effort were two organizations, Ohio University Without Boundaries and University Outreach, led by Director Merle Graybill. In addition to providing new learning opportunities and expanding the campus, Ohio University planned to utilize the virtual campus as a way to market its "real life" campus to prospective students. Additionally, Ohio University planned to use its virtual campus as a way to reach out to business partners to provide training and learning opportunities in the hopes of creating long term relationships. Part of the strategy for outreach involved the creation of an advertisement for Ohio University's virtual campus.

***Second Life* Promotional Video (Ohio University)**

The commercial is featured both on Ohio University's VIRTUAL LAB website and the popular video media site, Youtube. Running approximately two and half minutes, the advertisement features narration by a young, white, male avatar who demonstrates various elements of interaction in *Second Life* such as flying and the ability to manipulate and change the environment, as well as providing a tour of the virtual campus.

The commercial begins with the avatar flying through the air across what appears to be an ocean. A song plays in the background of the commercial, beginning with the lyrics, "We can be more than other people." Throughout the piece, the avatar provides commentary on the potential of the campus to offer learning opportunities never before available to students. From flying over an ocean, the shot focuses on the avatar manipulating a silver ball while standing in a green campus quad next to a large, red brick university building with a large glass wall. The next shot features an angular zoom away from a large cable bridge upon which the avatar is walking. Next, we see the avatar piloting a fighter jet and then the scene immediately cuts to an empty lecture hall where the avatar is standing at the podium. The rest of the scenes feature images of student avatars interacting and watching large screens displaying PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, and videos. Next, the conference center is featured, where the avatar host is seen in a business suit standing behind a conference table in front of large video screens. The voiceover describes potential opportunities for businesses to save money by using the OUSL conference space to showcase their products and services. The commercial concludes with a message that reads "See you in world" followed by a web address where viewers can access more information about Ohio University *Second Life* campus.

***Second Life* Promotional Video: Mythinformation, Technical and Political Value Language Frameworks**

A major theme within the commercial is that of innovation and the freedom of possibilities that appear to be inherent *Second Life*. The avatar voiceover explains:

Most of us have dreamt of flying. Dreamt of a world with endless possibilities where reality falls away to be replaced by imagination, creativity, and endless opportunities for discovery. Discovery, so central to learning, has now broken free of the boundaries of the classroom. Learners now thrive in an environment unbridled by space, time, or even the laws of physics. Welcome to the Ohio University *Second Life* Campus. An engaging new universe of learning opportunities for intellectual and professional growth, an immersive atmosphere where the classroom has not just been recreated, but rather reinvented. (VIRTUAL LABS, 2006)

There are several particularly interesting messages we can read in the above piece. First is the valuation of the virtual world over the real world, an example of what Ferneding calls techno-utopianism as a form of "mythinformation." The term mythinformation was coined by political theorist Langdon Winner referring to the "almost religious

conviction that a widespread adoption of computers and communication systems along with easy access to electronic information will automatically produce a better world for human beings” (quoted in Ferneding, 2004, p. 50). The idea that the virtual campus breaks boundaries implies that the real classroom has boundaries while the virtual world does not, and additionally, that these are impediments to learning. In particular, the traits of the real world classroom considered to be boundaries are phenomena such as “space, time, or even the laws of physics.” This suggests that temporal boundaries and spatial limitations are hindrances to the learning process and emphasizes characteristics associated with freedom and experimentation. The move towards de-contextualization presented in this advertisement suggests that learning can and should be separated from time, space, and other social and physical contexts. There are practical applications such as asynchronous learning experiences that allow students to engage with class activities or materials in non-traditional ways, opening higher education experiences for non-traditional students. However, over-emphasis on solely technologically based learning environments can be highly problematic given the increasing compartmentalizing of learning activities. This can create ahistorical, non-contextualized understandings which perpetuate unrealistic relationships and may actually serve to alienate students from the learning process and the course content.

A second issue is the idea of the reinvention of the classroom through the introduction of new technology. The assumption of innovation taking place within the virtual world becomes more problematic when we contextualize the piece within the visual elements of the advertisement showcasing the new technology. A majority of the features illustrated in the commercial re-create existing symbolic or visual markers of the university experience. For example, in one of the scenes, we see the host avatar in an empty lecture hall complete with rows of chairs facing a large screen where the avatar is standing at the podium. Shots of the virtual campus show a series of red brick university buildings clustered around a central grassy quadrangle, an arrangement that mimics the architecture of the real life Ohio University campus in Athens, Ohio. In addition, the learning experiences described by the commercial are very similar to existing methods of education:

Learning experiences can range from entire college courses to one hour learning modules. Learning comes in many forms. Learning kiosks are scalable systems for housing course content for blended or stand alone delivery. Each kiosk houses applicable course content in a variety of possible media forms from text to video podcast and more. (VIRTUALLABS, 2006)

Much of the learning material featured in the commercial is text-based, ranging from PowerPoints to typed notes and documents to text-based quizzes. While there are a few video podcasts and lectures, these are simply traditional documentary-style videos in which the talking heads of professors speak directly to the learner from a kiosk or from screens at the front of a virtual lecture hall. While the innovation appears to be in the way the information is accessed (through an avatar standing in a virtual world at a kiosk or sitting in a virtual classroom space), the mode of information delivery itself is not innovative. The role of student as listener and consumer of information is replicated from the real world of university classrooms where passive listening and learning are traditionally encouraged.

