

## What Can a Second Life Teach Me about Me?: Writing Our Identity in Second Life

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### INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Second Life (SL) became an integral part of my daily existence while writing my dissertation on teaching first-year composition in SL. I decided on this research project partially because I realized that the students in my composition classes spent much of their time facebooking, blogging, tweeting, and IMing (via different websites), even while participating in classroom discussions. Students are doing more informal writing via these Web 2.0 technologies and others than I had ever done during my college career, and they are having serious discussions via these media as well. However, SL is the Web 2.0 technology that I believe can have a substantial impact on the students' writing; hence, it is this medium and how it can be used to enhance a student's perception of identity and otherness that will be discussed here.

I will accomplish this by 1) examining what SL is, 2) discussing how SL fits the definition of a Web 2.0 technology, 3) looking at how SL can be beneficial in composition classrooms, 4) reviewing, briefly, the research methodology, and 5) considering how identity and otherness can be viewed in a virtual world and the writing that comes from that.

### WHAT IS SL

Before giving an in-depth explanation of SL, it might be beneficial to have a quick overview of what this virtual space is and how it works. SL is a massively multi-user virtual environment (MMUVE): a term I use to differentiate it from other virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft which is a massively multi-user online role playing game (MMORPG). SL is not a game. One begins a second life by creating an avatar, and avatars are not limited to being either male or female; in fact, humanity is not even a requirement as there is an entire community of avatars who call themselves Furrries and walk around in SL as animal-type avatars. Once one has created this avatar, SL is a world to be explored just like our own with areas of entertainment, shopping, living, learning, and more.

SL began as a computer program, originally known as *Linden World*, created in 1991 by Philip Rosedale. Rosedale founded the company Linden Labs in 1999, and the beta version of *Second Life* was released in November of 2002. It did not go live to the public, however, until June 23, 2003 (Rymaszewski et al. 1). SL began by using a tax structure that charged users based on certain criteria; however, a crack-down on tax evaders that created havoc inworld began what Michael Rymaszewski et al. refer to as "a grass-roots social movement . . . . Within a few weeks, a revolution was underway. In December 2003, the revolutionaries won: an entirely new tax system based on land ownership . . . was introduced . . ." (1). This has since morphed into the current free basic membership, which restricts residents from buying property from Linden Labs, and paid premium membership, which allows residents to own land for which they then have to pay a monthly maintenance fee.

Hence the birth of SL as a the metaverse (a term originating from Neal Stephenson's 1992 sci-fi novel *Snow Crash* that describes a world with humans as avatars, interacting with one another via software). This metaverse, according to all accounts, was not Rosedale's intention. According to Wagner James Au, "building the metaverse wasn't even the company's main goal when it began in 1999 . . ." (407-11). Perhaps it was not Rosedale's main goal, but most texts on SL refer to it as the metaverse, a world created in words by Stephenson and brought to life virtually by Linden Labs.

To have a better understanding of this world, one might imagine visiting a new country for the first time. I have lived and worked in several different countries, and I equate the culture shock I felt in SL as similar to what I experienced in the third world country of Angola, Africa. When I first entered SL at Orientation Island, it felt strangely familiar because of the computer games I had played throughout life where one learns how to maneuver inside the game. Beyond Orientation Island, however, SL is nothing like a game. Anytime we travel to a new country there is much to learn about the geography, economy, traditions, religions, people, and so much more. Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace claim that SL "is less a game than a parallel world unto itself" (75). SL consists of a Help Island, Private Regions, Open Spaces, and the Mainland Regions; these are the countries that make up the world of SL. According to Brian A. White as of January 2007, "SL contained virtual land that is the equivalent of over six times the size of New York's Manhattan Island" (5). A blog entry by Zee Linden on [secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com), further states that the "continued brisk sales have left us with roughly a two-week backlog for new Island order delivery" ("State of the Virtual World"). SL's status as a world is legitimate.

