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An Exploration Of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games: Their Application To Public Relations Education And Possible Future Public Relations Practice

Deirdre Quinn-Allan, Deakin University

Abstract Social communication technologies present exciting and challenging opportunities for public relations professionals. Although not new the latest online attraction grabbing the attention of educators and companies around the globe are the virtual worlds known as Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). This paper will examine MMORPGs – in particular Second Life – and consider their potential as an educational medium and relevance to the practice of public relations. The paper argues that MMORPGs should be taken seriously by educators and public relations professionals alike and not simply be treated as online entertainment.

Keywords: MMORPGs, Second Life, Public Relations, Education, Virtual Worlds, Avatars

Introduction

Early indicators suggest that virtual worlds and their residents will become increasingly important as the boundaries between reality and virtual reality blur. This paper argues that students will benefit from experiential learning opportunities afforded by virtual worlds. It is also increasingly likely that graduates will find their public relations roles spanning the worlds of reality and virtual reality.

MMORPGs (pronounced morpgs) are online role-playing games often based on some sort of fantasy theme. They can accommodate hundreds and thousands of players at one time. Many of the newer games create a persistent world which means the virtual world continues after a player exits; in this sense they represent parallel worlds (Yee, 2005).

One of the most popular MMORPGs is Dungeons and Dragons based on the 1970s game developed by Gary Gygax and David Arneson. In the online version of the game players adopt fantasy characters and embark on a quest
where they battle monsters, gather treasure and interact with other players with a general objective to become more experienced and powerful (Wikipedia, date unknown).

Games like Dungeons and Dragons are inherently adversarial and the objective is to overcome an enemy or foe. Play is governed by complex rules of engagement which dictate how players interact with each other and how they will proceed through the game. In Dungeons and Dragons for example, the Dungeon Master (DM) sets the rules for player interaction and gameplay and the game’s official website describes four key roles for the DM. Briefly these are adjudicator, teacher, creator of the world and the adventure.

What is so interesting about MMORPGs is the nature and complexity of player interaction. Meek (2004) writes that MMORPGs seem like “...an ingenious merger between two familiar PC-age institutions: the fantasy role-playing game and the internet chatroom.” This is a good starting point for the uninitiated to conceptualise these virtual worlds. Current technology means that although players communicate through text chat, interactivity is enhanced through computer-generated representations of a physical world, something that is missing from chatroom and other computer-mediated communication environments.

Before starting a player generally needs some form of client application loaded on their computer to enable them to subscribe and gain access to the play. Commonly new users download the required software via the internet. Once a player has subscribed the next very important task is to create their avatar, the online persona through which they communicate with other players. A player’s avatar may bear little resemblance to their real-world self. This affords anonymity and the opportunity to be someone different or to extend beyond the limitation of their real-world physical presence.

The word avatar has been adapted from the Sanskrit word avatara approximately meaning the embodiment of a deity (Holzwarth, Janiszewski, Neumann, 2006). Embodiment can take the form of superhuman being, human or animal. Online avatars, a term adopted following the publication of Neal Stephenson’s 1992 science fiction novel Snow Crash (Hemp, 2006), are equally flexible and adaptive. There are few rules about the form or gender of an avatar; players are limited only by their imagination and game skills. If either of these fall short, players can purchase avatars, though this depends on the game’s end user licence agreement (EULA) and who owns the intellectual property rights to avatars created (Klang 2004).

**Game or Not**

“...whenever one plays a game, and whatever game one plays, learning happens constantly, whether the players want it to, and are aware of it, or not. And the
players are learning “about life,” which is one of the great positive consequences of all game playing. This learning takes place, continuously, and simultaneously in every game, every time one plays. One need not even pay much attention (Marc Prensky, 2002, p.1).

The word game misrepresents the complexity of virtual worlds created in MMORPGs (Yee, 2005) and that the boundaries between virtual and real worlds is becoming blurred (Castronova, 2005). Whether a MMORPG is regarded as a game or not may depend on one’s own understanding or experience with online games, but many writers argue that playing games provide valid and fruitful learning environments that are both engaging and motivating. Yee (2005) points out that “[M]ost forms of advancement in MMORPGs require increasing cooperation or dependency on other users, oftentimes mutually beneficial.” And Herz reflecting on the work of Oblinger (2003) says “[F]ar from being every man for himself, multiplayer online games actively foster the formation of teams, clans, guilds, and other self-organizing groups. It appears to be very simplistic to simply focus on the gaming elements because they encourage and develop skills very much in demand in the real world like problem solving, decision-making.”

