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Learning from Online Worlds:
Ambiguity, Interpretation and Pedagogy

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Learning from Social Worlds

Examining: informal and social learning practices in online worlds, including online games.

Asking: What might these learning practices teach us about teaching in virtual worlds?

This presentation:

Part 1. An introduction to a virtual world, Second Life. Teaching in Second Life

Part 2. Learning practices in online worlds (multiplayer games). Collaboration, conflict, interpretation and instruction in online games

Part 3. Conclusions and Implications

What we use Second Life for

- MA Media Culture and Communications
- MA ICT and Education

- We use SL in combination with a more conventional VLE (moodle or Blackboard) - not as a replacement.

What is Second Life anyway?

Developers: Linden Labs, online at http://secondlife.com/

What our classes look like

Visits...tours

What our classes look like

Plots, planning, pedagogy...
Using simple structures to
suggest action/location (sofa,
rug).

More details at http://learningfromsocialworlds.wordpress.com/learning-to-teach-in-second-life/

Learning *in* Second Life?

– using SL as a platform, tours, discussions, exhibitions, building, making/using simulations…making machinima (animations)

Or learning *about* Second Life?

– Online communities, online identity, virtual ethnography, methodology, virtual pedagogy, ethics, research design, etc.

These options are not mutually exclusive of course...

What the students said

- I could feel the 'real class' when I saw bunch of you gathering at the outside of the ground floor. I felt that finally I would meet all my classmates (even though it was not real). Can you imagine in real life when you meet your classmates for the first time and you will automatically introduce and ask around about people? It was fun (Ae's report)

- In all honesty, I felt I learnt more from the single 'lecture' in Second Life than I have done through the weekly discussions on Blackboard. That's not to say Blackboard is of little use or Second Life is a revelation in terms of teaching and learning: the fact it was face-to-face and as close to a real lecture as we have had on this module made a great deal of difference. (G's report)

- [Things like Second Life were] so interesting because they offered me the opportunity to "meet" the other members of the module and have a closer talk to the teachers. (E's module debrief)

- Second Life is great and I'd love to do more in it. I'd never have tried it but for this module. (A's module debrief)

So we keep using it...

There are also negative comments/reactions:

- wondering about 'how to act' as a student or a student-researcher in this context, keeping up with/contributing to a text-based discussion.

(2 examples - students who disliked SL).

We looked at both positive and negative feedback from the students with a particular focus on affect – how the session felt, dissatisfaction, anxiety, pleasure, etc.

- We listed the factors associated with affect, and arrived at the notion of 'ambiguity' ...

- Ambiguity? That meaning was unresolved/unfixed, potential for confusion...as well as heterogeneity/multiple perspectives and different interpretations.

Table 2: The factors in the sessions that contributed to or countered ambiguity

Classes 1 and 2	Classes 3 and 4
Elective activity	Core activity (but still voluntary)
Smaller group	Larger group
Guest presenters (with tutors present)	2 of the 3 tutors were known to the class
Course taught in mixed mode of delivery: via conventional VLE (First Class), 2 days face-to-face residential teaching, 2 elective sessions in Second Life.	All distance learning (on Blackboard) with 2Second Life sessions.
Mix of full time/on campus students, with part-time distance learners	All distance learners
Less straightforward relationship between course content (computer games, gaming and education), and Second Life as a whole, or as a phenomena	Obvious links between course content (computer mediated communications and education) and Second Life as phenomena
Some of the course literature (on simulations and role-playing for example) does apply toSecond Life.	Clear relevance of much of the course literature and set reading.
Session format: Tours, guest presenters, projected images, various locations.	Familiar discussion and presentation format, in one location.
(greater ambiguity)	(reduced ambiguity)

