

Teaching Moral Psychology in a Virtual World

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Abstract

The present paper describes an exploration of teaching of moral psychology within Second Life, a web-based virtual world. Using student written comments and observations collected weekly across the semester-long course, we conclude that virtual worlds support instruction by allowing students to experience situations that cannot be easily replicated in the real world. Particularly salient was the observation that Second Life—coupled with course content—provides students with examples of how various social processes influence moral understanding, judgments and actions. Further, Second Life provided a range of environments in which students can assess the influence of context on moral actions. The utility of virtual worlds as a teaching and research environment are discussed.

Keywords: Moral Psychology, Ethics education, virtual worlds

Introduction

There have been different approaches to teaching ethics at the undergraduate level (Canary, 2007; Schmidt, McAdams, & Foster, 2009). Despite several strategies proposed and used for teaching ethics, few have employed technology in their approach. Technology has increasingly been found to be an effective tool for teaching undergraduates various disciplines and there are several benefits to this approach (De Lucia, Francese, Passero, & Tortora, 2009; de Freitas & Neumann, 2009). Typically, the emphasis on technology in university level instruction is supported on grounds that it is more efficient (e.g., Inglis, Ling, & Joosten, 2002) and effective (e.g., de Freitas & Neumann, 2009). Using technology in university instruction is said to be an efficient approach to teaching because students can be flexible in their time, engage courses in a variety of places and proceed at their own pace. These time shifting benefits are said to be especially important in the current educational environment where many students are employed and need the flexibility to succeed (Inglis, Ling, & Joosten, 2002). Although the benefits of time-sifting seem unambiguous, the effectiveness of instruction using technology is more difficult to support. Proponents of the role of technology in increasing teaching effectiveness typically note the importance of active learning and the likelihood students adopt an active learning style when technology facilitates instruction. That is, proponents suggest that technology provides opportunities to experience course content in a more self-directed manner (Turney, Robinson, Lee, & Soutar, 2009).

Increasingly educators have focused on 3-D virtual worlds as environments that can maximize active learning experiences (Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrath, & Trivedi, 2009). Following the inception of Web 2.0, virtual worlds have proliferated. Unlike text-based on-line teaching environments, virtual worlds immerse students into life-like situations many of which can be tailored to emphasize course content. Specifically, these virtual worlds have been noted to foster experimentation, real-time social interaction, and personalized exploration, all of which are features of experiential learning. Given these perceived advantages, virtual worlds are increasingly used in place of traditional role-playing activities to provide learning experiences within contexts that mirror real life events and situations (Monahan, McArdle & Bertolotto, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to highlight the utility of virtual worlds in the teaching of moral psychology to undergraduate students. We suggest that having students compare and contrast real and virtual worlds is a particularly efficient way to highlight central concepts in moral psychology and ethical theories. Schmidt, McAdams, & Foster (2009) note the significance of using comparisons and reflections in the learning process. Further, we suggest that active learning is encouraged when students explore different settings and interact with others within virtual worlds.

Perhaps the best-known virtual world is Second Life (SL). SL is a rapidly growing 3-D virtual world that appeals to a wide-range of users including educational, financial, special interest, and recreational groups. Organized around islands, primary users purchase land and build structures to suit their needs. Individuals on the other hand develop their own avatars and are free to travel to islands, attend concerts, poetry readings, go to clubs and dance, and yes, even get married and set up a house by the sea. There are very few SL-wide rules or consequences for violating the few that exist. Some islands develop their own usage norms but typically these are rather basic and focus on disruptions of intended functions and uses. Of importance to the current paper is that only basic rules, laws and norms exist in SL and users have latitude in the quality and genuineness of their interactions with other avatars.

The course setting and objectives

The purpose of the course was to integrate moral psychology and ethical theories and apply this information to some of the moral dilemmas of our time (e.g., Sexuality, Abortion, suicide, euthanasia, among others). In the first section of the course students were exposed to moral psychology, then Western, Eastern, and Middle Eastern philosophical ethical theories, followed by discussions of contemporary ethical issues. Interpretation of moral psychology views were applied to the various ethical dilemmas discussed (e.g. Sexuality, etc.). Although this paper will draw off of experiences across the course, our primary aim is the material on moral psychology.

