Second Life: a learning community. The contribution of ethnography to understand virtual worlds

Ivonne CITARELLA[a,48]

[a] *Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies, National Research Council, Italy*

Abstract. Starting from the question "Why the virtual world Second Life despite its bad reputation is a significant place of interest?" I began my observation of this metaverse with my avatar Baby Pooley in 2009, in particular I studied the Italian community of the Pyramid Café group. During my participant observation I was able to identify the three steps by which everyone can acquire new competences they are: by doing; developping a sense of community and increasing self-knowledge. The results of my research was very interesting because I identify Second Life as a place that offers real opportunities as a developer of stimuli from the single up to everyone taking advantage of the technology to enhance learning and make it efficient and effective way. The learning shared inworld allows the birth of many prolific projects, activities and ideas that can be transferred in Real Life enriching it, both in terms of culture and skills both in economic terms. In the virtual worlds all learning strategies centered on the active new-learning such as contextualized learning, cognitive learning, cooperative learning, independent learning are applied in a completely spontaneous. For these reasons, Second Life, as virtual tool, should be considered as an useful tool and it is therefore necessary to break the wall of prejudice born around it in order to encourage a wider educational and professional use. The professional role of the "virtual teacher" is incisive and it would be appropriate to consider its position in the field of teaching strategies. Second Life as all the other virtual worlds are not perceived as potential tool for overcoming individualism staff and the success of a project shared, thanking also the common interests distributed on the various groups that ensure the rising up of the cohesion and of the collaboration.

Keywords. Second life, Pyramid Cafè, learning by doing, sharing, new-learning, virtual teacher, tool, self-knowledge.

1. Introduction

Second Life[49] is a virtual reality created in 2003 by Linden Labs, based in San Francisco, where users or residents create their own virtual personality.

Second Life is a platform known primarily as an immersive game in which you can create a virtual "second identity" and live a "second life." For this prerogative, this virtual world has also been singled out as a place of *perdition* for the easiness with which you can live experience more "libertine" (even if virtual).

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[48] Corresponding Author. Ivonne Citarella, IRPPS-CNR, Italy. E-mail: i.citarella@irpps.cnr.it
[49] To learn more about Second Life is recommended Rymaszewski M., "*Second life: the official guide*" or to go to website: www.secondlife.com

Second Life is often associated with the big flop caused by wrong marketing policies applied by a lot of big commercial companies such as 20th Century Fox, Adidas, Reebok, American Apparel, American Cancer Society, BBC, Creative Commons, Disney, Endemol, Eudoxa, Gabetti Property Solutions, IBM, Lichtenstein Creative Media, Toyota, Telecom and others that invested considerable economic resources in it.

Second Life is used for military aims too. The last case of which I am aware is from the Norwegian army, followed by the University of Oslo too, in which the soldiers improved their approach, in virtual environments, with civilians of Afghanistan.

Second life also attracts those people with a technical background who wants to experience the construction of prototypes in 3D

Yet, despite the negative reputation, the *metaverse* has continued to attract users and I asked myself: why?

To answer this question, I decided to get into Second Life and on January 20th, 2009 Baby Pooley, my avatar, born. From that day my daily participant observation begun.

When I got into SL I passed through three steps of learning:
1. Learning by DOING
2. Learning the SENSE of COMMUNITY
3. Learning YOURSELF

2. First step: learning by doing.

My first step inworld was becoming familiar with the metaverse, so I spent my first time *inworld* learning the software of Second Life. When having any kind of technical problem in Second Life I met a lot of people who helped me to solve them in a totally spontaneous way and for free.

By my choice I preferred to avoid the available mentors in the help points of Second Life instead I tried on my own, *learning by doing*, that it's the method chosen by 72,7% of the residents who independently manages to reach different degrees of skills thanks to the playful and intuitive approach of the platform.

In Second Life it's possible to sign up to a large numbers of *groups* who join residents with the same interests and organize free courses in which it's possible to train Builder, Scripter or Sculpter, designers, architects, and animation builder too.

The intuitive software platform and the playfulness paves the way to the use of external programs that can enhance the product already developed in Second Life. Basic skills include knowledge of the *build* of Second Life that can develop in various levels: low, medium and high. As basic abilities, should be included knowledge of support programs such as Blender, Photoshop, Graphic three-dimensional, two-dimensional graphics useful for textures, Inkscape and a lot of tutorial on YouTube. Scripter is next to profile the "Frontend Web Developer" identified by Iwa[50] as the builder is placed next to the "Creative Information Architect" profile.

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[50] Iwa is a working group that studies about the delineation of Web skill profiles taking into account the technical standards set out by the European Committee for Standardization (CEN) in line with the objectives of the European Union.