Second Life (SL). is one of a new generation of MMORPGs which are more than simply a game. SL is a virtual world designed to foster communication and creative endeavour. In November 2006, Second Life, reported an online community totalling “.... 1,211,392 people from around the globe.” This is a phenomenal rate of growth for a virtual world that has only been in existence since 2003 and SL is different from many other MMORPGs because it allows players to “…retain full intellectual property protection for the digital material they create…” (Moltenbray, 2004).

In a special report in The Economist (2006, p.75) the founder of Second Life, Philip Rosendale, is reported as saying “since I was a kid, I was into using computers to simulate reality” and SL is a virtual world that makes it possible to “extend reality”. It is difficult to describe the objective of second life because participation is determined by individual players who decide on the scope and nature of their interaction within SL. This of course mirrors the real world where we all have personal goals, develop relationships, and attend to daily tasks. But at the very least players can shop, attend concerts, visit with friends, family or strangers, and create products to sell and the list goes on. Where SL extends reality is that players can involve themselves in activities they may not be able to in the real world – being able to fly and teleport to anywhere in SL are obvious examples.

SL exhibits many characteristics of the real world and most noteworthy is a burgeoning in-world economy which is also beginning to make its presence felt in the real world. In-world is the term used to describe the virtual world. Linden dollars are legal tender in SL and these can be bought and sold for
US dollars on LindcX – the SL currency exchange launched in October 2005. There are a number of ways a SL resident can acquire Linden dollars; the most straightforward route is to simply buy them. The rules of supply and demand apply and currently (November 2006) the exchange rate is 250 Linden Dollars for US $1.00. Another common way to acquire currency is to sell virtual items like clothing or furniture. For the more entrepreneurial player land speculation and development is proving lucrative. It is possible to lease or purchase islands which a player is then free to develop according to their own preference. As in the real world if the SL developer can make the property desirable they are able to attract paying tenants to generate an income. If this isn’t evidence enough that SL should be taken seriously then consider that tax offices around the world are beginning to pay attention to income earned in MMORPGs. In a recent article in The Age Nick Miller (31/10/2006) quoted a spokesperson from the Australian Tax Office who said “[T]he real world value of a transaction may form part of your taxable income, even if it is in Linden dollars.” This spokesperson also cautioned that GST may be payable too.

Over the last year the media has paid increasing attention to commercial and not-for-profit activity and transactions taking place in SL. An examination of the reported activities indicates that SL, besides having an established marketplace, is developing social and commercial structures similar to that which public relations students will face in the real world. Castronova (2005) believes that when in-world factors extend beyond to the real world this is reason enough to sit up and take notice. In the following examples, it is apparent that activity in SL is reaching a critical mass and that its impact is being recognised and felt in the real world by some influential organisations and people. These are the sort that public relations graduates are likely to seek employment in or will engage with in their professional lives respectively.

In October 2006, Reuters set up a virtual news bureau in SL headed by Adam Pasick whose avatar goes by the name of Adam Reuters. Pasick (Reuters, 2006) says of his in-world reporting job “[A]s strange as it might seem, it’s not that different from being a reporter in the real world.” and “[O]nce you get used to it--it becomes very much like the job I have been doing for years.” Pasick’s job is to report on both in-world and real world news which SL residents can access in the form of news updates via a virtual handheld device.

Also in October 2006 Sun Microsystems held a press conference within SL to launch their new Sun Pavilion. They claim to be the first Fortune 500 company to hold a press conference in SL but it shouldn’t be overlooked that they were targeting real world journalists also. Chief researcher, John Gage said “...we’re jumping into Second Life with both feet because we see the online world’s unlimited potential for collaboration on everything from social issues to Java technology development” (Sun Microsystems. 2006). Many other for-
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profit companies. Toyota for example (The Economist, 2006, p.77) also have a presence in SL and the numbers are growing.