Participants: The course participants were 11 undergraduate honors students who enrolled as part of their honors program requirements. Honors students are identified by admissions test scores at or above the 90th percentile and must maintain a 3.5 GPA based on a 4-point scale. Gender was roughly balanced and students were in their sophomore and junior years. Students reported little familiarity with ethics or moral psychology upon entry into the class.

Procedures: Using a virtual classroom built on an island supported by the department, students met twice weekly in Second Life (see Figure 1). We met on Mondays and Wednesday. On Wednesday material was presented in a somewhat traditional classroom format. Instructor avatars lead the class using blackboards and PowerPoint slides uploaded into second life. This portion of the class assumed a traditional lecture –discussion format. At the end of the Wednesday class students were given an assignment within SL to be completed on their own which focused on moral psychology concepts and perspectives such as Rest’s Four-Component model. On Mondays, students returned to the island classroom for a discussion of their findings. Thus, the course included traditional information, individual assignments in SL, and group discussion. Student reflection papers were submitted prior to the Monday discussion. Each paper assignment required students to reflect on an aspect of a moral theory, and consider how one might observe the expression of the concept within the real and virtual world. As such, students were asked to focus on the psychological concept by comparing how it might be expressed within both real and virtual worlds. Typically students sought out islands in Second Life where they could explore the questions and assignments. Frequently they interviewed and chatted with other residents of Second Life to obtain their perspectives on the moral/ethical issues. Additionally, students noted incidences in Second Life that demonstrated or depicted the moral/ethical issues.

Content. Moral Psychology represents a branch of developmental psychology that focuses on psychological processes involved in the production of moral action (Rest, 1983). Although the roots of this field date back to Piaget and Kohlberg and a focus on moral reasoning and judgment, more current views highlight additional processes that are claimed to supplement reasoning in the production of moral action (e.g., Blasi, 1983; Firmer & Walker, 2009; Rest, 1983). Of these models, Rest’s Component Model has been particularly helpful in structuring moral interventions and educational systems (e.g., Bebeau & Munson, 2009). Within the Four Component model, moral action is assumed to be the product of at least four sets of processes: moral sensitivity, moral judgments, moral motivation, and moral character/implementation operating together and in interaction. As defined by the model, each of these components has a unique contribution to moral functioning and is best viewed as defining a set of processes that serve the same ends. Moral sensitivity includes processes that promote an individual’s ability to identify and attend to moral issues (i.e., moral sensitivity), the ability to reason and justify the morally ideal course of action (i.e., moral judgments); a motivational system that prioritizes the morally ideal choice against other claims on the individual (i.e., moral motivation), and finally, processes that promote the ability to stay on task, manage interpersonal relationships to promote a moral point of view, ego strength and the like. It is important to note that the four components do not make distinctions between affect and cognitive processes and view both as operating both within and across components.

Further, the mode does not expect moral actions to be the result of a simple linear sequence starting at component 1 and moving linearly to component 4. Indeed, the expectation is that components may contribute in a highly interactive way. This framework was used throughout the class.

Student reflections and observations.

The first set of reflections followed from class discussion about the role of intentions in moral functioning. In class the discussion had centered on the cognitive developmental focus on the understanding of intentions as a central to the formulation of a moral judgment. Students understood the importance of intentions in real life, but were suspicious that one could really focus on intentions in the virtual world. The assignment maintained the focus on intentions by asking students to speculate on how one typically judges the intentions of others and then to compare and contrast how one might judge intentions in the virtual world. Students clearly identified the typical strategies one uses in the real world to assess intentions. As three students suggested:

Inferring the intentions of others is normally not an explicit or conscious thought process. Most people implicitly learn social rules and expect others to act in predictable ways in accordance with their particular social group. I personally use clothing, hairstyle, and vocal cues to make assumptions about an individual. These assumptions merely act as an outline of a predictable set of actions and responses that I can expect from that individual. While the idiom “don’t judge a book by its cover” is widely held to be true, in my experience I have found that people are not books and that most are people consciously or unconsciously make their personal tastes and the social groups they identify with apparent through their style. Clothing and hairstyle are an outward nonverbal expression of who an individual is.

