

## Virtual Worlds: Integrating *Second Life* into the History Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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IMAGINE having the ability to transport your entire classroom to Europe during the summer of 1916, to the very epicenter of the First World War. You, along with your students, are now standing in the winding trenches of the Somme in France. The sudden sound of artillery fire startles you. Weary soldiers pass by and, hearing a whistle blare, climb on to the fire step and then over the top of the trenches, into no man's land toward certain doom. Mustard gas begins to drift in, clouding your vision. Other soldiers trudge through the trenches, carrying the wounded, and they pause to speak with you about the horrors of the war. Your experience at the Battle of the Somme is visceral and immersive, engaging you and your students completely within an interactive world. Such an experience would be difficult to render in a traditional classroom, and few students have the resources to travel to various historical locations, such as the remains of the Western Front, throughout the globe to visit such sites. The virtual 3D world of *Second Life*, however, offers such experiences, along with a variety of further innovative opportunities to expand the ways we teach and discuss the past.

*Second Life* began in 1999, when thirty-year-old entrepreneur Philip Rosedale founded Linden Labs in San Francisco, California.<sup>2</sup> Rosedale had been involved with computers and software development from an early age, and long dreamed of creating a virtual world, not unlike the “Metaverse”

portrayed in Neal Stephenson's seminal 1992 cyberpunk novel, *Snow Crash*.<sup>3</sup> Video games have a long and popular history in the United States and the larger world, and as the accessibility of the Internet expanded to more and more Americans in the 1990s, video gaming moved online. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) gained popularity from the mid-1990s onward, with games such as *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* bringing together players from across the country and the globe. The successes of platforms such as *World of Warcraft* exemplify the globalization of the modern digital age, allowing people from around the planet to interact while breaking down cultural, linguistic, and other borders.<sup>4</sup> From the outset, however, *Second Life* founder Philip Rosedale was not interested in creating a gaming world. "I'm not building a game," Rosedale commented in 2004, "I'm building a new country."<sup>5</sup> Whether or not *Second Life* is a true "game" has been debated, but what is certain is that the content within the world is almost completely user-driven.<sup>6</sup> And unlike *World of Warcraft* or other online games, there is no programmed objective in *Second Life*, and users can create their own environments for their own purposes. At any given time, approximately 50,000 users are logged in to *Second Life*, and there are approximately 35 million accounts from across the globe. While such numbers pale in comparison to users of social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, *Second Life* offers much more potential for education and instruction than the most popular of social media technology.

*Second Life* offers a virtual universe where users from across the globe are able to craft a world and personal avatars—virtual representations of themselves—in almost any conceivable fashion. *Second Life* is used most often as a social space, as users visit cafés, bars, and restaurants; go dancing; buy clothes and other consumer goods; or hang out at the beach with friends. Users also stage complete performances of Shakespeare plays, poetry readings, live musical concerts, and other artistic ventures. Such activities demonstrate that *Second Life* is not used exclusively for pure escapism. In fact, *Second Life* offers unique opportunities for those with limited financial means or with physical handicaps to explore the world, albeit a virtual one, and interact with people from across the globe in ways they most likely never would be able to in the "real" world. The *Second Life* experience is, ultimately, whatever the user wants it to be. The experience is not, of course, limited merely to social interactions or for leisure.

A college French class, for example, could use *Second Life* to talk in real-time with French speakers from France or other Francophone countries. Students could discuss, *en français*, politics, art, culture, and other issues with native speakers in a relaxed environment. *Second Life* is becoming

increasingly common in higher education, particularly in the disciplines of business and education. The United States government itself has a presence in *Second Life*, with NASA, NOAA, the CDC, and the NIH all having facilities engaging in research and outreach in the virtual world.<sup>7</sup> Even the United States Armed Forces have begun using this technology for military training and simulations.<sup>8</sup> The potential for utilizing this medium in the history classroom has largely been untapped, but offers nearly limitless possibilities for both educators and students.<sup>9</sup> There are two potential ways of using *Second Life* that I will discuss in this article. The first is the use of *Second Life* as a meeting space. The second is the use of this virtual world as a tool for historical inquiry, particularly public history. While *Second Life*'s utility in higher education has been discussed in some depth, the literature has not adequately examined its potential specifically for the history classroom.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Second Life* as a Meeting Space**