The people who live in this world make things to enjoy their virtual lives more. Ludlow and Wallace argue that "perhaps the most important difference between Second Life and most other virtual worlds is that SL's Terms of Service specifically grants residents ownership of the intellectual property right in their creations" (76). This means that residents of SL can build and create anything inworld, retain the rights to the object, and sell it inworld or on a website such as SLexchange. But SL, as mentioned earlier, is not a game like all of the other popular virtual worlds such as Everquest or World of WarCraft. Residents do not level up in SL. They do not kill monsters, find treasures, nor attempt to impress the neighbors. There are also no goals to attain. So the questions of what do people buy and why are valid ones to ask.

For many, including myself at first, the answers to the questions above seem fantastical and unrealistic. If SL is not a game and there are no levels to show progress in the world, why would anyone want to spend real money and how could people make real money in this environment? Julian Dibbell begins to shed some light on these inquiries when he writes that SL, with its wide-openness to user-created architecture, objects, and other in-world content, and its whole-hearted embrace of the real-money trade in virtual properties . . . , is striving mightily to leave the games market behind and become, instead, the next-and perhaps final-generation desktop—a globe-spanning virtual realm in which everything from social lives to business plans to artistic movements unfold. (107)

Linden Labs understands the concept that "players do not just consume, or act as passive audience members of, the game but instead are active cocreators in producing it as a meaningful experience and artifact" (Taylor 133). This world, unlike the others, not

only encourages residents to use their creativity to build in this environment, but to actually *live* a second life by participating in a culture that is not so different from our own, regardless of where we reside in real life (RL).

One way of accomplishing this living of a second life is to purchase or rent a place to live. With a residence comes the need to furnish it, and so the cycle of living begins. With a premium account comes a weekly stipend of 300 Linden dollars (L\$). Most residents soon find, however, that 300L\$ is not nearly enough to furnish a house and live the life style they dream of in SL. This necessitates finding ways to make money in SL if the thought of spending real money to purchase L\$ is not appealing. Rymaszewski et al. suggest the occupations seen in figure 1 to support a second life. This list is not all-inclusive, but these are a few of the professions anyone in SL can pursue. Another option, though, if residents do not wish to work for someone else, is to become a business owner. Some of the most popular businesses to own in SL include clubs and various retail establishments such as clothing stores, wig shops, and skin stores.

Journalism	Camping (hanging out at a location to get paid)	Greeter
Security	Shop Attendant/Sale Rep	Event Host/DJ
Dancer/Stripper	Model/Photomodel	Escort
Texturer (creating textures using a program like <i>Photoshop</i> to apply to prims)	Clothing Designer	Scripter (using a programming language to make objects interactive)
Builder/Landscaper	Animator	

Fig. 1. Suggested jobs in SL. Rymaszewski, Michael, et al. *Second Life: The Official Guide*. Indianapolis: Wiley, 2007. 217-39.

As hinted at by Dibbell, SL is more than just making and spending money, much like RL. It is also a creative outlet for many artists, musicians, poets, and others. Nashville, Tennessee's famous Bluebird Cafe streams live video and audio into their SL cafe every night. A search for live music on September 17, 2008, retrieved twenty-one live performances. Several locations, such as Poetry Recitals at Avgi, The Isle of Awakening, and the official group representing the Poetry Society of the United Kingdom, offer live poetry readings frequently, and artists display their work in organized events such as Art Work at the A&C. White reports that Circe Broom, a well-known music promoter, states that she is in SL "for the music and to help musicians get a break. I was there once and I love music. They need and deserve some help and it makes me feel good!" (qtd. in White 336). SL is a place where unknown artists, whether it is musicians, poets, or someone else with creative flair, can get their work into the mainstream of SL and even into RL. SL allows its residents to work, play, and experience things just as they would in RL but in a safe Web 2.0 environment.

#### WEB 2.0 & SL

Before delving into the case study, a quick overview of how SL fits the criteria of a Web 2.0 technology will be helpful. But first, what, exactly, is Web 2.0? Ask any of your colleagues or friends and you will receive a different response: some more different than others. Even Tim O'Reilly, one of the experts at O'Reilly Media, states that "there's still a huge amount of disagreement about just what Web 2.0 means" ("What is Web 2.0"). One key, however, is that it puts users more in control of their web experience.