The American Cancer Society has been touted as a fundraising success story raising US$40,000 during the 2006 Second Life Relay for Life fundraising campaign. The council clearly recognises the value of maintaining a presence in SL – not just in terms of fund raising but to educate and build awareness of their mission. The Council’s website says this of their permanent SL presence: “[the] virtual office will serve a number of purposes including an interactive cancer information resource center, a venue for peer support groups, as well as a headquarters for in-world event planning.” Such is their commitment to the venture they are advertising in the real world for in-world volunteers.

The one aspect that does seem to be missing is government. Second Life is not entirely without rules. But in-world political states are not in evidence and Castronova says “...as a long-time player, not despotism but anarchy seems to be the de facto form of government in synthetic worlds” (2005, p.209). However, one real world politician and possible 2008 US presidential hopeful, Mark Warner the former Governor of Virginia, delivered a speech in SL in August 2006. Again the crossover between real world and in-world is evident with Warner’s appearance receiving much attention and comment in real world blogs and other media.

Examples like those discussed above demonstrate that SL worthy of exploration as an experiential learning environment. Quite simply SL has many of the characteristics of the real world that public relation students will encounter in their professional lives beyond university.

Contemporary developments within the field and practice of public relations, demands that students be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to be effective and curious employees on graduation. A stagnant curriculum that does not adapt to commercial, social and technological developments does not position graduates well in the market place. SL promises to deliver on experiential learning opportunities because, as discussed above, the social and economic structures are in place in this virtual world.

This is presumably the reason that SL has been attracting a lot of attention from teachers who recognise the educational potential of the medium. As of November 2 2006, 60 universities were affiliated with SL. They are predominantly US-based universities but there are also institutions from Korea, Finland, the UK and Australia. The range of teaching activities ranges from the simple to the more complex.

Harvard University runs classes within Second Life for extension students taking the course titled Law in the Court of Public Opinion. Students meet once a week within SL on the University’s island called Berkman Island. The course
website tells students in SL “…you’ll be able to actually attend classes in a classroom with the other students. You’ll meet other students and do group work with them, be able to ask questions in real time, and do many other exciting things, everything from flying to making animated movies” (Harvard University, n.d.). Students also complete assignments based on group work undertaken in SL. Interestingly Harvard also allows players not enrolled in their course into some areas of their online campus to experience learning within a virtual world thereby removing risk and allowing trial.

**MMORPGs And Learning As Social Construct**

Public Relations units at Deakin University use a range of face-to-face and online instructional methods, but the underlying pedagogy within the public relations program is social constructivism which is notable for the emphasis placed on learning as a collaborative activity and student-centred approaches.

Hilton (2006, p. 16) suggests that games present instructors with a more effective means of “…teaching skills that are non-linear” and abstract. Abstract concepts are not easily taught in a traditional classroom setting because full understanding is only achieved through experience. Learning is a cyclical process (Northwood et al, 2003). A problem with transmission models of teaching is that they rely on the packaging of content delivered to students in a linear manner. Often this enables students to develop and demonstrate declarative knowledge (Biggs, 2003, p. 41) only. Recognising learning as a cyclical process means acknowledging that declarative knowledge in and of itself is not the prime learning objective for students. In the field of public relations declarative knowledge finds value in application to real life situations. It also needs to be recognised that we cannot hope to teach students all the ‘knowledge’ they will need in their professional lives. Students will need to learn how to critical analyse primary and secondary data for meaningful application, develop problem-solving skills and attitudes which support life-long learning. Thus we need to teach students how to identify where the relevance or usefulness of declarative knowledge ends and what to do and where to look to resolve knowledge gaps. Linear packaging and delivery of course content can work against students developing these abilities and skills and can also hinder student ability to recognise the interrelationships between interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary content. Designing curriculum goes hand-in-hand with developing appropriate learning environments that allows knowledge to be “…put to work” (Biggs, 2003, p. 233). Games like SL appear to have the characteristics and qualities that will afford rich experiential learning opportunities.

Another justification for considering MMORPGs as a teaching tool is the opportunities provided for interdisciplinary collaborative learning. Humans are social creatures and learning is a social process (Vygotsky; cited in Stacey, 1999). Student interaction in group work facilitates learning through the sharing of ideas and interpretations of ideas (Jacques, 2006). Group work also provides
opportunities for formative assessment and feedback. Rushton (2005) points out that feedback as an interactive component is central to pedagogy. Furthermore interaction and cooperation features in many aspects of our lives (Jacques, 2006) and public relations students must learn to work collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders who are likely to have competing goals.