My initial foray into *Second Life* took place during the spring semester of 2011 in my first online course at the University of South Florida. I was familiar with online technology, particularly Blackboard, before this course, but had never taught a completely online class. The new course, "The Second World War: A Global History," was a non-traditional online course, as it was not self-paced. Students were required to participate in weekly discussion boards through Blackboard and also were required to participate in four virtual, synchronous discussions in *Second Life* related to our four main texts. I also created podcasts for the course, which were supplemented by links to videos from YouTube. I wanted the course to be a mix of traditional learning through readings and lectures partnered with discussion-based learning through a virtual environment. Rather than using other available tools for synchronous discussion, I decided to engage my students in a more immersive experience.

To help students acclimate to the world of *Second Life*, I required them at the beginning of the semester to first create an avatar and then attend *Second Life*'s self-paced orientation.<sup>11</sup> During the second week of our course, I held two welcome sessions—in *Second Life*—on USF's ECampus, set on an island containing several comfortable classrooms with picturesque views of the ocean. The ECampus is equipped with classrooms with seating for approximately twenty students each, exhibit space, as well as faculty offices (on the beach, of course). Assisting me during the welcome sessions were two knowledgeable representatives from USF's Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teaching Excellence (C21TE), where I first learned of *Second Life* through participation in a yearlong online technology and

teaching workshop. At the welcome session, I was available to answer any questions that students had about the course itself, and since I was at that point a *Second Life* neophyte myself, the C21TE staff helped students with technical questions related to *Second Life*.

As with most technology, there is a learning curve in *Second Life*, and significant time must be spent within the world to make the experience worthwhile. Users need to develop their motor skills (such as walking, focusing on and manipulating various objects, and, yes, flying) as well as their research skills. To help students develop both sets of skills, their first assignment was to create a *Second Life* account and avatar (which is free for a basic account) and to find a historical destination within *Second Life*. The *Second Life* browser has a search function, which allows users to search for destinations, groups, or people. Typing “World War I” into the search engine will bring up several results, including the trenches of the First World War site mentioned at the beginning of this article. I gave students no particular instructions, only that they should find a site of interest to them. Students found some wonderful sites, including a fantastic Weimar Berlin re-creation, the world of ancient Greece, and a replica of the Sistine Chapel, among many others.

Following my students’ orientation with *Second Life*, I held four virtual discussions throughout the semester focused on our readings (three monographs and Elie Wiesel’s memoir-novel, *Night*), and the individual sections ranged between ten and twenty students. As with real-world discussions, instructors will need to find the right size—and style—for their circumstances.<sup>12</sup> A section of twenty students pushed the boundaries of management in my virtual classroom; for example, one would not want to deal with a virtual discussion involving thirty-five students. On the other end of the spectrum, during one poorly attended section in the middle of the semester, one group consisted of only five students, most of whom were reticent to participate using voice chat, which made the discussion less than effective.

Within the world of *Second Life*, users can interact with other avatars in one of two ways. The first method is through text chat, which will be familiar to anyone who has used an instant messaging program, and the second method is through voice chat. For my course, I required students to purchase headsets with microphones, as our virtual discussions were conducted using voice chat. During the first discussion, I did allow students to contribute via the text chat, but I quickly discovered that doing so interrupted the flow of the discussion. My preferred method was voice. A small group of students never participated using the voice chat, either through technological difficulties, refusal to purchase a headset, or simply an unwillingness to speak in front of their instructor and classmates. I



**Figure 1:** My virtual history classroom at USF's ECampus in *Second Life*.

recommend that instructors decide on their policy regarding voice chat versus text chat before the semester begins.

