



Vol. 4, No. 2, 2015

Paweł Topol

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland)  
LanguageLab, School of English in Second Life (Virtual World)

## Shaping Behaviors in Virtual Worlds – Gender, Culture, Education. Teacher’s Reflections from Second Life

**ABSTRACT.** The article focuses on the phenomenon of how human behaviors are shaped in the environments of three-dimensional virtual worlds. The so-called serious virtual worlds are taken into consideration. They are sometimes defined in the literature as social environments. The largest ones – like Second Life which has several millions of user accounts – are indeed multi-national and multi-cultural in character. Users, or residents, take part in social, cultural, artistic events or just explore the virtual space for their own reasons. The total area of Second Life is comparable to several Manhattans, so the opportunities to find new interesting spots or to meet new people seem endless. Some key questions covered in the article are: How do people – through their avatars – perform in the three-dimensional virtual world in communicative situations? Do they copy their physical world behaviors onto the virtual? Do they adopt behaviors from other people/avatars, or maybe they reshape their own? The final question is what possible implications for pedagogy and education are –with reference to learning and teaching practice in 3D environments. Examples from author’s experience in virtual worlds will be given.

**KEYWORDS:** virtual worlds, Second Life, social behavior, performance, education

### 1. Introduction

The dynamic growth of Web 2.0 at the beginning of the 21st century gave rise to the development of interactive online tools and applications. The role of the internet user changed radically – from a passive receiver of the WWW content into an active performer. Another characteristic feature of the new web was that users were able to add content. Hence, they became performers and creators. They were consumers of technology as well as producers. They became so-called prosumers. The term *prosumer* was coined in early 1970’s (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972) with reference to electric technologies in general, however, it became widely used in the age of efficient ICT. According to Oxford Dictionary, a prosu-

mer is “a consumer who becomes involved with designing or customizing products for their own needs.” A contemporary internet consumer customizes and designs web content. Being an active performer, the user may shape own behavior(s) in different ways.

Some of the most rapidly evolving Web 2.0 virtual environments were WWW-based social portals. One was able to build one’s virtual profile within a large community of users. Now, such communities may involve millions of members. People build their virtual identities and communicate with others. That virtual social life has become very popular, especially among young people. The development of mobile technologies enhanced that process for two main reasons: (1) modern smartphones have quite efficient internet access, and (2) some social portals have developed special viewers designed for mobile operating systems, i.e. the user receives a dedicated, functional application.

The Web 2.0 era brought another tool/environment that evolved rapidly, i.e. three-dimensional virtual worlds, which were technologically based on efficient 3D graphics available online. Majority of them were not accessed via WWW, one needed a special viewer to install locally. The contents and resources of such a world, however, were spread among servers around the globe. The local application connected with the servers. Some of the worlds were designed for gaming entirely. One of the largest 3D online games nowadays is *The World of War craft*.

Some other worlds had no pre-designed infrastructure and all their content was and still is created by their users who are often called *residents*. Residents rent land and are free to create content. They build houses, gardens, streets, parks, cottages, lakes, beaches, forests, hills and mountains, ponds and streams... all possible builds one can imagine are present in such worlds. They are called *serious virtual worlds* in the literature. Residents exist there for their own reasons, whichever they are: for entertainment, fun, social reasons, trade, marketing, education, politics, sex, religion. There are pubs where people meet, talk and dance, and there are religious builds where people seek spiritual sensations. There are replicas of famous places in our physical world, and there are fabulous, fairy-tale constructions.

Second Life was and still is the largest serious virtual world nowadays. Many universities and schools have their virtual campuses in Second Life. There are schools of business, management, artistic institutions, medical centers, schools of languages, and many others (Topol, 2015). They either give classes to their own students in the physical

school, or offer education to external candidates. Some are commercial institutions and require fees, others are free of charge (Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann, 2009).

Most likely, people perform and shape behaviors differently in virtual games and in *serious* virtual environments. This article focuses entirely on the latter. Thus, the terms *virtual worlds* and *three-dimensional virtual worlds* will be used interchangeably. The examples that will be given come from author's experience and insight in virtual worlds.