The human capacity to gauge the intentions of other people’s actions is dependent on a number of communicative systems. While these forms of communication can sometimes conflict with each other (e.g., instinctive body language can contradict an intellectualized thought), emotions and ideas can be gauged most accurately only when all faculties of human expression are accounted for. That is to say, a person’s natural disposition is clearest when their voice, language (i.e., literal words), and body language can all be observed.

As defined, to intend is to have in mind or to plan. Specifically, the intent of an act encompasses the knowledge of the consequences and the results a person expects from such an act. Making judgments on the intents of others involves many cues, many of which are subjective. People are incredibly complex, so unless somebody explicitly states why they behave the way they do, personal biases must come into play. A person who would not donate time to charity may assume that someone he dislikes who does is a self-righteous do-gooder. This can come without any indications of the sort from the performer.

In addition to personal slants to interpreting intent, other tools are at one’s disposal. When speaking, voice can reveal a lot. If a person is a poor liar, dishonest intent is easily uncovered by using verbal cues (a change in tone, too many pauses, or stammering, for example). The voice can also be an indicator of genuineness. A heartfelt apology after an action gone awry (spilling a drink on someone’s outfit, for example) is a good indicator of whether a person intended

A third and also important factor in judging intent is nonverbal cues –body language or facial expressions, for example. Even a simple smile can tell a lot and have many meanings. A smile can be mirthful, threatening, nervous, apologetic, sarcastic, smug, or even completely fake. People seem instinctually programmed to read these universal expressions and indicators very well. Correctly judging a person’s stance, smile, or the look in his or her eyes can make intent very clear to do something or not.

These comments captured the basic set of assumptions that how one looks, the language one uses, the emotions one signals, and the posture one adopts all are used by adults to gauge the intentions of others. However, most felt that virtual worlds were limited.

In Second Life, the only purely original and individualized element of expression is language (since gestures are pre-set and vocal tones are, more or less, non-existent). The advantage of this limited form of communication is that it conditions people to employ thoughtful language. People actually have to think about the application of certain words in order to convey the emotions that certain pre-set avatar gestures fail to make clear. Yet, the obvious disadvantage is that people could use language in an inauthentic way. Thus, this focus purely on language (since body language and vocal tones are not wholly represented) grants people the leeway to create lies freely.

And so the one method for completely detailing intentions in Second Life (and maybe in reality) can also be used to conceal intentions (such as when a pedophile claims to be an attractive female avatar in conversation in order to attract young boys).

A problem in Second Life and even in real life communication such as texting is the relative inability to use voice to interpret intent. When typed, a sentence can easily be mistaken for coarse, rude, or offensive. A few hurt feelings later, one party is apologizing to the other because of misinterpreted words. Some (myself included) compensate for the possibility of misinterpretation with the use of emoticons, text arrangements designed to look like faces. A correctly placed smiley face can assure the recipient of a message that the preceding sentence is meant in good humor.

A second student focused more on the limited ways of communicating in SL.

In our world we are guided by morality and many other sets of codes or laws that govern us promote appropriate behaviors. In virtual worlds like Second Life however, these codes are not the same. We are still able to make judgments and inferences about other people and their actions by using many of the same tools like deductive reasoning that we might use in the real world but there are many differences. We can still analyze speech patterns for example because you can here real voices and we can analyze the way a person talks even in typed speech. One of the greatest weaknesses of second life is that it is unable to capture all of the minute aspects of body language because we have a limited number of gestures to choose from. The main difference between the two worlds is that it is harder to analyze how a person chooses to express themselves because how a person wants their avatar to be seen can be quite different from how they want to actually appear in the real world. For example, our analysis of how one's avatar expresses him or herself is only valid in making inferences about the intentions of the created creature due to the fact that the creation is merely an extension of a person's self. It takes away certain essential elements that might cause someone to make particular assumptions or develop particular inferences. Second Life accomplishes something that we may never be able to achieve in our world by taking away factors such as race, language, and sex. Living a life in a virtual world allows people to do things they would not typically do and then see what effects might be caused by their actions, without having to face the same consequences in their daily lives. We can still gauge whether an act is good or bad but it is considered differently as a result of the fact that what may be good for the world of Second Life may not be good for the real world. How a person behaves on second life may be more revealing of their true nature but without the same consequences it makes it much harder to infer or interpret their intentions.

Interesting, however, students were able to find virtual worlds have some advantages in determining intentions.