After students arrived and were settled, I began our discussions as I would a “real-life” course by asking students if they had any questions about the course or upcoming assignments. After these questions were addressed, I then asked a series of questions related to our readings. I asked students to type “\*” into the text chat box when they wanted to answer, which allowed me to create a queue for the various discussion questions that I posed to them. The questions were based on our readings and were mostly open-ended, and I allowed plenty of time to deviate from my planned questions. I allotted ninety minutes for each discussion section, which gave us plenty of time to get settled, address any questions or concerns about the course, deal with any technical difficulties, and adequately cover that week’s reading.

Overall, students in my course seemed to appreciate the virtual discussions for both their novelty and ability to allow students to interact with their fellow classmates and instructor in an online class in real-time. Studies have found that people attach themselves strongly to their avatars, and one of the aspects I most appreciate about the world of *Second Life* is that there is a level of anonymity allowed.<sup>13</sup> Even in a virtual classroom (see Figure 1), students were able to express themselves through their avatars (some students put much work into refining the look and style while others

used the default selection throughout the semester) and, like online forums and chats, were able to remain anonymous. While I knew the identity of each avatar, students were free to name themselves whatever they liked. Such freedom of expression and anonymity allowed, I believe, students who would be too shy or reticent to offer opinions in a real world classroom the opportunity to better contribute. Our discussions covered controversial topics such as the mythologizing of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bombs by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By allowing students some measure of anonymity, I felt that more students participated in the discussions and did not hesitate as much as they would in a “real-life” classroom to give their opinions.

There are several synchronous tools for online discussions available, such as Blackboard Collaborate. Yet such tools focus primarily on conversations, and do not replicate the atmosphere of a classroom. Since students are attached to an avatar in *Second Life* and can see their fellow students and instructor in a virtual space, the experience is far more visceral than normal web conferencing. With the additional ability to take students on virtual tours of historical sites or to conduct discussions with experts who could join the class as a guest, the potential exists for dynamic discussions that will involve further students in engaging with the course material.

The major frustration of students with *Second Life*, which I often shared, was the frequent computer crashes that occurred within the world. But as a learning tool, students largely enjoyed the experience. In an anonymous mid-term survey on the course overall, I asked students if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that “the virtual discussions in *Second Life* have been a meaningful way of learning and interacting with classmates and the instructor.” Seventy-six percent of the respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with this statement. At the end of the survey, I offered students the opportunity to note what they liked most about the course, as well as what they would like to see improved. Several commented on the usefulness of *Second Life*. One student noted: “my favorite part of this course is the virtual discussions. I think it’s a great idea using this feature to have discussions on topics assigned.” Another lauded “the meaningful discussions. Every time we’ve met in *Second Life* I’ve found it entertaining and informative, which is the best of both worlds.” Several students appreciated the use of new technology. One wrote: “I truly enjoy the addition of technology to what could otherwise have been a fairly ordinary class. The use of virtual classrooms greatly enriches the course material.” Another noted how the discussions were comparable to real-world experiences: “I have enjoyed the discussions the most. I feel that I get a lot out of them and it is great to be able to bounce opinions off of others.” Further students found the medium impressive and wanted to

see more of it in other classes. One student commented: “*Second Life* is a great tool for online learning and I hope this is adopted by more online courses.” Finally, one student was so enthusiastic about virtual discussions that he or she thought the course should have more of them, noting: “there is no need for the final [exam]. Unless it is a university requirement, I feel that we have learned plenty through discussions. I feel that there should be more of them to supplement the final.”

Despite the large amount of praise for the immersive medium, some students struggled with the new technology. One commented, “I was not a fan of the *Second Life* program. I prefer a more traditional online class where it is essentially ‘read this, write this, take this test, all by these dates.’” Another lamented the confusion of virtual discussions, particularly the open nature of the questions: “I do not like the use of *Second Life*. Most of the time I’m not sure what answers are right or wrong.” Finally, one student did not like the idea that *Second Life* is, for the most part, a completely open world where users can (and usually do) interact with other avatars. A few of our discussions were visited by users who were not connected with the course, and students frequently interacted with other users during their two assignments that took place in the larger world of *Second Life*. A student commented: “the use of *Second Life* is something I am a little bit uncomfortable with. I did not like receiving messages from people I did not know. Another live chat type tool like Elluminate or something through Blackboard would be more comfortable in this setting.”