The structure and message in the commercial suggests the primacy of Huebner’s (2000) the technical language value framework. This framework refers to concerns about mobilizing human resources and materials to achieve predetermined ends or objectives that have been identified by a “sociological analysis of the individual in the present or future social order” (Huebner, 2000, p. 223). In the commercial, the central focus is on the descriptive mechanisms for course delivery and how they work together. The goal of the commercial appears to center more on changing interfaces of education and curriculum than the content or structure. The end projected by the commercial is a full integration of technology into the virtual space; however, success here appears to be a measure of how like traditional curriculum this particular environment can become. There are no indications of any markers by which to assess that learning has taken place or that what is being learned is “good.”

The coupling of this language with evocative phrases, such as “Discovery, so central to learning, has now broken free of the boundaries of the classroom,” serves a dual purpose. While this language may suggest innovation and boundlessness, it simultaneously serves to discount the importance of embodied learning as well as devalue the need for contextualization. In this way, the virtual world is constructed as superior to the real world where things like laws of physics somehow get in the way of learning. This compartmentalization is reflective of a technical language that values the importance of how to make something work rather than scientific value frameworks concerned with the attainment of knowledge and the empirical testing and exploration necessary to produce this knowledge (Huebner, 2000). Additionally, esthetic and ethical language frameworks do not appear to be present in the commercial. However, one can detect the presence of an underlying political value framework as evidenced by references to an agenda driven by corporate and business interests.

Another element of the commercial is the repeated references to industry partners and opportunities for the business community to utilize the space provided by the OUSL for marketing. The voiceover explains, "The campus also contains substantial space for virtual trade shows and conferences. *Second Life* conference exhibits are a highly cost effective method for ongoing contact with your customers" (VIRTUAL LABS, 2006). Put into the context of the visual elements of the commercial, we see that these features are coupled with markers of business practices, some of the student avatars wearing brand name shirts and the large logo of a company at the conference center, complete with a business-suited representative.

The particular references to industry partners and businesses seem to indicate a political language framework within the commercial. This framework values the manipulation of resources in order to make them available to maximize effectiveness of the educational endeavor. This is often accomplished through the use of power, control and prestige on the part of the curricular worker (Huebner, 2000). Ohio University's message appears to include references to the industry partners and funding sources used to further the *Second Life* campus project. The commercial reiterates that, "At the heart of Ohio University in *Second Life* is the same mission that drives Ohio University in real life; a complete dedication to the learning outcomes of our students and our industry partners" (VIRTUAL LABS, 2006). While attempting to situate the dedication to student learning as primary, the inclusion of the business and industry partner concerns can be read as an example of the phenomena of the increasing corporatization of public universities.

While the focus of the university is initially towards students and educational endeavors, the needs of business partners become more and more primary, especially in terms of emerging technology and its marketing with schools. While generally considered more cost-effective for teaching, *Second Life* is a very explicitly economic space where profit is a concern. The sustainability of new educational projects such as these require financial backing which, for many public universities, increasingly comes from business and industry sources (Reynolds, 2004). The speech in the commercial serves political interests by making explicit the value of business partners and a desire to cater to their needs to continue receiving funding. This becomes a priority for public universities in the wake of decreased funding due to state budget cuts. However, significant criticisms of the issue of corporatization, particularly its intertwining with mythinformation have been raised.

Ferneding (2004) explains that many critics have pointed to the characteristics of current educational reform discourse as being "narrow in scope, reflecting instrumental rationalist and functionalist perspectives...[and] aggressive political efforts to privatize or marketize public educational systems, policies that often reflect fundamental shifts toward market based systems of national governance" (Ferneding, 2004, p. 48). However, Ferneding also points out that few critics have been particularly alarmed by the concurrent extensive and aggressive efforts to implement technologies into schools. She points to several elements in the construction of technology; as a tool and "neutral" artifact, therefore an apolitical entity, as a part of a larger grand narrative of progress, as a form of commonsense social story, and through its embeddedness within popular culture (Ferneding, 2004, p. 49).