We no longer go to the web to simply find information that is fed to us by some Oz behind a curtain, but instead we create our own information in the form of blogs, wikis, social networks, and other forms. According to Jason Pontin, “Web 2.0, with its emphasis on collaboration and communication, has become overwhelming social—a nice return to the Web’s foundations” (34). Web 2.0 is all about the platform, not the application. Instead of using packaged software that is loaded onto our computers, we often use applications that are native to the web, such as Google Maps, Acrobat Buzzword, Facebook, Twitter, and many others.

This opening of the web, allowing users to create or edit content, creates a more democratic web experience. Do a Google search on nearly any topic, and it is likely that one of the top ten hits will include a Wikipedia page: a page that has been created by some user, in some part of the world, who has a degree of expertise in that area. However, if a user disagrees with any part of this information, they can register on the site and suggest changes based on their knowledge of the topic as supported by experts. This gives the user power in their web experience.

Pontin, as mentioned above, sees Web 2.0 as a return to a more social, collaborative environment. Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Ning, Twine, Friendster, LinkedIn, and many others support this aspect of Web 2.0. The question remains, however, of whether or not SL exists as a Web 2.0 technology and if so, how? A Roytanck.com blog entry asserts that SL includes the social aspect but lacks the democracy of Web 2.0. I am not sure the blogger fully understands SL and the fact that everything but the land is made by the residents. People are free to pursue political, activist, creative, and other interests, just as they are in RL. It is difficult to understand how any environment could be any more democratic. One of the blogger’s concerns is that you have to have knowledge of Linden’s programming language to build, but this is not entirely true, and one has to have knowledge of how to build in RL as well if they wish to do so. The level of building one wishes to accomplish determines the level of knowledge needed. Another concern considers the fact that owning land in SL costs money. However, I resided in SL for nearly two years on a free account and never felt the need to buy or rent land except for my research. One can practice building skills in a sandbox for free, and take what he/she has created when she/he leaves. These concerns do not make SL less democratic, though.

Some would argue that SL actually moves more toward the future of Web 2.0 (or maybe 3.0). With typical Web 2.0, people sit at their computers blogging, taking quizzes on Facebook, or tweeting on Twitter. Likewise, they can read updates from all their friends or look at other blogs or wikis. SL, however, takes this one step further. Tateru Nino argues that ‘when you’re in Second Life, you’re in the world. . . . and people are with you. The Web 2.0 gets you in touch with people. Publishing. Collaborating. Making a fool of yourself; but it takes something like Second Life to lift you out of your chair and give you that crucial juxtaposition that makes you more than just a few words on a page’ (“Second Life and the Future of Web2.0”). When was the last time you and a friend, who is thousands of miles away, went sailing and discussed a philosophical problem that had been bothering you, all while enjoying the sounds of the ocean and a beautiful sunset on Facebook? SL and other virtual worlds allow for a degree of connectivity that is simply not found in most Web 2.0 applications. SL, therefore, meets or exceeds the criteria of being a Web 2.0 based application.

## SL AND COMPOSITION

SL, as a parallel universe or metaverse, has possibilities for impacting RL education. For Beth Ritter-Guth, who teaches at DeSales University and Lehigh Carbon Community College, it means that she can “build environments where students can really explore the literature,” and for Jean-Claude Bradley, chemistry professor at Drexel University, it means he can “show [students] molecules in three dimensions. . . . [They] can walk around the molecule and discuss it” (qtd. in Sussman). Education is a large part of SL, so large in fact that Linden Labs has dedicated staff members whose focus is on how SL can be used for RL education.

The implications for educational possibilities in SL are clear when one considers such examples as Ritter-Guth's or Bradley's use of the world. However, what might not be as clear is how SL can be used to teach first-year composition (FYC) in the academy. Understanding this correlation will require a brief discussion of how students use multiple technologies in their literacy practices and how SL, as one of these technologies, becomes a medium students can use for writing.

