

Real-life Tasks in a Virtual World



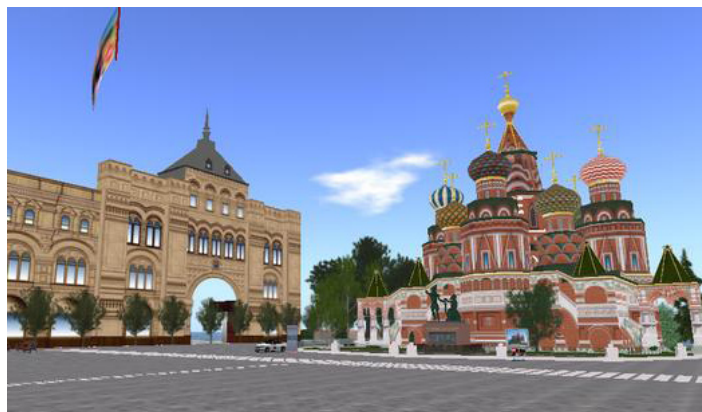
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Web 2.0 technologies have begun to provide educators with new ways of helping students connect real-life tasks with classroom learning. Virtual worlds represent one of the new opportunities for innovation. I will discuss my experiences of using a virtual world called *Second Life* (secondlife.com) in the Russian-language classroom, including the creation of a simulated Russian village for students, and its potential for enhancing student learning.

Second Life (hereafter referred to as SL) is a virtual world in which users interact with the world and each other using visual representations of themselves called avatars. Avatars can interact with the world in a variety of ways, including traveling through it, visiting places in it, communicating with other avatars using chat and voice chat, joining groups, attending events, buying virtual land, creating objects and scripts within the world, and even participating in virtual commerce. SL differs from other online “games” in that it has no inherent goal, and simply exists

as a platform and environment for whatever purposes its users create for it.

Perhaps for this reason, educators have been interested in exploring how to use SL for educational purposes. The approaches have been varied: many universities have created virtual campuses, but others have used it in different ways. A few examples include Canadian border guards being trained using a virtual border crossing¹, the US Department of Energy’s area in which avatars can look inside a virtual particle accelerator, and visitors to an area² on mental health can experience a simulation that mimics the symptoms of mental disorders.³ Even areas without explicit educational intent can be used for learning purposes: Moscow Island,



Screen capture of Red Square, Moscow
<http://secondlife.com/destination/moscow-island>

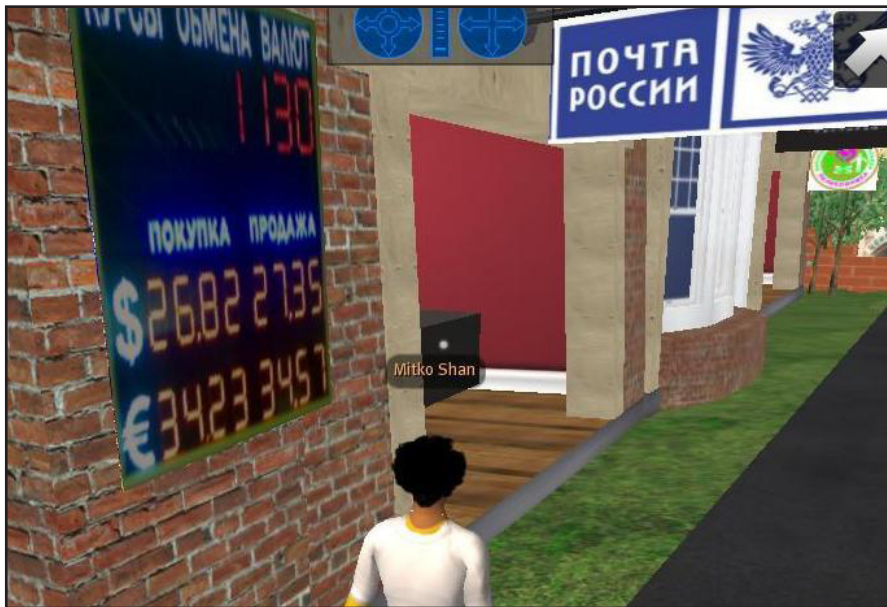
for example, reproduces Red Square, easily visited by Russian language students.⁴ Avatars can gather in one space for events such as lectures, conferences, or musical performances, and can interact with others from anywhere in the world. As a teacher of Russian language and project assistant in foreign language technology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was at first primarily interested in SL as a forum in which students