Linden Lab, the company behind SL, is clearly keen to promote the educational potential of the virtual world and say on their Education portal “[U]sing Second Life as a supplement to traditional classroom environments also provides new opportunities for enriching an existing curriculum” (Second Life, n.d.). The company is actively encouraging educators to join and become part of an online community of educators.

**Avatar-mediated Communication – A Glimpse At The Future**

Another interesting aspect of MMORPGs is the role of the avatars. Research by Holzworth et al (2006) suggests that avatar-mediated communication may become an increasingly important dimension in online communication contexts – particularly between organisations and their stakeholders. Though they focus on online retail sales their research raises some interesting issues for all communicators, particularly those who are delivering persuasive arguments. Whilst Holzworth et al, found that avatars “… can be effective instruments of persuasion…” they conclude that more research is needed to understand the nature of the relationship between consumer and avatar and how might avatars overcome consumer strategies to resist persuasive communications.

John Guiniven (2006), associate professor at Elon University in North Carolina has already described avatars as a new public. If this is possible are we soon to see the emergence of a new branch of public relations practice – avatar relations? It is not inconceivable given the potential for avatars to bridge the gap in computer-mediated communication contexts by personalising communication. Yahoo has been helping its Yahoo Messenger customers do just this for some time by providing them with access to simple avatars. Castranova believes that avatars add richness to communication environments and also supports the idea that avatar-mediated communication within synthetic worlds is likely to grow because “… they are a lower-cost, higher quality communication tool than any of their competitors” (2005, p.69).

If avatars will become increasingly important in online communication then students are well served if they learn to use and understand avatars and how to communicate with avatar audiences. Avatars are extensions of individuals and this is likely to make the segmentation of avatar publics challenging. Traditional segmentation variables may no longer be relevant or apply in virtual worlds. Should this situation become a reality then SL appears to be a good vehicle for allowing students to experience being part of an avatar public as well as taking
the organisational position to develop a public relations campaign directing informational and persuasive communication to an avatar public.

**Potential Problems And Considerations**

Integrating a MMORPG into a curriculum presents many challenges that should not be taken lightly; too often we see technology being adopted simply because it can be. There needs to a demonstrable benefit for both student and teacher alike and resource limitations and requirements clearly articulated and communicated.

Although the adoption rate of broadband in Australia is increasing there are still many dial-up users and broadband speeds in Australia are slower than those in other developed countries. Increasingly Deakin students have access to broadband either at home, at work or on campus [the author teaches at Deakin University]. But knowing that does not mean Deakin students will have access to the necessary hardware and net connection speeds needed to access and use MMORPGs effectively and at a time that is convenient – particularly for students using computers at work.

Currently, most online communication and Deakin Studies Online (DSO - the online learning platform) relies on asynchronous communication. MMORPGs and other new communication technologies are providing greater opportunity for interactive and synchronous communication. Use of synchronous teaching environments for distance education students has time-management and workload implications for both student and teacher alike which must not be overlooked in the rush to embrace new online communication platforms. Class size too can be a limiting factor. Kristin Demetrious, a public relations lecturer at Deakin University, has developed and uses online role playing. As an advocate for online role-playing she does caution that management of this type of learning environment becomes problematic as class sizes increase and large classes are too big for a single teacher to cope with alone (Demetrious, n.d).

Further complicating matters is the need to download client programs to gain access to MMORPGs or to load them from CD. Even requiring students to access a MMORPG may be difficult for some students. At Deakin, distance students receive the Deakin Learning Toolkit which is a CD containing basic software students need to access DSO and other online Deakin resources. Although somewhat of a simplification it is possible to envisage a situation where students are provided with relevant MMORPG client software; a simplification conveniently overlooking factors like cost and licensing arrangements at this point. Students can be disadvantaged in a variety of ways. First, if the university is not able to provide client software then students will be responsible for downloading the same from the Internet which uses up bandwidth and may be slow on dial-up connections. Second, students accessing their studies at work
will have to overcome network restrictions which can be a major problem. The client software for SL, for example, cannot be successfully loaded onto the Deakin Server without assistance from the network administrator. And third, MMORPGs are bandwidth guzzlers. Many cheaper broadband connection plans place caps on the monthly download rate, and students forced to go beyond their allocated monthly bandwidth allocation will incur added charges which are generally costly.