The courses for technical expertise, including Machinima courses too, allow the abilities to shoot video or movies in a virtual environment, with a lot of interest in the field of advertising.

Then, it's possible to participate at cultural meetings such as language courses, literature, music, poetry, art, psychology, physics, chemistry, biology but also presentations of books, literary competitions, fashion shows and much more.

At the beginning of my investigation I hypothesized that the flow of professionalism went from Real Life towards Second Life especially for people who had some familiarity with the digital programs, design or 3D construction but the results obtained showed the opposite: Second Life seems to give an added value to individual skills.

Second life produces effects on skills level

- With the acquisition of new abilities
- Strengthen previous abilities
- Birth of unknown passion

And on real incomes

- Inworld
- In Real Life

Infact, thanks to Second Life, a lot of people unemployed (students or housewiwes[51]) developed skills and entry into the labor market, not only in the virtual world but also in Real, getting real incomes.

So they, in addition to a professional identity can develop an individual professional identity immersed in a social and relational context, a real horizontal [52]social organization, in which social mobility are more fluid and closer to meritocracy and able to break down Italian territorial conflicts (North vs. South).

Second Life is the place where artistic creativity or technique can meet its maximum expression and where people who already has got his own skill can leverage them effectively.

The ability to create prototypes and objects for utility in the Real is one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from most other virtual worlds (Ludlow Wallace, 2007). Second Life is also the place where you can find everything you want from a castle to the reproduction of a famous cities.

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[51] Hine (2000) remembers how women in particular have been able to appropriate technology in ways meaningful which are within their lives

[52] Moreover Linden Lab, in Second Life, adopted the same innovative architecture used in the conception of their own organization that rejected the classic top-down hierarchical network favoring a "governance" horizontal model. Malaby (2009), who studied very closely the Linden Lab, explains the three reasons about the overcoming of the management model in favor of governance: the first one is that the management model applies the old conception of the business of managing top-down; the second reason is that the governance represents the right way in which Linden Lab uses the human experience in the digital realm focusing on a wide range that includes both politics and other fields; the third and final reasons considers governance the term that allows to talk about the influence of politics so that it can recognize the efforts of a balance between control and emerging resources. Governance is a very important topic that well fits into the redefinition of the boundaries of the digital age in which new technologies could reconfigure the possible actions of the people. On the other hand in the history of modern social thought are well known influences of bureaucratic institutions on human relationships, as well as the consequences, treated by Weber and Foucault, the increase in technical practices and strategies of representation with which the institutions streamline, to govern and to control (Malaby, 2009).

2.1. The Professional Job Areas

I have identified five areas shown in the following tab in which I include the jobs carried out in Second Life.

The table shows the professional areas of the works present in Second Life but it is important to specify that the virtual realization requires, in each job, as well a personal creative talent as basic technical skills.

To this list, for information, to be added some professions that we know exist in Second Life but that did not happen in our survey sample.

- Vehicle manufacturer
- Aerospace Engineer
- Creator of jewels
- XML coder
- Game developer
- Travel Guide
- Advertiser
- Bodyguard
- Private Detective
- Weaponsmith

Professional Job Areas					
Managerial	**Intellettual**	**Tecnical**	**Relational/ Comunication**	**Commercial**	**Artistic**
Manager	Teacher/tutor	Scripter	Public relation	Real estate agent land SL	Stylist
Art director	Reporter	Streaming Operator	Escort	Real estate developer RL	Gallery-sculptor-painter
Owner land		Machinima	Helper	Financial consultant	Poet
Owner disco		Cleaner	Psychologist	Touristic Promoter sl	Singer
Social provider		Builder-designer	Legal Counselor	Touristic Promoter Rl	Photographer
Content creator				Financial intermediary	Theatre actor
				Dealer	Dancer
					Model writer
					Editor
					Deejay

3. Second step: learning the "sense of community".

After my birth in Second Life I became a member of Pyramid Cafè, an important Italian group located on Solaris Experiences land, where it's possible to find the locations of a lot of activities and cultural meetings of group such as L'art d'amour, ALI, Second Life Italian mentors, Pyramid Cafè TV that advertises events in Second Life, IPAP (my group) which it's also the location of Irpps National Research Council, Wu Wei (a meditation centre), Torno Kohime foundation and Arte Libera.

The daily observation in the metaverse allowed me to point out that as well as the physical space of leisure, as cultural space, has a place in the urban area and it's possible to lace up the relationships between individuals and classes, so the virtual space has risen to the same function aggregating and socializing.