The literacy that I grew up with is not the same as it is today; I primarily grew up with traditional print literacy. Even though I also had the visual literacy of television, it was limited to two channels that came in clear and one that was more snow than show, so my sense of literacy was mainly in the books I read for both pleasure and school. This literacy fit well with what was expected in my education. Today, however, things are much different. Bronwyn Williams notes that, according to Michael Hoechsmann, “the academic world at large continues to behave as if it exists in a world where print is the dominant medium of discourse” (*Tuned In* 3). The reality, however, is that it is questionable whether or not print is still at the forefront of communication, making print, therefore, no longer the only means of literacy.

With multiple literacies, such as print, television, social networking, and video games/virtual worlds—to name a few—come multiple ways of learning. It is my responsibility, as an instructor, to tap into these different modes of literacy and learn to meet the students where they are comfortable in order to challenge them to go beyond their comfort zone. Many of my students were familiar with the literacies mentioned above, but I found that using the virtual world of SL in the composition classroom took them out of their comfort zone from the first night. The writing that often evolves from students' experiences in this mass-media culture, as Williams contends, are

contact-zone texts that befuddle both us and them. Their attempts at mimicry can result at least in hybrid writing that resists our readings or, in a more overt resistance, mock the discourse we are promoting. This in turn challenges our most cherished metanarrative of literacy as empowerment, of literacy as the fundamental requirement for critical consciousness in a civil society. Students resist and undermine what we see as the fundamental strength of the written discourse we teach. (*Tuned In* 17-18)

For myself, it was time to take the binary of the academic written discourse versus the literacies produced in our mass-media culture and remove the black and white, or right and wrong filter that we, as academics, so often look at them through and instead realize that the two can work together to produce a more powerful discourse. As Diana George

points out, “For students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them” (“From Analysis” 32). It was this intricate combination of both the visual and the verbal/written word that SL would provide the students.

Video games and virtual worlds like SL and World of Warcraft offer this combination of the visual and the verbal/written communication to which George refers. In the world of static video games, or those not played with other participants, the player is required only to read the visuals of the game and interpret what these visuals are telling him/her about the gaming situation without having to consider other participants’ actions. These games can also include verbal—audible—or written text clues that the player must interpret correctly in order to advance in the game. These visual, verbal, and written aspects in gaming help to enhance critical thinking skills. As James Paul Gee points out when he discusses his first experience with gaming, games require “the player to learn and think in ways at which I was not then adept. Suddenly all my baby-boomer ways of learning and thinking, for which I had heretofore received ample rewards, did not work” (*What Video Games 2*). Video gaming and virtual worlds expand the ways in which we think and consider things, giving us an advantage when it comes to thinking and then writing about topics concerning these games, worlds, and experiences.

When it comes to writing in FYC courses, instructors continue to experiment with ways to get students more involved and actually interested in what they write. Nearly all FYC instructors have read the “My First Kiss,” “My First Prom,” “Winning the State Championship,” and other similar essays. Some are well written and even interesting, but generally speaking, they seem to lack the level of engagement that we wish the students would have with their writing. Jennifer Howard argues that “often students . . . simply have no interest in what they are writing” and this “lack of engagement leads to flat writing” (7). One suggestion to avoid flat writing, as put forth by Howard, is to “ask the writer to connect the topic to something in pop culture or how it could affect everyday life” (7). The use of SL takes this connection of the topic-to-pop-culture one step further by immersing students into their topic and allowing them to actually experience it in one form of everyday life: their virtual lives. Writing that comes from personal experience can be fun for students. Williams explains that what we need to do as instructors is to “offer students assignments and opportunities to recognize that what brings them pleasure is connected to experience, competence, and challenge . . .” (“Are We Having Fun Yet?” 341). SL is a medium that challenges students and gives them experiences, and ultimately confidence, helping to make their writing more engaging to read and more enjoyable for them to write.