Carr, D. Oliver, M., Burn, A. (2010) 'Learning, Teaching and Ambiguity in Virtual Worlds', in *Researching Learning in Virtual Worlds*. Peachey, A, Gillen, J, Livingstone, D, Smith-Robbins, S. (eds) UK : Springer
Online draft at: http://learningfromsocialworlds.wordpress.com/paper-for-relive-08-at-the-ou/

Ambiguity and virtual world pedagogy

Managing ambiguity involves thinking about:

- Teaching context (What is the course? Who are the students? What are their expectations?)
- Learning context (distance and/or classroom?)
- the relationships between the session's topic, and the module or course as a whole, and Second Life 'as an object of study' (lots of potential for confusion here)
- the student as 'newbie'
- the use of 'markers' or conventions such as chairs or seminar rooms for orientation…

Ambiguity: build it in, or design it out ?

I return to this after looking at learning practices in other online worlds…

Part 2

Examining informal learning practices in a different online world – World of Warcraft

Thinking more about relationships between
> *meaning, affect and interpretation*
> *and*
> *learning and instruction*

What is World of Warcraft?

It's an MMORPG

RPG style rule-set ('leveling up', specialist classes, collaborative groups, etc.)

Players pay a monthly subscription to access the game

In the region of 12 million players, from the US, Europe and Asia

Supported by lots of websites, fan guides and forums

Players can play on their own, or in casual 'pick up groups' and/or join guilds (larger more permanent groups)

More information:

http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/

We went looking for learning practices

- I was working with colleague Martin Oliver

- Most of the literature on learning in online games focuses on guilds and mentoring.

- We wanted to collect data about that would relate to the game, the way it is played and the contexts of play – at the same time.

- So we decided to interview couples who play the game together while sharing a real-world space.

Carr, D and Oliver, M (2009) 'Tanks, Chauffeurs and Backseat Drivers: Competence in MMORPGs'. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*. Vol 3, No 1 (the journal is available online)

Screenshots of the interviews in World of Warcraft…

Out of the interview data…

- Developed a framework for looking at increasing competence in relation to the 'management of resources'

- Where '*management*' involves the recognizing, negotiating, accessing and applying of….

- '*resources*' - which might be material, ludic or social.

- Actually the 3 resources mix all the time, but the provisional classification meant that we could be specific about learning practices while acknowledging the complexity of competence in this context.

Managing resources…

MATERIAL: 'Real world' things and the contexts of play, paying for the game, sharing an account, who gets the 'best chair', who plays on the 'best computer', childcare

LUDIC: Obvious game-play things, levelling up/gaining in experience, loot, gear, talents. Using 'alts' to manage leveling rate. Taking on supportive or specific roles (healer, tank). Attempting to 'role play'. Being selective about play styles (RP, PvP). Working with game structures and constraints

SOCIAL: Guilds, friendship groups. Mentoring. Delegation and dissemination (gathering and sharing of detailed information relating to gear or builds, for instance). Peer review, critique and assessment. Affect and responsibility (for errors and wipes)

We found that…

- 'Playing together' can mean various things (a shared knowledge of the game, turn taking…or chatting about the game over a meal)

- Learning in WoW is evident in players' increasingly sophisticated management of real-world, ludic and social resources.

- Learning in MMORPGs involves an ongoing process of sharing, specialization and negotiation as well as a constant blurring of boundaries between play and other areas of life

- **Competence is variously constituted and variously assessed by those taking part**

So, there is scope for ambiguity…

The need for tact…

- Backseat driving – 'helper as pest'
- Couples talked about the potential discord (over mismatched expectations, different play styles, perceived competencies and preferences)
- And acknowledged the need for tack and flexibility when managing these…
- And noted that these tensions play out in groups and guilds across the whole game - contributing to their formation and their disintegration

What happens to these conflicts over skill, expertise and learning outside of a relationship?

What happens when there is less reason to be tactful?