In Second Life friends spend their free time together as friends of Real Life talking in a square or sitting on a beach in front of a bonfire, dancing or listening live concerts of pop or classical music or simply seeing a movie.

Learning the sense of community means that that the founding principle is *free sharing*;
Sharing the:
- competences
- same time
- same space
- thoughts
- experiences

The effects of this free sharing are:
- Promotion the sense of community
- Reducing social distances (Peer 2 peer: it's not important who you are in Resal Life but what you share with the others)
- Reducing distances in kilometers (with programs like Skype, MSN, and other) sharing the same space
- Allowing emigrants to integrate into ancestors' culture

In fact, living in Second Life and attending the Italian Community, I met a lot of people descent of Italian who attends Italian community for approaching their ancestors' culture. Today there are many ways to interact with other people who living distant and uses Skype, MSN, etc. to communicate; but in the case of Second Life it's possible to feel integrate into a different culture in which everyone feel to belong for their origin. Today, more than yesterday, people likes to return to its roots because the globalization is in progress and that as far as unifying (Morin 2001), is conflicted in its essence.

The community of Second Life is populated by couples who get married and divorced, buy an house and decide to have a child. This may seem strange or absurd, because it's in the opinion of most of the people that the basic condition in a relationship has to satisfy all the five senses fully that can ensure its success. Yet it's not rare that romantic relationships born in the metaverse becoming happy marriages or long-lasting friendships in Real Life too.

The dynamics in the metaverse obviously reflected the sense of belonging to a group that feeds on itself consolidating it. Mayo stated that the psychological well-being of the individual depends more than any other factor by his sense of belonging to a group, in the respect that it enjoys, from the understanding that this shows him as an individual.

As I found in my observation none of people who joined Second Life for curiosity or to "play" was assumed to be able to meet new friends, to be part of a community, to meet the love or develop an unknown passion or technical expertise and above all, none of them, knew that sharing and gratuity were the founding principles of the community that promotes the "*sense of community*".

Fourastié states that to choose our own leisure means to choose our own lives even if the choice of entertainment will be placed always in second place after family obligations, professional or socio-political and will always be influenced by new cultural values (Dumazedier,1985) and that leisure is composed by games that are extensions of the collective consciousness, allowing a respite from the usual (McLuhan, 1951).

So any game, and in this case Second Life with its playfulness, conveys and determines investing them across the development of three areas: relational, professional and cognitive, encouraging the increase of the potential of the same and the start of a process to individual emancipatory inside of a real social context.

4. Third step: learning yourself

As during a sessions with a psychologist, people have to deal its most hidden part, in the same way the virtual environment can be useful to untie the knots of its frustrations, beginning from the admission of them and into an environment like a virtual world, which is not binding, without structural rigidities such as those contained in the real society may facilitate the emersion of that kind of problems.

I refer to a wide range of cases that I have encountered in my research involved in slumbering passions or simply even unknown passions, from artistic predisposition that achieving personal gratifications, economic too, to intimate desires as the cases of women happy to declare their homosexuality or men who exceed all their innate shyness with women. People get in game play without fear and, as stated Ludlow and Wallace (Wallace 2007), they are guided by the psyche of Real Life and they live their relationship with the same intensity as in any other place on the earth. It is not possible to separate an avatar from its "real-identity"[53] (Castells 2009).

In fact, for example, homophobia has not spared the virtual world but at the same time it is also true that there is also a long tradition of tolerance in the cyber world (Harris et al. 2009; Boellstorf 2010) and in Second Life there are many lands managed by gays and lesbians communities with clubs, shops and discos.

In cyberspace the worlds and relationships reside in the human mind with the only difference, in my opinion, that the malleability of virtual worlds predisposes to greater laxity in interpersonal relationships.

The virtual environment, therefore, should not be considered as an alternative to real life but as a space in which to grow, a *creatio mundi* and not a *fuga mundi* (Maldonado 1992), where achieve the expansion of the self and the principle of "be here and now", the basic principle of cyberspace, faithful to the board of living in the

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[53] Sherry Turkle speaks of the 'Second Self', opposing it to 'First Self'. Castells (2009) maintains that it is not possible to separate an avatar from his "real identity" that is supposed to Second Life residents (people) can not reproduce that social dynamics of their Real Life, including those related to a personal line of shadow. This peculiarity human, then this also in the virtual world, demonstrate "the inability to create" Utopia "in the absence of legal restrictions and space" (ibid., 2009). Jurgensons For one can not separate the "real world" from the virtual world and consequently there is no distinction between "first and second self."

present suggested by humanist philosophers, it's shared in the dimension immersive too (Suler 2003).