### **IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS IN SL**

Identity is a broad topic, but here I limit it to the role it plays in the virtual world. Experts in virtual spaces such as Turkle believe that the role/s that identity play/s in worlds like MUDs (multi-user dimensions or domains), MOOs (MUD object oriented), and other virtual spaces such as SL are complicated. Sherry Turkle states that the “anonymity of MUDs . . . provides ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves” (xii). These spaces are not necessarily places where people can become someone whom they are not, although some view them that way, but, more

importantly perhaps, they are a place for true self-expression. Rymaszewski et al. argue that “*Second Life* is often held up as the perfect place to get your fantasy on—and yes, there’s no other place like it for becoming something you aren’t, or even for working out just what it is you want to be” (301). This ability to explore and play with one’s identity and then to write about such experiences is probably one of the best arguments for using virtual realities such as SL in the composition classroom.

Identity is a volatile and fluid thing. The fluidity of identity makes it difficult at times to be able to say exactly what it is because . . . it is ever changing. But it is amazing how many FYC students, who are primarily 18 and 19 year olds, do not see identity in this way. One of my students, when responding to a request to describe himself/herself says, “But I have no clue what or hoe [sic] to define me. I am only 18!” to which another student responds “you still dont [sic] kno [sic] damn?” (“*Second Life Chat*” 08 Nov. 2007). Another student later states, “i think who i am is somewhat constant though. it may change a little bit but...constant for the most part” (“*Second Life Chat*” 08 Nov. 2007). The same student who could not believe that someone still did not know how to define herself/himself, after much discussion about identity and how it is shaped and constantly changes, remarks “your identity should already be shaped” (“*Second Life Chat*” 08 Nov. 2007). These remarks, again, came from the class with younger students, which I’ll call Class A. Even though there were younger students in the class with older students, which I’ll call Class B, they did not see identity as something that is almost always the same or already shaped. So even though many scholars see identity as something fluid, it is not safe to assume that everyone does.

Other issues, however, kept some feeling apart from the true SL residents. These things kept them thinking about their own identities and subsequently writing about them. One African American student wrote, “in the virtual world I’m white. I see every different color but mine” (Student Quick Write #2). At the time my students signed up in SL, there were no African American choices in the avatars. Now, however, the choices are more varied and you can start with an African American skin, but the furies are no longer available. The site, though, has a link in small letters that says “more” and there it relates that “you can change your clothes, your skin, your hair, your shape and even your gender. You might even choose to make your avatar something nonhuman such as a fish, a robot, or maybe even a potted flower. The only limit is your imagination” (*SecondLife*). My students also had such choices, but it was not as clearly stated, so if the students did not spend additional time inworld, it is something they never realized.

The topic of racial identity is common in SL. You might notice that the *SecondLife* website states that you can play with your gender and humanness, but the closest it comes to saying anything about race is that you can change your skin. For many, that means you can have a tan or be Goth white, but race does not necessarily come to mind. Au discusses one Caucasian woman’s experience when she donned the skin of a beautiful African American woman given to her by a skin creator. Keep in mind that she was still identifiable by her unique SL name (no one has the exact same name), which did not change. When Thereian (avatar name) randomly teleported to a location, Au relates that “one man took a look at her and announced, ‘Look at the nigger bitch’ while another replied, ‘Great, they are gonna invade SL now’” (1206-11). Au also reports that some of Thereian’s SL friends also treated her with cold disdain, asking when she was going to return to her old self. Thereian tells Au that some of her RL friends

who are African American are also in SL, and they play white characters to avoid the racism to which Thereian was subjected (1211-16). Perhaps this explains both why one of my African American students chose to play as a Caucasian character and why he/she fails to see any African Americans in SL, creating for her/him a sense of otherness that keeps him/her from becoming an insider. Without this experience, however, these personal reflections never would have appeared in this student's writing.