In Second life I can still make assumptions about people based basically on the same qualities. I just obviously would not expect this to have any bearing on who the person is in 1st life. Clothing, hair, accessories, body proportions, and make up still serve the typical purposes. There have been anthropological studies showing that taller avatars are more aggressive, and attractive avatars are friendlier (Yee & Bailenson 2007). People probably don't think of it but by being different from who they are in 1st life they are basically role-playing, and so the same real world guidelines apply.

There is the added benefit in 2nd life that you can click on an avatar before even talking to them and read their profile. I have never seen anything substantial in profile information, except that often people will request that you IM instead of "yelling" in local chat. Some people will describe themselves as friendly and approachable, "will help noobs", some express a preference for their hobbies, some sound like egocentric, vain simpletons, etc. You are also able to see the persons groups they are affiliated with. There are also titles above the avatar's name. Some guy who has "Womanizer" over his avatar's name comes off as less approachable to me than someone with "Knight Errant".

Taken together, it seemed clear that SL could be used as a medium to compare and contrast what it takes to develop an understanding of another's intentions. Through explorations in SL, students reflected on ways in which one could determine intentions and found evidence that people develop analogous strategies in SL to compensate for the limitations on an Avatar's ability to express emotion and subtle body movements. These observations helped to highlight the importance of focusing on intentions by demonstrating how quickly other strategies are developed to form impressions of other's behavior when the situation limits traditional techniques.

Student comments illustrated how they were able to use other sources of information such as profiles and selection of avatar names. Further, the experiences of interacting with others in SL were central to this process in that all students expressed that they used their SL interactions to formulate their positions.

The role of consequences on moral action in a virtual world

Griefing is a term used to label individuals who disrupt, vandalize or interfere with others within SL. That is, people who cause grief. Grievers have some visibility in SL and there are groups who see promoting griefing as their primary aim. During our class we had at least one instance of griefing and as students explored SL the practice of griefing became noticeable. Our class discussion of this practice led to a consideration of consequences for behavior. Many noted that there are relatively limited consequences for bad behavior in SL. As one student put it:

In Second Life, the lack of major consequences leads some to believe that it is a moral-free world, and they act accordingly. In the virtual world, rudeness, harassment, and violence, at worst lead to a few minutes of annoyance and inconvenience. Many discussions that I have had with grievers have put me under the impression that they consider their decisions amoral rather than immoral.

Others wondered whether the anonymity in SL is more central to the griefing problem.

I believe that one major reason that people Grief is because of the feeling of anonymity that exists in Second Life and the fact that they foresee few consequences from it. It is true that Second Life is a representation of yourself, but I believe that that is only as true as you want it to be.

We then asked students whether moral psychology might offer an explanation for why the lack of consequences was sufficient to encourage greifing. Further we asked why wasn't the individual's own self-perception and internal monitoring enough to resist griefing? Many noted that the age range typically associated with griefing corresponded to more self-focused understanding of cooperation typically associated with Kohlberg's Stage 2 or the personal interest schema in the Neo-Kohlbergian formulation (Rest, et al. 1999).

Interestingly enough, when asked, users believed that grievers were mostly younger people and college students. At first this was alarming, however it does exemplify Kohlberg's stages of moral development. In stages two, three and four a person is most susceptible to falling into something like griefing because they are in the most selfish stages of moral development. Someone in stage two is very self-centered and is only concerned with how griefing will aid them. This could be from sabotaging another person to simply enjoying making someone unhappy.

Persons at stage 2 would say that grievers are motivated by their own personal objectives; the pure hedonistic enjoyment of messing with others, with no thought for the feelings or thoughts of others.

The motives of grievers are hard to discern, but Kohlberg's ethical model allows for some prediction of how people at certain levels decide what to do. People at Stage 2 of Kohlberg's model act out of self-interest. This seems to agree with the general perception of grievers desiring nothing more than a sick laugh. As there are free accounts in SL, a griefer really doesn't lose anything important when they get banned, and by griefing, they get the enjoyment of having mildly inconvenienced someone in a silly way.

Still others noted that early conventional thinking could be implicated as well. This was particularly apparent to students who searched out grievers as members of groups.