### **The Potential of *Second Life* for Historical Study**

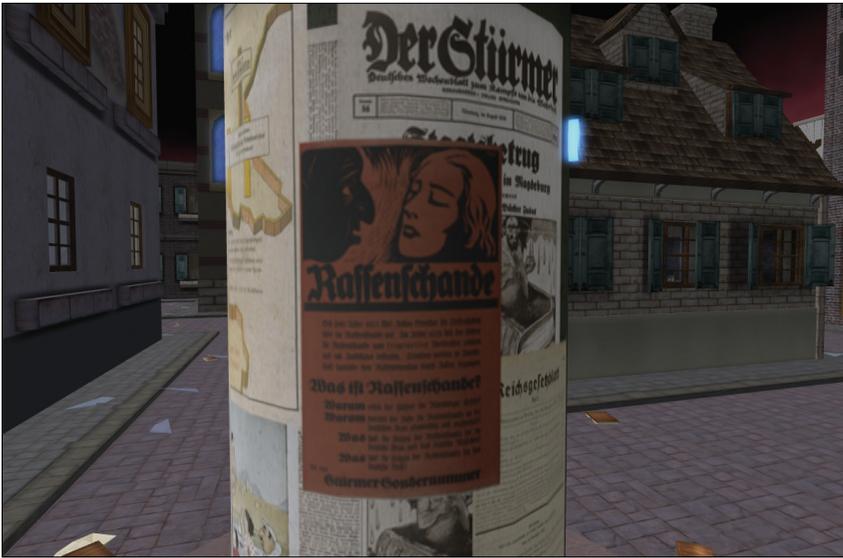
*Second Life* is useful not only for classroom discussions, but also has potential for historical inquiry, research, and creativity. I had my students engage in one specific activity within *Second Life* that facilitated a more intimate encounter with a historical event, and will propose possibilities for projects that educators may consider to make the most of virtual spaces. For the second paper in my course, my students were asked to compare and contrast the experience of Jews as portrayed in Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s virtual Kristallnacht exhibit, “Witnessing History: Kristallnacht: The November 1938 Pogroms.” The prompt asked:

Explore the Nazi persecution of the Jews through your experience in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Kristallnacht exhibit and Elie Wiesel’s novel, *Night*. How does each medium portray the Holocaust and why it occurred? What did Jews experience during the Holocaust? Which medium was most effective, and why? And finally, what do both experiences tell us about the memory of the Holocaust?



**Figure 2:** A shattered Jewish shop window from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Kristallnacht exhibit in *Second Life*.

While my students ultimately found *Night* to be the more effective medium, the virtual museum provided a different way for students to understand the persecution of the Jews by the Nazi government. The Kristallnacht exhibit (see Figures 2 and 3) is the pinnacle of the historical experience in *Second Life*, as it provides excellent historical context, documents and other primary sources, oral histories, and a virtual experience of the pogroms.<sup>14</sup> Numerous websites exist on various aspects of the Holocaust, including the Kristallnacht pogroms. Yet visiting a website and engaging in a first-person immersive experience are very different. As David Klevan, the Education Manager for Technology and Distance Learning Initiatives, Division of Outreach Technology at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, commented, “That’s one of the things we learned from the kids we worked with a year ago. There’s a different sense of reality. That’s one of the things we’re hoping for that the folks that come through will not only learn more about history, but absorb it differently. When you go through the streets and see the kiosk or the newspapers hanging on windows, you absorb it. The thing for us is to how to do this without trivializing it or making it feel gamelike. You don’t want them to feel like they were there, because they weren’t, but that they’ll know something more.”<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 3:** Replicas of Nazi propaganda within the Kristallnacht exhibit, including the *Rassenschande*, or the Law on the Protection of German Blood and German Honor.