Not all students, however, considered themselves outsiders, which was reflected in the same quick write assignment, which comes from Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's text *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research* asking students to describe their insider/outsider status (219-20). Some students indicated that they had found a sense of belonging by investigating SL and finding places that interested them. The ones who did this were primarily the ones that I would see inworld outside of regular class time. They were the ones who were willing to complete in-class assignments as homework if they found they were not satisfied with the results of their fieldworking during class. One student wrote, "I have been to a couple of parties at the tattoo shop. Rea is learning to DJ and it's fun to dance and dress up in what ever the theme may be. My noobishness shines through every now and then. . . . I now have a whole new view in SL that is so much more awesome than I thought it could be" (Student Quick Write #3). Another student wrote, "I began to walk around, talk with others so that I could gain some more cultural insight on the inner workings of this magical place [Burning Life Festival] in the middle of this barren desert. Such a nontypical setting made me feel usually odd but not in this case. I knew off the bat that coming here made me become an insider" (Student Quick Write #4). Other students felt a mixture of insider/outsiderness when it came to their experiences in SL, depending on how involved they chose to become. One student writes "every time I log on to SL I am more comfortable and relaxed about what I am doing . . ." and then writes in the very next sentence "though I am an SL resident I am still a newbie" (Student Quick Write #5). These issues of identity came through in much of their low-risk writing.

In order to complicate both the issues of power and of identity, I created the "Everyone's a Kool-Aid Man Today" assignment (see Appendix A). As Inman argues, "discomfort in academic spaces, if structured carefully and responsibly, often leads to great personal and intellectual growth for students" (218). What safer environment for students to take risks in than a virtual space where teleporting or simply logging off immediately removes them from a potentially dangerous or overly uncomfortable situation.

This assignment was designed to help my students experience what it might be like to be viewed as an "other:" an uncomfortable situation for anyone. The assignment calls for students to become someone they are not. I started the students thinking about being someone whom they are not by asking them to do a quick write prior to any knowledge of the assignment. I told them to imagine that they woke up one morning, stumbled to the bathroom to take their morning shower, and found that they could not fit in the shower door. Upon looking in the mirror, they discovered they had turned into the Kool-Aid man. They were then instructed to write about their experiences as they attempt to go to classes and function like any other day. The student quick writes were both entertaining and serious, but more importantly, the students began thinking about the idea of being different.

On the next venture into SL, students were instructed at the beginning of the class session—the second half of class for the night class—to log into SL and go to the circle of chairs where they would find a box. I informed them that they were to pick up the box, unpack it, and then don the skin that they had unpacked from the box. The writing in the essays that resulted from this experiment shows that many of the students were surprised by the way this costume made them feel and the way others treated them while they wore it. One student writes,

During my time spent as the Kool-aid Man in Second Life, several avatars denied me the right to enter buildings and people's conversations based on foolish motives. Numerous avatar characters rejected my identity and refused to accept or tolerate me. Having people refuse my presence because of my appearance ultimately forced me to question my stability as an individual. (“Insight of an Outsider”).

This student found that trying to be someone whom you are not can create an identity crisis.

For another student, the experience brought back memories of two friends he/she had in high school. One of these friends paid money to “look” different than everyone else, but the other friend was born with a physical facial deformity which she would have paid to have had corrected. The student writes that her/his “deformed friend had no control over her looks, and was miserable because of people’s reaction to her otherness. People stared at her in restaurants, and she cried afterwards. Her uncontrollably different appearance eventually got to her when she hung herself at age sixteen” (“Otherness” 1). This student’s experience as an “other” gave him/her the outlet that she/he needed to write about a painful experience. Barry Joseph argues that “educational programs can not [sic] only leverage the impermanence of identity within virtual worlds but help to make these issues explicit for learners or use these features to explore various real world issues like race or class” (13). My student then connects this RL experience to his/her Kool-Aid man experience in SL. She/he writes that during “my time spent in Second Life, I have never seen anyone as different as I was when dressed as the Kool-Aid man. This goes to show that people are just as self conscious in SL as they are in real life. They are afraid of being laughed at, or feeling uncomfortable” (“Otherness” 1). The difference between the student’s RL experience and the SL one is that the student was the one who was being viewed as an other. The student concludes with “I, for the sake of our experiment, cannot control my Kool-Aid-Ness, and now understand how frustrating it is to be denied rights simply because of physical appearance” (“Otherness” 1). The dichotomy that this assignment created for the students came through clearly in many of their writings.