Grievers in Stage 3 act in order to fulfill social roles, and there are online groups and clubs in which clever griefing is applauded. Logically, grievers in this stage seek acceptance and the fulfillment of their roles. To affect grievers in this stage, it would seem necessary to ban groups that support such activities. This could be problematic, as they may not be officially be part of SL, but just members of a certain forum.

.....or a griefer can build his reputation and "street cred" among his peers by doing griefing, so social motivations can play a part.

The students were able to use the SL environment to focus on internal and external influences on ethical behavior. Most held that individuals referred to the consequences of an action particularly in virtual environments. However, the discussion following the SL assignments did focus on the limitations of a simple consequence view which some noted in their written work. The following student focused on Bandura's (1999) description of moral disengagement which presupposes an internal moral system.

The griever may be displacing his or her frustrations or inadequacies in the real world onto others in Second Life, where they can't see the person they're tormenting. This allows for moral disengagement that removes the griever's knowledge that harassing people is morally and socially wrong. The griever doesn't feel like he or she is a part of the Second Life "society," so no guilt is felt when grieving.

In the process of gathering information on grieving and grievers most students had to search out sites which promote grieving. The following excerpt highlights the active role adopted by students to complete the assignment and also the utility of SL as an environment rich in active learning experiences.

I have never personally encountered grievers on second life. Even on the newbie islands. In true anthropologic fashion I decided if the grievers would not come to me, then I would go to them. I scoured the internets for tales of grievers and their whereabouts and found that the Encyclopedia Dramatic details the adventures of one specific sect of grievers who get quite a bit of media coverage in second life. This group allegedly had its beginnings as a two man show in response to an Ebaum's World forum post questioning whether second life could be raided. This concept is quite humorous considering that the connotations of raiding are generally attributed to World of Warcraft when a massive amount of players join together to defeat a boss. As second life has no goals, quests, or bosses, it would obviously be an entirely pointless act to raid the second life community.

The furry avatar (Note: an avatar the student met on an island catering to grievers) that was telling me about grievers speculated that they were adolescent to mid 20s males based on the video games and interests talked about by grievers. It is strange, but it is possible to date someone by their games. I recently had a conversation with an anonymous person and they mentioned they really liked their commodore and I realized I was probably talking to someone in their late 40s. In any event, there is a lot of speculation about who the grievers are on the internet and I've heard it both ways. When I mentioned that I am still just as shy in SL as RL the furry avatar said that people generally act similarly in SL as they do in RL; Grievers probably act similarly childish in RL and bad people tended to do bad things in SL and real life. I cannot attest to the validity of this theory.

The exercise on grieving was successful in highlighting the limitation in attending to consequences as the primary consideration in promoting moral behavior. Through our focus on greifing we were able to note connections between moral judgment developmental theory and specific behaviors. Students were able to speculate on which age group was most likely to find grieving an exciting and satisfying action and provide a theoretically grounded explanation. Further, students actively searched SL and in the process encountered individuals entering into the behaviors of interest. The latter feature of SL was particularly important in furthering the discussion in that one could begin our exploration of this "bad behavior" by comparing and contrasting real and SL and providing a testable explanation that students could then test on their own.

Rest's Four Component model and moral behavior within Second Life

The last major section of the class devoted to moral processes focused on contemporary models in general and Rest's Four Component Model in particular (Rest, 1983). As mentioned previously, the Four Component Model suggests that moral action is the result of four component processes operating individually and in interaction. The components include: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation. After presenting the theory, the class was asked to evaluate whether or not the Four Component Model was equally descriptive in SL. Most students focused on Component 1 and moral sensitivity. In each case most thought that virtual worlds obscured ethical issues and made their focus less likely clear.

I think that there is a breakdown in component 1 as people move into the virtual world. People may have moral ideals in the real world that they may act on and maintain. Yet individuals may want to have virtual sex or be very obnoxious on the internet and this creates a dissonance between their moral views and their actual actions. I think that people redefine component 1 to better fit what they want to do. Most of the individuals I've encountered are obsessed with writing scripts for businesses or chatting with the opposite sex, so I focused my moral questions to the topic of cheating on a significant other. Everyone seems to have at least a rudimentary opinion on the matter.

I spoke with three individuals on the matter. One individual expressed that there are certain boundaries that he wouldn't go beyond despite the anonymity that SL affords.