Many of my students came to similar conclusions, noting that the virtual 3D setting and freedom of the user to explore their surroundings created a unique opportunity for learning. One of my students concluded:

The experience of the Kristallnacht Exhibit is a visual one. One is able to venture into a virtual past and view the destruction and terror that laid waste to the homes, shops, and synagogues of the Jewish people in the early part of the Holocaust. The user is able to click on various photographs and documents throughout the exhibit to get a better understanding of what took place during this event. For example, in the police station, the user can read the document that was given to the German Police instructing them how to carry out the terror attacks. Walking throughout the ghost town, the user views the broken glass, the vandalism, the strewn papers and the general destruction of virtually anything Jewish within the city. In another part of the Exhibit, the user is able to enter a secret hiding room that was used by Jews in an attempt to escape the Nazi attacks. This is effective in giving the user an experience in which he or she can *see* what happened to the Jewish people and their property during “Kristallnacht” in a very visual, artistic and meaningful way.

Another student commented:

Walking through the re-creation of the Kristallnacht event, windows would shatter after reading a specific eyewitness account and propaganda was

placed throughout the area, promoting hatred towards the Jews. Words and caricatures categorizing Jews as pigs and thieves were the most common of graffiti and flyers in the exhibit. Specific cases such as victims that died during Kristallnacht and statistics of how many Jews were persecuted during the event were provided to the students every time they touched an interactive photo or building. The whole experience is amazing for the students who are unaware of Kristallnacht or how deadly the Nazis were just in the start of their campaign against the Jewish people.

Yet there are limits to a virtual museum. One student noted some of the limitations of the exhibit, concluding:

There are flaws to the exhibit that hinder how much information a person can learn about the Holocaust. For example, there are many hidden areas of the exhibit that students could easily miss while exploring. If students are not technologically savvy then they would not be able to read the note cards given with each interactive photo or area touched by the character. There was only limited information on the note card about the specific interactive areas like explaining what certain photographs were about. There is no direction on where to go in the exhibit and a student is walking around blindly hoping to witness everything that the beautiful area has to offer. However, the technology aspect of the exhibit is refreshing. Students can watch Holocaust survivor testimonies after they exit the Kristallnacht portion, which are very interesting and informative about lives of Jews that are still affected even today.

While my course's experience in *Second Life* was limited to virtual discussions and my students' interaction with the Kristallnacht exhibit, there are intriguing potentials for developing further uses for *Second Life*'s virtual world for the history classroom. Given the nature of modern higher education funding and considerable difficulties with diminishing budgets, particularly at public colleges and universities, the suggestions in the following section may appear unrealistic to some educators, and offers room for discussion on the use and cost of technology in higher education. Yet despite financial challenges, the potential does exist to collaborate and share expenses between institutions, and enterprising educators could create a worthy project for, say, a NEH Digital Humanities grant.

Purchasing land in *Second Life* is relatively inexpensive, though there are ongoing costs to maintain a virtual space. The official currency of *Second Life* is the Linden, and it is traded on the market just like the U.S. dollar or Euro. One U.S. dollar (USD) will buy approximately 200 Linden dollars. Buying a small parcel of land in a public space, which would be accessible to any *Second Life* user, can be as inexpensive as 5 USD per month, though a project that sought a very large private estate with complete control of the environment would cost approximately 1000 USD up front, with

monthly payments of around 300 USD. A small grant, depending on the necessary size of the virtual location, would be more than sufficient to cover the costs of purchasing a small parcel of public land which, of course, would be accessible to many more users. Educational institutions and non-profit organizations receive a fifty percent discount on land owning and maintenance costs from Linden Labs. Faculty or students do not need any special programming skills to construct a virtual environment in *Second Life*—only time and a creative mind.<sup>16</sup> Faculty or students could create nearly any conceivable historical location, with as much as or as little detail as desired. Educators or their students could create a historic time and place, a virtual museum—akin to the Kristallnacht exhibit—or a combination of the two. Pictures, photographs, documents, sound, and video can be added to give historical legitimacy to a site. An excellent project for a course would be to assign students to create a historical site related to the class. Again, *Second Life* would work for any time period, country, or subject. The only limits are those of the creator's imagination. Creating a historical site or museum in a virtual environment would allow students to grapple with the same types of issues that they would encounter in a real-life museum setting. Students could be prompted to discuss historical accuracy and interpretation, the privileging of sources, conflicting and competing memories, and contested views of events and their meanings.