What I was not prepared for, however, was the student who would write about being the “other” in RL with “the neatly manicured boy upfront [who] points out your medusa like hair, the ‘Battle of Your Face’ that has been all but won by opposing forces and your shoes, which he now dubs ‘neon nightmares’” (“Taming the Beast”). Rather than feeling like an “other,” masquerading in SL as the Kool-Aid man, this student found acceptance. The student admits that one location she/he visited asked him/her to leave, but it was not because the student was creating too much lag because of her/his girth, but rather because the establishment thought the student was advertising. The student found that acceptance of things new and somewhat strange comes quickly in a virtual world.

He/she relates, “I began to ask them [SL residents] why my appearance hadn’t been an issue. In every instance it was the same response—I was not the first Kool Aid man to visit. . . . I was no longer an oddity. . . . They had been desensitized and had accepted the fact that Kool Aid men were just a part of SL now” (“Taming the Beast”). This student was prepared for the same type of humiliation she/he had been subjected to in RL, but instead, found acceptance based on the simple fact that residents were now used to seeing Kool-Aid men.

Most students entered into the assignment with the mentality of simply finding out how others would react to them. There were a few, however, that took a more aggressive approach to the endeavor of becoming an other in SL. They were not willing to accept the distribution of power that was being presented to them and were willing to risk confrontation to make a point. When one establishment attempted to keep one of the Kool-Aid men out because of his/her size, the student retaliated. She/he writes, “I really didn’t want to be in there. It was just the point that she was discriminating against us because of our size. I ran through her entering the nightclub. I wasn’t going to let some little avatar tell me that I’m not allowed in somewhere” (“Otherness” 2). The result of this action was that the student’s screen went black as he/she was not only banned from the club, but was put into SL limbo with her/his friends who had entered the club with him/her. The student and her/his friends took back the power that was denied them, if only temporarily, and they all felt a sense of empowerment from their actions, if, again, only briefly. The students were satisfied with the fact that they had entered the club and not walked away defeated.

Once they had freed themselves from limbo, they proceeded to another location to see how residents would react to them, and next, they found themselves being threatened with bodily harm. The student writes, “I looked at the avatar and he had this humungous machine gun pointed right at me! I could not believe what I was experiencing. It made me really mad so I gathered up all my other fellow Kool-Aid men and told them to go to Money Island” (“Otherness” 3). Again, these students were not willing to be treated any differently than any other avie in SL. This time, however, they sent out a call to the rest of their class members asking them to teleport to their location. The result, according to one student, was that the avatar threatening them “eventually ran off,” and the students who had been threatened felt a sense of accomplishment. By banning together with their classmates to increase their own power, they stood up to and won the battle for equality in this virtual space. The students are, in effect, practicing what Inman terms “cyborg pedagogy,” which he defines by “tying it carefully to activism for equity and diversity” (210). These students protected their right to be diverse, and in the case of trying to enter the club, they were attempting to secure equality for themselves regardless of their diversity.

The “Everyone’s a Kool-Aid Man Today” assignment was designed to place the students in an uncomfortable situation in hopes that it would help them understand more about themselves or their own identities and the culture in which they live. Taylor makes reference to the fact that “how you choose to represent yourself has meaningful implications psychologically and socially” (12), and I trusted that this assignment would place the students in a place, both psychologically and socially, that many had never been before. Kolko emphasizes that a virtual environment such as a MOO is “a place of

contact and conflict, both with the self and with others” (261); all my students experienced these conflicts to one degree or another.