When asked about what circumstances would make cheating permissible he replied that SL is like watching interactive cartoons and it would depend on how detached one can be from the animation. So is it really all about the intent behind an action? And if SL is really just interactive cartoons then surely you wouldn't consider it cheating if you didn't consider reading magazines or watching porn cheating. I acknowledged that these things would be alright if he weren't being deceptive or lying about them. However, this individual didn't think he should have to share with his wife every time he bought a hustler magazine, which is probably understandable.

Another individual said that he behaved much more impulsively and didn't have any moral problem with upsetting virtual people. However, he would never ruin his reputation in RL by being rude or obnoxious. He agreed with the generally held opinion that decisions and actions affected people in the virtual world in some way, but not to the extent that they would in the real world; it's called real life for a reason. He equated it to SL currency translating into the real world. You have to work hard at grieving to make it translate into the real world. He said that SL is just an experiment in human teleportation. If people could really teleport across the world and back home again, there would be rampant grieving. He also noted that he is surprised how vicious he can get online for real. In real life he claims to be a "chill" person. He says that he has never dated someone in RL and simultaneously dated someone in SL, but that he probably would do it and wouldn't tell his real world girlfriend. I asked him if it was cheating and he said it depends what goes on, the way you can have lunch with a girl in RL and it's not a problem. He also said that virtual sex was nothing like real sex and that for it to really be cheating it would depend on the amount of intimacy. However, in RL getting drunk and cheating or casually "hooking up" both count as cheating. So at some point the act matters just as much as the intent or the intimacy.

A third gentleman asked me where I was from and if I was single. I noticed that he was in the group Married and Cheating; "a group for married men and women in SL and RL that wanna be the dirty filthy cheating sluts we all are in the human species". I was very excited to be speaking with him because it was exactly what I was curious about. However, after I said that I was not single he would not talk to me thereafter.

I think that in these few discussions and in class discussions I have narrowed it down to some strange sort of cross over; where actions matter less and it's all about mental intent in the virtual world, but in the real world actions matter just as much as thoughts or intent, if not more. The reasoning must be that virtual actions are not real actions, but the mental events in the person behind the avatar are. It is interesting how people redefine their definitions of what a moral situation is to allow for their actions to be in compliance with their views.

A minority of the students focused on component 3—moral motivation. Common to these essays was the claim that virtual worlds remove the complexity of the situation as well as the consequences on the protagonist and thus rendering the component less significant in the production of behavior. The following essay makes this point clear.

I selected component three for my comparative analysis of its relevance in real life versus Second Life. Component three states that, "the person must give priority to moral values above other personal values such that a decision is made to intend to do what is morally right." This means that a person will often have to be willing to make personal sacrifices in order to make moral decisions. For example, suppose I was to pick up \$100 I saw someone drop on the ground. I could either keep it or give it back. Giving it back is clearly the moral choice. Making that choice would require that I sacrifice the \$100 that I could have had if I chose to keep it.

In real life, the choice between self advancement and morality is one of the most common moral decisions people have to make. Every day I make many such decisions. Today for example, I could have not done my share of my GBA 490 group's work and gotten one of my teammates to do it by making up an excuse. I would have probably felt justified in doing so because members of my group have done similar things many times in the past. However, in the end I made the decision to do my share of the work. Making the moral choice in this situation resulted in a sacrifice of time on my part- the type of sacrifice one must often be willing to make in order to make moral decisions. This is one example of several choices I have already been faced with today, and it is only 11:45 AM. Because it is highly relevant in real life, I believe that component three is one of the most pervasive and important components of the four component model.

In Second Life, this component is much less applicable. There are not decisions to make in Second Life like there are in real life. Nothing like the situation I described earlier with the \$100 bill would ever happen in Second Life. The only “moral decision” a person could make in Second Life that I can think of is the decision to not bother someone. Otherwise, for the most part there no real moral decisions to make because there are no institutions in SL to enforce obligations. In the example I gave earlier of my decision to do my work for my GBA 490 group, I have an obligation to them that is enforced by social norms and our educational institution. In Second Life, the formation of this type of obligation is rare. So, non-action (i.e. not doing my work) on a user’s part will rarely result in harm to others. Thus, the choice to engage in non-action can rarely be considered a moral decision since there are rarely any real consequences to such a decision. There are rare exceptions to this rule- an SL marriage, for example- but even within these “institutions” the issue is still debatable because the validity of these institutions is debatable (if I don’t want to be in an SL marriage anymore I can just log off and never log back on).