Recent work…

Looked at these same arguments and tensions in games that only last 25 minutes

Carr, D. (in press) 'Interpretation, Conflict and Instruction in Online Multiplayer Games: Lessons from Warsong Gulch' in *Computer Games / Players / Game Cultures: A Handbook on the State and Perspectives of Digital Game Studies*, edited by J Fromme and A Unger. Publ: Springer (draft copy online at playhouse blog)

'Play rough': Battlegrounds

- 'Battlegrounds' are a game-within-a-game, inside World of Warcraft (25 minute, WG).
- Player v. player (in teams). 'Capture the flag'
- Communicate within your team using chat-text
- Chat: Abuse, whining, arguments, moaning…as well as wit, humor, glee, teamwork
- Attempts at leadership (broadcast instructions, directions…get ignored, get frustrated…)
- Collaboration and invention (sharing information, teaming up in defense or attack, healing, etc.)
- Different expectations/interpretations - For example, playing to win the game v. playing to fight

Screenshots online at...

http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/battlegrounds/warsong/warsong-gallery.html

1 of the battlegrounds in WoW – Warsong Gulch
Playing field
chat window with team discussion...
Game-space, goals and game rules...

Methods

Retrospective textual analysis based on playing 'Warsong Gulch' between 2008-2010

(see the chapter for a discussion of these matters)

Some examples of the text-chat..

Player : great now get def or attack! We're gonna lose…go def
    dammit

Player : ffs if all u do is def how the hell do u expect to win

Player: damn when u see they get flag try to kill
    them

Player: where the !@%$ is everybody?

Player: You idiots ...

Player: goddamit rogue [you have] got 2
    %^*&% stuns…use them on healer

Player: dude where are you running?

Player : go go go go go go go go [...]@£$% GO GO GO GO GO

Player: we suck

Player: GO GET FLAG don't die…go get flag ffs

Player: FFS – how hard can it be?

Player: Don't sheep him you noob ...

Most of the 'learning in online games' literature is concerned with mentoring in guilds and people being *nice...*

In Warsong Gulch, things are much more mixed up...

- Unsolicited 'advice'
- Combating the other team - while fighting your own team-mates
- Collaborative and competitive play are mixed up
- Instruction and 'being mean' are mixed up…

So…

Even in a rule-based game with clear goals and a limited game-space - participants argue about what is going on

They argue about expertise, competence, strategy and credibility

Clearly there is scope for ambiguity here too

Conflicting interpretation

Player-to-player pedagogy has generally been discussed in relation to being helpful and nice, etc. BUT If we look at these pedagogic efforts in the context of conflicting interpretation, and while using a particular model of textuality - it suggests an alternative account -

That player-to-player pedagogy can involve an attempt by one player to impose his/her 'preferred reading' on other participants

So even in a game with clear rules – these ambiguities and anxieties about meaning are present…as are associated attempts to control meaning

So?

Thinking about Second Life classes again, and **interpretation, affect** and **ambiguity** – this time considered along with issues of **power**

And thinking about a politically informed pedagogy in this context – what that might mean/look like...for eg:

- Allowing for shifts in power relations and roles, empowering students, building community and relationships, allowing space for individual voices to contribute, respecting personal experience and diversity, challenging the conventions of theory, authority and instruction *(Webb, Allen, Walker (2002) 'Feminist Pedagogy' article...)*

Lots of potential for this in virtual worlds

Which raises questions, I think, about some of the rhetoric of ICT and education literature – for eg. what does being an 'active learner' actually entail? It doesn't just mean 'people doing stuff' - does it?

Conclusions and implications

•Ambiguity managed //while allowing for learner's agency and heterogeneity..?

•Making pedagogic design visible

•Rethinking roles, events, settings

•Associating the above with progressive and reflexive pedagogy.

Which raises a final question:

Education and online worlds: Is this about change, or just about a change in venue?

Consider for instance, issues of access and inclusion – and the introduction of 'voice' to Second Life…see Carr 2010.

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Presented by Diane Carr, Nov 2010.

http://playhouse.wordpress.com/

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