might be able to interact with native speakers of Russian. I discovered an area in the world called the “Russian Welcome Area,” and found there a place in which people were “speaking” in Russian using text chat (now voice chat is also available). A colleague at UW-Madison, Molly Thomasy Blasing, also started to be interested in the possibility of using SL as a way to interact with native speakers. She and I saw great potential not only in SL as a venue for meeting and talking to Russian people, but in the cultural content that we experienced there. For example, when we were in the Russian Welcome Area on International Women’s Day (an important holiday in Russia), we were presented with a virtual flower by another avatar we met – evidence of the target culture

within SL. Molly decided to try taking students into SL, and I assisted her in organizing an experiment that would take a small group into the Russian Welcome Area.

We encountered a variety of problems during our experiment. Technical challenges included access to SL (a computer

should have its software loaded as well as high-speed internet access and relatively powerful video and processing capabilities), and problems because of students’ unfamiliarity with typing in Russian characters. Cultural problems manifested themselves as well. A few of the native speaker interlocutors expressed displeasure at our group crashing their Friday night dance party by using slang and vulgar language, much of which the students did not understand. Interestingly, however, several other native speakers



Screen capture of Shannon Spasova's virtual space, "Zhanningrad"

defended the students, chiding the offenders for mistreating "guests". Overall, though, student participants held the opinion that SL could provide them with a new way of interacting with native speakers of Russian.

The difficulties that we encountered during that experiment did not deter us from using SL with students, but it certainly affected the plans that we made for how we might use the tool with students in the future. Molly continued to use SL with students whose language proficiency was intermediate level or higher. She focused on questions of avatar identity, evidence of the target culture in SL, and evidence of language acquisition in the virtual setting (a full description of her conclusions from the two experiments can be found in the Spring 2010 issue of the *Slavic and East European Journal*).⁵

At Dalhousie University, however, most students in Russian language classes have a language proficiency of intermediate or below. So instead of using SL to introduce students to native speakers immediately, I decided to create a virtual space. My intentions

were threefold: firstly, to give the students a "safe" space in which to get oriented to SL and its environment; secondly, to create an environment simulating the target culture; and thirdly, to try to take advantage of what SL has that a real life classroom does not – namely, its visual, "embodied" nature. Encouraging students to use SL as a vehicle for interactions with native speakers became a long-term peripheral goal.

With a small Teaching and Learning with Technology grant from Dalhousie's Centre for Learning and Teaching, I created a virtual Russian town.⁶ I had in mind tasks typically found in first- and second-year language textbooks – following and giving directions to locations in a city. Traditional pen-and-paper map exercises cannot mimic the way it feels to be in the physical space of the city, where you cannot see around corners or skip back to your starting point if you take a wrong turn. The "embodied" nature of SL, though, can do this, and the tasks potentially take on added "real-world" significance: if you don't understand the directions to the post office, then you do not get there – similar to a real-

world task but without the real-world stress of getting lost, for example. Unfortunately, some of the technical difficulties of using SL (some examples include the learning curve of avatar movement and the need for a computer with the SL software installed) have limited the ways in which I have been able to use it with students. I have, however, used a video of an avatar in the world and asked students to describe the avatar's movements.

In the context of considering the possibility of teaching the Russian language in an online environment, I continue to think about how virtual worlds might serve language teachers and students as the technology advances. If language courses are offered online, SL could provide a common meeting space for instructors and students, since classes, office hours, lectures, and cultural events can be held virtually. Furthermore, the greater community of SL has the potential to offer new ways to extend learning beyond the classroom (whether the real-world or the virtual classroom) through interactions with other avatars, simulations of real-life experiences, or completely new and innovative activities impossible in the real world.

References

1. <http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2008/05/border-crossing.html>
2. <http://secondlife.com/destination/energy-island>
3. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/6453241.stm>
4. <http://secondlife.com/destination/moscow-island>
5. Blasing, M. (2010) Second Language in Second Life: Exploring Interaction, Identity and Pedagogical Practice in a Virtual World. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 54 (1), 96-117.
6. The area can be visited using this slurl: <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Murrumbidgee/234/205/101>