In Second Life avatar are perfect, beautiful, young, so it's right to say that the exchange with others is mostly mental. Paul Mason (Mason 2006) a BBC journalist in an article interviewed Sara Van Gorden, a leading creator of avatars in Second Life, said that people encountered in real life was no better than those inworld because it's important their personality and not the appearance. In real life a body is a vehicle for the recognition of the mutual exchange between individuals capable of creating society (Simmel 1996) allowing the inclusion of the person in the world (Fornari 2008) and can occupy a priority position with respect to the cultural and social (Mary Douglas 1993).

The bodies of Avatar as stated Nicoletti (Nicoletti 2009) is the medium, the shape of a work written by everyone dazzled, as we are in today's society, from the splendor of perfect body.

Second Life has proved a valuable tool in many case that involved people with health problems.

In fact, many health centers, organizations and companies have found it useful to adopt Second Life as one of the strategies of Web 2.0 communication (Friedman 2007), useful for those people with physical disabilities (Boellstorf 2010) too, or for people affected by "attention deficit" that state of being perceived in the metaverse, like any other resident. Also people with schizophrenia who usually live recluse and rarely communicate, in Second Life they can live experiences that otherwise would not have been able to try (ibid. 2009).

4.1. Two Italian cases of public schools institutions involved in "virtual worlds": University of Pisa and ed-Mondo.

Second life it's considered a great educational environment as evidenced by the projects of many universities presents in it. Infact, the Italian University of Pisa, for example, with the professors Beatrice Rapisarda, Enrica Salvatori and Maria Simi, were part of an international project with the King's College of London in which they involved many students who performed design and construction of historical buildings such as the Tower of London, the Tower of Pisa and Galileo Galilei's laboratory. The experience has shown that students not only learn, being actively engaged in the construction of virtual objects working in a collaborative environment, but they made aware of the problems of communication and using that arise in relation to virtual worlds. In fact, students thanks to this project, showed to be stimulated to improve their culture and to increase their appreciation for the history and the art (Molka-Danielsen, Deutschmann 2009).

Starting from the potential of Second Life, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (Miur) and the National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research (Indire) launched a pilot project in 2009 called *ed-Mondo*, a virtual world dedicated only to teachers and students in which skills and abilities cross different fields like building in 3D, developing the organization of space, sharing, collaborating and exchanging experiences at distance, learning the building of virtual objects, doing web searches to study programming techniques, using the techniques design, recording, graphics / audio / video.

After my virtual experience in SL, I shared the will to dedicate a virtual space exclusive only for teachers and students of primary and middle schools, still

maintaining the principle of high potential offered by virtual worlds. The reasons were to eliminate the critical factors present in Second Life such as keeping kids far from places for adults only, using the same identity of teachers and pupils in real life and to maintain the commercial purposes present in Second Life far from the policy of *ed-Mondo's* as an *e-learning* platform.

5. Final consideration

Hine (Hine 2000) says: *"While ethnographers in the past or in other settings may have been able to look at bounded physical settings, when studying the Internet the concept of the field site is no longer so straightforward."*

After my observation I think that studying virtual worlds is more straightforward because in my opinion they are such as a *middle-land* between Real and Web in which boundaries, even if virtuals, are closer to real one although in this case, Second Life is considered to be more engaging by foreigners compared to other tools available on the web, so much so that many business conferences are held just inside it, unlike what happens in Italy where the component of prejudice Second Life=game hampers the use of the full potential of this platform

Ethnography applied to the virtual world of Second Life has allowed to understanding better what happens in it.

In fact only by giving "life" to my avatar and attending, observing daily and interacting with the Italian community in Second Life, I was able to understand the relational dynamics activated in it and discovering its professional world too.

Second Life offers real opportunities as a developer of stimuli from the single up to everyone taking advantage of the technology to enhance learning and make it efficient and effective way. The learning shared *inworld* allows the birth of many prolific projects, activities and ideas that can be transferred in Real Life enriching it, both in terms of culture and skills both in economic terms.

In the virtual worlds all learning strategies centred on the active *new-learning* such as contextualized learning, cognitive learning, cooperative learning, independent learning are applied in a completely spontaneous.

For these reasons, Second Life, as virtual tool, should be considered as an useful tool and it is therefore necessary to break the wall of prejudice born around it in order to encourage a wider educational and professional use.

The professional role of the *"virtual teacher"* is incisive and it would be appropriate to consider its position in the field of teaching strategies.

Second Life as all the other virtual worlds are not perceived as potential tool for overcoming individualism staff and the success of a project shared, thanking also the common interests distributed on the various groups that ensure the rising up of the cohesion and of the collaboration.

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