Beyond the creation of virtual historical sites, *Second Life* could also be used as a collaborative tool and for outreach. Professors can give lectures—with images, video, sound, and even PowerPoint presentations—within *Second Life* to virtual audiences around the globe. *Second Life* could also bridge gaps between secondary and higher education, and could be used for long-distance collaboration as well. Scholars from other parts of one's state, country, or the larger world could give guest lectures, and professors could collaborate on courses, team teaching and developing historical content within the virtual world. As noted earlier, the current historical content within *Second Life* is limited at this point, and so the potential exists for nearly any kind of virtual site, teaching experience, or collaboration within the world. While *Second Life* may not exist in its current incarnation forever, the user-driven 3D experience will only continue to be developed and honed over time.

As our world becomes increasingly digitized and connected by technology, the options for integrating innovative mediums into our classrooms continue to expand. *Second Life* is a unique virtual world that offers substantial potential for educators who want to broaden the experiences of students, as well as themselves. Whether through the use of virtual discussions through or more immersive experiences such as

historical tours or the creation of historical sites or museums, *Second Life* can be whatever educators want it to be. The historical discipline would benefit greatly from innovative educators who are interested in expanding the small historical world within *Second Life*. Building a virtual historical community will only help to broaden the appeal of the discipline, and will allow historians to remain at the forefront of technological developments in teaching. Creating global connections—even virtual ones—for continued historical inquiry is an effort worth pursuing, one that will certainly offer greater opportunities for scholars and educators to reach larger audiences and to enhance the learning experiences for all our students, in both the virtual and real worlds.

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Regan Gurang, Andy Kersten, David Voelker, and the anonymous reviewers for their careful readings and insightful critiques of this manuscript. The author is particularly in debt to the staff of the former Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teaching Excellence at the University of South Florida in Tampa. During the 2010-2011 academic year, the author participated in a yearlong workshop, “Increments and Transformations: Enhancing Teaching and Learning with Technology,” which first introduced *Second Life* to the author as a potential teaching tool. The workshop was instrumental in broadening the author’s appreciation of the vast array of available educational technology, as well as the numerous pedagogical challenges of both the use of technology in the classroom and online learning. The author participated in a similar workshop during the spring semester of 2012 at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, and thanks Aeron Haynie, the Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, for providing the welcome opportunity to discuss online learning with fellow colleagues, as well as the staff of the Learning Technology Center, particularly Leif Nelson, with whom the author engaged in several enlightening conversations concerning *Second Life*.

2. See Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Wagner James Au, *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World* (New York: Collins, 2008); and Thomas M. Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

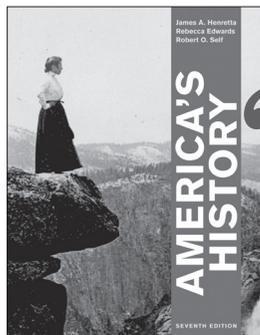
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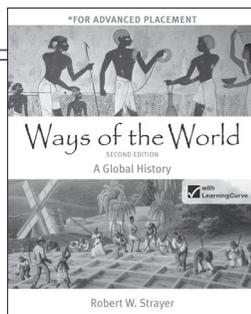
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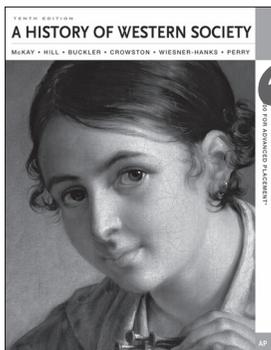
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