The OUSL commercial exhibits these characterizations of technology as the panacea to educational failings and problems. By casting technology as liberating and as a superior mode of educational delivery to in-person educational interactions, the OUSL commercial also engages in the discourse of inevitability. The privileged position of technology serves to obscure the increased role of privatization and business interests in the decisions of educational institutions. Most critically perhaps, the limited frameworks of discourse serve as a way to shut down critical inquiry into this new technology and cover up the realities of technology as it falls short of stated goals of improving educational interaction. In particular, Ferneding (2004) makes the argument that the promise of technology as liberatory, as a way of deconstructing existing hierarchical systems that limit access to information and as a means of regenerating the possibility for participatory democracy, come into question as studies provide data that indicate the contrary. She explains, "Indeed the popularized utopian vision that such technologies will automatically create a participatory democracy relies on an ahistorical perspective that ignored the fact that technological progress has been a mixed blessing" (Ferneding, 2004, p. 51). The problem arises when curricular workers come to rely solely on the mere presence of technology to produced desired educational ends. This reliance serves to mute discourse articulating and interrogating the specific structures and aims of technology.

Dominant and Missing Language Frameworks: The Discourse of Inevitability and its Limitations on the Learning Project.

Much of the language in the OUSL commercial appears to focus on a primarily technical language value framework along with elements of a political language value framework. According to Huebner (2000), the danger in concentrating on only a few of these frameworks is limitations they impose on inquiry into the educational project. In particular,

The proposition may be put forth that educational activity in classrooms will be richer and more meaningful if all five categories are brought to bear. Indeed, the insignificance and inferior quality of much teaching today may be the result of attempts to maximize only the technical and political and perhaps scientific values without adequate attention to the esthetic and ethical ones. (Huebner, 2000, p. 228)

In keeping with Huebner's assessment, the most conspicuously absent language frameworks in the OUSL commercial are the scientific, esthetic and ethical. Huebner's (2000) esthetic framework values symbolic and esthetic meaning, involving an element of physical distance, without a functional or instrumental significance, yet containing a wholeness and totality in and of itself that can capture spontaneity often lost in the world. He outlines how the ethical value framework views educational activity as valuable for its own sake as opposed to a specified end, an activity that values the encounter of person to person, as an expression of an essence and meaning of life where,

the educator meets the student, not as an embodied role, as a lesser category, but as a fellow human being...no thing, no conceptual barrier, no purpose intrudes between educator and student when educational activity is valued ethically...the educational activity is life—and life's meanings are witnessed and lived in the classroom. (Huebner, 2000, p. 228)

While there is language present that might suggest an ethical value framework in the reiteration of a public education mission and commitment to students, these serve a more underlying political function. They are driven by rhetoric rather than a true concern for student development of a moral and ethical self in relation to a larger world. Similarly, one may perceive an esthetic value framework in the commercial. However, it cannot stand apart from the functional aims present in its creation. It represents reality very much tied to non-spontaneous aims. It represents human interactions not through a lens of higher meanings but instead through a lens of ideological structures that privilege the acquisition of capital and a reliance on technological progress to solve educational failings.

Caution is necessary, perhaps now more than ever in the light of a discourse of inevitability that places technology at the forefront of human potential for solving social problems. While the OUSL claims to provide a new form of educational innovation and opportunity for students, the project they attempt falls short by limitations imposed through the value systems inherent in the language and discourse used to talk about this new educational format. In addition, innovation as it is presented in the commercial refers more to the novelty of its delivery rather than the actual content itself.

Despite the lack of innovation displayed by various universities within *Second Life*, there were a few institutions which used the tools given to them to transform their virtual campuses into interactive areas. The University of Denver was one of the most interactive campuses explored, allowing avatars to take a ride on a rocket ship or tour their virtual nuclear power plant via a flying bus. However, as observed with many of the other virtual islands, technological glitches were present in the space, with camera movement becoming jumpy and almost frantic as the camera attempts to focus on an avatar. Despite these issues, the space was innovative and demonstrated an example of a space incorporating attention to Huebner's (2000) scientific and esthetic language frameworks: allowing students to learn about a nuclear power plant by controlling it. A telescope allows visitors to examine renderings of planets, and an interactive 3D periodic table of the elements demonstrates comparisons among the sizes of nuclei of various elements.

The best uses of *Second Life* all involved simulations that spoke to almost all of the language frameworks, providing students with an opportunity to work through situations within the game that may very well happen in real life. The University of the West of England runs multiple simulations on their *Second Life* campus, most notably a workplace incident simulator. The workplace incident, as Liz Falconer (2009) describes it, is made up of a set, engine, and scenario. In groups of two and with a tutor present, students walk through a warehouse where a forklift is loading and unloading boxes. Students interview witnesses and read through company policies, assessing an accident (Falconer, 2009). Through this simulation, students are given hands-on experience without the consequences that may be encountered in a real world event. The ability to replay simulations allows students to learn from their mistakes in a small group, under the facilitation of a trained tutor to understand how to handle various iterations of a given accident in an ethical manner. Providing this sort of room for critical inquiry and critique that disrupts the discourse of inevitability is needed if the potential for new technologies to become tools and not masters is to be realized.

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