## 2. Interpersonal Behaviors from the Physical World

Castronova (2005) calls virtual worlds synthetic as well as social worlds. Tom Boellstorff, an American anthropologist, perceives Second Life as an anthropological, ethnographic and cultural space (Boellstorff, 2008). Indeed, some features or functions in worlds like Second Life or OpenSim are quite similar to those of social portals based on WWW. Groups of interest, for example – there are hundreds of them in Second Life. Anyone can create one's own group(s) and invite an unlimited number of guests. Group members may announce public messages or send individual messages (so-called instant messages) to one or many members. Group members may have live chats – either in text or voice (Topol, 2015). The two main communication channels are text and voice, however, virtual worlds are three-dimensional environments where 3D animated avatars perform, or people rather perform by moving or animating their avatars. Those 'bodily' or 'physical' avatar behaviors are equally important in our discussion.

To a certain extent, a virtual world like Second Life bears the hallmarks of *second reality* or *parallel reality* to the 'first life', also in terms of behavioral manners. Copying everyday behavioral patterns from the physical onto the virtual world is a common phenomenon. All in all, meetings, get-togethers or other social events in Second Life do gather real people behind their avatars. Let me give an example from my own experience, from my first steps in Second Life back in 2008. Whichever meeting I took part in, I was invited to take a seat. Indeed, there were objects like chairs, benches, logs, stones around. But why did they want me to sit? Why did it bother anyone that I was standing – or rather my avatar was? That seemed a little bizarre to me, and it took me some time till I realized a possible reason. Do we not behave the same way in phys-

ical life? When we get together for a chat, we also prefer sitting to standing. It would be even impolite to keep one standing while the others are sitting (see picture 1: a teachers meeting in LanguageLab School of English in Second Life).



Picture 1. A weekly faculty meeting in LanguageLab, the largest school of English in Second Life. We are sitting at a table and discussing some current issues and school events. The round table is organized in a specific way. There is always one seat vacant. If a newcomer takes it, a new vacant seat is produced automatically. This way, all possible newcomers will find a place to sit and participate. In the background, there is a table of teachers currently available (online) in Second Life

Source: picture taken by author.

On the other hand, the reason of the above behavior may be purely technical. Virtual world viewers are complex applications. The user often performs multiple operations at the same time, which include: making the avatar move (walk, run, change directions, fly, teleport, etc.); zooming the avatar's camera in and out in order to have a closer look at objects or a broader view from the distance; interacting with virtual objects; controlling the voice channel and the text chat. Such multitasking may be difficult to cope with for an unexperienced user. It is easier to

manage different functions of the viewer when the avatar is immobile, e.g. when it is seated. The avatar will not move by itself – there is a special button to press to make it stand up and walk again. The user can avoid uncontrolled or unintentional avatar moves this way, and focus on other actions in the meantime.

The learning curve in mastering technical-operational skills in virtual worlds like Second Life is rather steep and the technical and competency threshold is very high. The same applies to leading classes in virtual worlds (Peachey et al., 2010; Warburton, 2008). Users gain experience gradually with time and finally do not need to immobilize the avatar in order to perform multiple technical operations within the viewer program. However, the custom of sitting and inviting others to take a seat preserves. It may indicate that the main reason is more likely of a social-habitual or interpersonal nature rather than of technical.

The next example refers in a way to sex and gender, or to be more specific, to courtesy or good manners in male-female mutual relationships. It was one of many teacher meetings in Second Life where we gathered and shared experiences. People were pouring in and at a certain moment all the sitting places were taken. We started our discussion on teaching methods and techniques in 3D virtual worlds. After a few minutes another person appeared. It was our friend (Second Life name: Gwen Gwasi), a female teacher from Germany who also dealt with language education. She – her avatar – was standing close by as there was no place to sit. Suddenly, one of the male participants (SL name: Wlodek Barbosa) stood up and offered her a place to sit. That gesture raised general applause. Heike said, “Oh, thank you, Wlodek, it is so nice of you.” The other people (mostly women) commented: “that was very polite”, “a real gentleman”, “wow, how courteous you are”, etc.

I could observe many other similar social behaviors that were taken directly from the physical life into the virtual. Example one: a small group of people are standing at an elevator that will take us to the upper floors of a building. When the elevator door opens, someone says to the women-avatars, “Ladies first, please.” Example two: a group of avatars are walking and suddenly one brushes against another one. The immediate reaction from that person was: “Woops, sorry” or “Beg your pardon”, or “Sorry for pushing”... By the way, there are spots in Second Life where pushing another avatars is strictly forbidden. Those who do not obey that rule may be banned from that island temporarily or permanently.