Generation Y students passing through higher education and those coming along behind them have grown up with computers and computer games. Oblinger (2003) says "...the computer is not a technology – it is an assumed part of life." This may be true on one level but what is also evident is that technology is not equally important or attended to in all students' lives. At Deakin University we still see many students who lack basic computer skills or have a limited computer-based skill set which consists of an ability to send email and perform basic word processing tasks. Anecdotal evidence from peers at other tertiary institutions suggests that Deakin students are no different in this respect. Further, not all teachers are comfortable with computer and online communication technologies. These technologies can be a source of tension and stress to both student and teacher alike when they are asked to adopt and adapt to new online communication environments. Training helps – but training is often designed to teach skills rather than communicate the benefits and overcome entrenched negative attitudes towards technology. And training is costly in both dollars and time. But if MMORPGs are to be included in the classroom then training and time must be made available to teaching staff and students to allow them to acclimatise to the new environment and build confidence in their skills.

Interestingly MMORPGs such as SL may be new, but role playing games and computer games have been used as teaching aids since the 1970s with varying success. In a student-centred learning context the teacher relinquishes control to become what Northwood et al (2003) call the guide on the side not the sage on the stage. Fanderclai (1995), though writing about multi-user dimensions (MUDs), alerts us to the potential for teachers to derail student learning in MMORPGs if these learning contexts are treated simply "...as an extension of the real life classroom." Developing an effective learning environment means relinquishing a fair degree of control to students to allow them to take responsibility for their own learning. Fanderclai (1995) says "[S]tudents need clear goals, and knowledge of the tools and methods they might use to accomplish those goals. And then they need for us to stand out of the way and let them learn." It is inevitable that students will make mistakes; that is in the nature of learning. But making mistakes within the relative privacy and control of the university classroom is one thing; to have them make mistakes in a virtual setting like SL which may be witnessed by a large audience not affiliated with the teaching institution is likely to be something that would make administrators and managers most
uncomfortable. The institution's tolerance of risk and approach to the control of online learning environment are factors that will need to be considered and negotiated to establish workable boundaries acceptable to the institution. At the same time teachers must ensure that students are not unnecessarily restricted through the creation of a learning environment which Fanderclai (1995) calls "dehumanising" and which sends the message to students "...that they cannot be trusted to behave appropriately on their own."

**Conclusion – Where To From Here?**

This article has proposed that MMORPGs – and specifically the new breed of MMORPGs like SL – present public relations educators with an exciting opportunity for engaging and motivating students in order to develop the knowledge and skills they will need to be effective and curious employees not just on graduation but long-after they have left university.

Virtual worlds like SL contain many of the characteristics of the real world; that they are not real does not appear to be an obstacle. Many experiential teaching environments, online and face-to-face, are facsimiles or close approximations of conditions students are likely to experience in the real world. But SL in some respects is more real because it exhibits characteristics and communication environments beyond the control of the teacher arising from the interaction of the residents of SL. It has an economy, there are real world organisations doing business, real world media organisations are present, and there are customers and other stakeholder publics. In short many of the business and social conditions and communication contexts that public relations students are likely to encounter in the real world are present in SL. This alone makes the virtual world an environment worthy of consideration by public relations educators.

One of the advantages of SL is that the owners have recognised the teaching opportunities and have identified educators as a key public. The SL website is designed to foster and develop a community of educators who can come together to share ideas and solve problems; it is conceivable also that a community of cross-institutional students is not far behind. Adopting a new teaching platform is to some degree part trial and part error. Having access to a community of educators willing to share their experiences is likely to enhance trial and hopefully reduce the opportunity for error.

However, caution is always advisable when considering new teaching approaches. This article has identified some of the problems that need to be explored and understood before letting students loose in a virtual world; no doubt there are many others that will be uncovered over the next year as the exploration of SL continues.

But it should not be forgotten that problems often obscure opportunity. The next step for this writer is to jump in boots and all and continue the exploration of SL with the help of colleagues also keen to learn more about virtual worlds. So if
you have occasion to stop by Second Life and happen to meet an avatar going
by the name of Parrot Plympton – say hello – because for now that is my new
identity.

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