## CONCLUSION

Virtual realities such as SL with their Web 2.0 (soon to be 3.0) technologies are the future of computers and composition. In order to keep up with the ever changing and expanding world in which we live, it is crucial that composition scholars and teachers who are interested in technology stay informed and self-trained in the newest software and hardware changes because what was once viewed by many as a trend has proven its staying power and its usefulness. George’s comments in 1995 are still correct today:

Technology is here. We cannot ignore it. . . . What we don’t quite know . . . is how this ‘New World’ really will reconfigure our teaching . . . . Because we come to the technology with structures already in place . . . we are in danger of either recreating the old or staring at the new in wonder—hoping for the utopian classroom that too many of our colleagues envision. (“Wonder of it All” 332-33)

Even after fourteen years, many still expect that utopian classroom when it comes to the use of technology. It is never going to happen. As instructors we have to work hard to 1) train ourselves in the technologies we believe will be beneficial to our pedagogy (even if our institutions do not offer the hardware or training to facilitate this) , and 2) constantly revisit our pedagogies to ensure we do not let the technologies drive them. Cynthia Selfe recognizes that “composition studies faculty have a much larger and more complicated obligation to fulfill—that of trying to understand and make sense of, to *pay attention* to, how technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country” (“Technology and Literacy” 96). In order for composition specialists to be able to use technologies such as SL, they will also have to spend time understanding how the technology, which is inextricably linked to literacy, can work with their pedagogies.

Web 2.0 technologies such as SL impact our students’ lives in meaningful ways that we cannot ignore. Watching my students struggle with issues of identity while using SL and then seeing those concerns appear in their writing was what I had expected. I had hoped that my students would experience things in this virtual other life that would inspire their writing. As long as students are writing about things that are of interest to them, they are engaging with their written work as noted by Ralph Fletcher and Aimee Buckner. Keep in mind that engaged, inspired writing is not necessarily good writing, but it is often more interesting and more readable, which is a step in the right direction.

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Appendix A: Kool-Aid Man Assignment

**English 1010-107 Professor Baldwin**

**Essay 2: Essay—Everyone’s a Kool-Aid Person Today, or What It Means to Be an Other**

**Revision Workshop: Tuesday, Sept 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

**Editing Workshop (in-class): Tuesday, Oct 02<sup>nd</sup>, 2007**

**FINAL DRAFT DUE (by email): Tuesday, Oct 09<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

**ASSIGNMENT:** Some of us have never experienced what it is like to be considered an “other”: someone who isn’t like everyone else around them for one reason or another. Sometimes these reasons are all too obvious, but at other times they are much more subtle. In this assignment, we are going to use the relatively safe environment of SL to experience this otherness by draping ourselves in the shape and skin of the Kool-Aid man and going to a public place to interact.

**TOPIC:** Otherness. Continue to write up field observation notes as described in *FieldWorking* (to be included with your final draft) and then incorporate those observations in your writing. How did you feel while masquerading in the shape and color of the Kool-Aid man? What were others’ reactions to you? Have you ever experienced anything like this in real life? Have you ever unknowingly or knowingly treated someone else like an “other” or outsider? These are just some questions that might spur your writing. Try to think of some others. You can create a PowerPoint (don’t forget that there must be 1100 polished words), a graphic story (same 1100 words), a journal entry or letter, or a traditional essay.

**AUDIENCE:** Regardless of the media you choose to write your essay in, your audience is an auditorium full of educators of high school students. You want them to understand how some of their students might feel if they are being treated as an other. With this type of audience, you will have to gain their respect, so choose your words carefully.

**TASKS TO COMPLETE BEFORE THE REVISION WORKSHOP:**

Type the essay according to the medium you have chosen

Be sure to use SL terminology

**PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE WRITE 1100 WORDS**

**PAPER GUIDELINES:** Paper guidelines pretty much go out the window in this type of an assignment. **If you are doing a traditional essay, use the Harbrace MLA format on page 605.**

**SPECIFIC SKILLS/ABILITIES REQUIRED:** You will

Be aware of your audience, high school educators, and write to that audience

Use the language appropriate to that audience and SL terminology

Reflect and respond to your field note observations

**TRAPS TO AVOID:** You will want to avoid the following problems, especially

Not writing to your audience

Not writing at least 1100 words