The final example, this time about female-male relationship, was during a meeting in Second Life where we celebrated Guy Fawkes Day on November 5<sup>th</sup>. The place where we planned our party needed to be arranged and decorated. We met in a group of about 6-7 people and started the arrangements. Among others, we had some objects with animated huge fireworks. They had to be moved from one side of the place to the other. Then, one of our female colleagues said, "Maybe one of our gentlemen will take care of that...?" She was not serious rather, she said it with a smile. We laughed but all agreed. Indeed one of us – men – relocated the objects. Needless to say, the objects were only potentially dangerous because even the hugest fires can do no harm to any avatar. The situation was rather funny, however, the fact that she did say it and the others approved was symptomatic.

### 3. Cultural Behaviors from the Physical World

There are many builds in Second Life where the land owners create certain codes of behavior for others visiting their spot. In educational places, where group meetings, lectures or regular classes take place, those rules refer usually to 'proper' students' or teacher's behavior that will avoid possible disturbances in the lesson scenario.

The following is an example of how cultural behaviors are cultivated in virtual worlds (see: Topol, 2013, p. 46). On one of our field trips within a certified course in teaching methods in 3D environments, we visited the On Islam Island in Second Life in 2011, where we walked around virtual Mecca – a full-size replica of the real place in Saudi Arabia. We gathered at the landing point and waited for our friend, a teacher from Turkey (SL name: Daffodil Fargis), who was supposed to show us around. When she appeared, she led us to the main entrance where we could see a large information board. It listed numerous rules to obey and restrictions when entering virtual Mecca (see: picture 2).

Some of the rules need further explanation:

- *No weapons*. Avatars must not have any kind of weapons on them, despite whether they are intended to be used or not.
- *No giant attachments*. It is possible to attach any object to one's avatar. Giant attachments are perceived as *griefing* in virtual worlds (*griefing* is defined as any kind of abusive, intrusive and unwanted behavior). The same applies to the "No Abusive Behavior" icon.



Picture 2. The entrance to virtual Mecca in Second Life. Information board containing the rules to obey and restrictions while visiting the place

Source: picture taken by author.

- *No music or dancing.* Playing music by avatars and dancing is forbidden.
- *No immodesty,* i.e. no nudity, or wearing provocative clothes.
- *No Nationalism, Racism or Political Affiliation.*
- *No Vice,* i.e. no debauchery or any other actions of criminal character.
- *No Vampire or Other Role Play.* Avatars can change their appearance within seconds. There are people in Second Life who intentionally make their avatars look somehow different from regular humans: dragons, monsters, animals, or practically any other way. Any odd looking is forbidden.

Imposing the above rules and restrictions seems rational. Mecca is a religious place so some code of unwanted behavior should not surprise. However, the board itself and the other information signs around the place did not mention anything about wanted or expected behaviors. To my surprise, Daffodil asked all of us to take off our virtual shoes (if anyone was wearing shoes at the moment). She also gave all the ladies in the group virtual headscarves to wear before we entered Mecca.

I had known Daffodil for two years before she arranged the trip to virtual Mecca. I met her in person on my visit to Anadolu University in Turkey in 2009. I knew she was Muslim and she was a religious person. She wore traditional clothes and headscarves on a regular basis. She did cultivate Muslim traditions and behaviors, e.g. she never shook hands with men. However, I know she is an open-minded person and by no means a religious fanatic. The above Mecca experience made me think of how informative it can be to learn in virtual worlds about habits, customs and behaviors typical for other cultures.

#### **4. Implications for Pedagogy and Education – Learning and Teaching Practice**

Picture 3 shows a board placed in the landing place at Cypris Chat Island (known also as Cypris Village). Cypris is a place in Second Life where one can learn English for free. It is run by some educators enthusiasts and volunteers who do not get paid for their teaching (see: Topol, 2013, p. 210-211). The island is quite large with many different builds where English classes take place: a few buildings, a park, places to rest, a bonfire with several seats around, a corner with board games, and many others. The picture below presents the Four Principles at the island which are addressed to potential or present students. This is a certain code of behaviors in the virtual class, which are supposed to both encourage the students and facilitate learning.

The full principles are as follows:

– *Principle 1: SHARE. After joining our family, members should find ways to share what they have learned or done in Second Life. Tell us where you have been, what you have seen. Show us your safe toys, clothes, avatars and gadgets. Sharing promotes communication.*





Picture 3. Cypris Chat Island in Second Life. Students gather at the board of Four Principles – general rules of how to behave or perform during English classes

Source: picture taken by author.

- *Principle 2: RESPECT. Second Life is very different from real life, but it is real for many of us. We all come from different cultures, different backgrounds and with different reasons for spending time in Second Life. We might not understand each other but we both have the same goal, to learn or teach.*
- *Principle 3: RESPOND. Share your opinions about Cypris. Let us know what you think. Help us make this community a better place for you. Your feedback is what makes Cypris so great. Your opinion matters the most. Help each other with learner/teacher feedback. Communicate mistakes and successes.*
- *Principle 4: BE ACTIVE. Speak. Talk. Ask questions. Say something. We are not passive learners, we are active! In order to improve, we must practice. To practice we must participate. To participate we must SPEAK! Less text chat and more voice chat. We are here to help you improve.*

I shall comment on the above very shortly. Second Life is a huge world. Its total area is estimated about 600 square miles, which corresponds to almost 20 Manhattans in New York. Getting new experiences by exploring the virtual world and interacting with other people is highly approved according to Principle 1. Respecting cultural differences and learning each other's cultures is emphasized in Principle 2. Indeed, I could see while visiting Cypris many times that it was not only the language but also cultures that the students shared. Feedback about Cypris in Principle 3 is crucial for the owners and educators. Students are encouraged to communicate mistakes and successes both in terms of language learning and interpersonal behaviors. It is not only the linguistic success that matters but also the organization of learning, the way the classes are planned and student activities are performed. Principle 4 emphasizes the need of being active by using the language, most preferably in speech. However, the above is not only about speaking. I have observed at Cypris that students are often involved in kinesthetic forms of language learning, e.g. quests or scavenger hunts. They interact behaviorally with the objects in the virtual environment as well as with other avatars.

## 5. Conclusion from LanguageLab

Residents of virtual worlds tend to copy their behaviors in communicative situations in physical life. Research shows that they also respect spatial social behavior (Friedman et al., 2007), according to which people keep different distance between each other when talking face to face. Hall (1966) distinguished four such distances or spaces: intimate space – for touching (up to 1.5 feet), personal space – for interaction among friends (1.5–4 feet), social space (4–12 feet), and public space (over 12 feet). Avatars in virtual worlds behave similarly.

To conclude with, I would like to bring back the example of LanguageLab, the largest commercial school of English in Second Life (with headquarters in London, Great Britain). I had a pleasure and privilege to teach in LanguageLab for more than two years (see: Topol, 2012, p. 312–315). The students were international, they came from different walks of life and from all over the physical world. Learning the language was always put in a behavioral context. The classes were rarely 'talking heads' alike. The students were most often involved in active learning. They

had to move/walking the virtual environment and interact both with the objects around and with the other avatars. They had to speak as well as 'behave' accordingly in natural communicative situations. Many of my students admitted that a language course in a 3D virtual environment is not only about language learning but also about culture and behavioral learning. They learned cultures of English-speaking countries, of course, but not only that. They learned from each other about customs, traditions or just everyday behaviors in their own countries/cultures.

#### REFERENCES

- BOELLSTORFF, T. (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- CASTRONOVA, E. (2005) *Synthetic worlds: The business and culture of online games*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- FRIEDMAN, D., STEED, A. & SLATER, M. (2007) Spatial Social Behavior in Second Life. *Intelligent Virtual Agents*. 4722. pp. 252-263.
- HALL, E. T. (1966) *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Doubleday.
- McLUHAN, M. & NEVITT, B. (1972) *Take today; the executive as dropout*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- MOLKA-DANIELSEN, J. & DEUTSCHMANN, M. (eds) (2009) *Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life*. Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press.
- PEACHEY, A., GILLEN, J., LIVINGSTONE, D. & SMITH-ROBINS, S. (eds) (2010) *Researching Learning in Virtual Worlds*. London: Springer.
- TOPOL, P. (2012) *Szkoła 3D*. In: Skrzydlewski, W. & Dylak, S. (eds) *Media – Edukacja – Kultura*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM. pp. 307-320.
- TOPOL, P. (2013) *Funkcjonalność edukacyjna światów wirtualnych*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- TOPOL, P. (2015) *Communication and Language Learning in Virtual Worlds – a Research Project in Second Life*. In: Wawrzak-Chodaczek, M., Kowal, J. & Kuzio, A. (eds) *Social dimensions of communication*. Lambert Academic Publishing (in print).
- WARBURTON, S. (2008) *Loving your avatar: identity, immersion and empathy*, [retrieved 20 August 2011 from:] <http://warburton.typepad.com/liquidlearning/2008/01/loving-your-ava.html>.