Moreover, there are not real sacrifices to make in SL either. In the exception I detailed before where not bothering someone could be seen as a moral decision, the sacrifice would be the extra enjoyment a person would have gotten out of grieving someone. In most other cases in SL, since there are no true decisions to make, there are no sacrifices to be made either. The existence of moral decisions and sacrifices is the crux of component three. Since these ideas do not apply as readily to Second Life as they do to real life, component three is not nearly as applicable in SL as it is in the real world.

Comparing SL and the real world was helpful for students to unpack how each of the components contributes to moral action. Overall, students tended to view SL as a simplified environment in which moral functioning is freed from many of the complexities of the real world. However all viewed the processes as present in some form or another. The process of developing an understanding of the concepts as they apply in real life, then contrasting the expression of these concepts in virtual worlds, followed by interactions with others in SL to test out their assumptions, was helpful in furthering students’ knowledge of Rest’s model.

Summary and Conclusions

Virtual worlds are increasingly identified as potential settings for high quality undergraduate instruction (Monahan, McArdle & Bertolotto, 2008). Central to this claim is that students are more likely to become active participants in their learning as they apply and explore concepts learned in class within virtual worlds (Canary, 2007; de Freitas & Newmann, 2009). The current report describes the teaching of moral psychological concepts to undergraduate honors students relying on using a virtual world, Second Life, for the educational setting and targeted experiences. With the exception of the first class meeting all of the interactions were in SL and all of the assignments required “field trips” into SL. Students explored psychological concepts by reflecting on how individuals experience virtual worlds and how these experiences might differ from real life interactions. Then students tested their perceptions by exploring sites and individuals within SL. This strategy seemed particularly successful as students appeared to enjoy the process and were much more actively engaged in the instructional process as would be expected using other venues.

Second Life is a particularly rich source for ethics instruction given the relatively wide-open environment without scripted experiences or highly regulated environments. Indeed a common theme in SL is a discussion on the need for self regulation within an environment that is defined by the near absence of rules and regulation (SL website). The freewheeling environment that is SL was particularly helpful in highlighting the distinction between external and internally driven moral systems and in so doing helped students challenge preexisting views of how cooperation is best conceived much the same way dilemma discussion interventions have been shown to promote debate and stimulate growth (Shaefli, Rest & Thoma, 1984).

From the students’ perspective the debate over whether internal moral systems are actually relevant was a theme that ran through the class. This focus may not be too surprising if one considers that students from the same university and cohort typically prioritize personal interest moral schema (i.e., a focus on personal outcomes and friendships) and maintaining norms schema (i.e., a decision-making strategy that emphasizes rules, laws, and social norms). From a perspective informed by a personal interest schema one would emphasize the weighing of consequences against benefits as a primary determining factor governing action. Running through many of the comments—most notably in interpreting the grieving phenomena—is the view that many might want to enter into actions that are not particularly cooperative since the fun factor for the individual is high and the consequences minimal.

Similarly, many students noted that the absence of rules made the regulation of SL difficult. In this maintaining norms perspective, rules of conduct are necessary to provide structure and guidance for SL users. Students who made this argument tended to suggest strategies Linden Labs (the owners of SL) could employ to rein users in. Most students holding to this view found the current strategy of banning disruptive users to the “corn fields”—an island for users on probation—somewhat futile. Underlying this view was the sense that chaos was inevitable in the lawless frontier that is second life. Only rarely did a student mention the potential constraints on autonomy that increased rules might engender. Taken together, the debates prompted by students’ views on cooperation within SL closely resembled central features of dilemma discussion interventions. Future research might directly assess the impact of the course on moral judgment development in order to confirm these observations on the quality of discussions prompted by the class and associated reflections on SL experiences.

Another theme that stood out to us was the unanticipated outcome that students were emboldened by their trips into SL to explore topics of particular relevance to them. For example, some students honed in on relationship dynamics and explored issues of honesty and fidelity in SL. Reoccurring topics included online marriages and the connection between SL and real life. Others went to SL clubs and social sites in which they were exposed to a range of individuals that they were not likely to experience otherwise. Still others noted the role of religion in SL and were able to experience a range of religious experiences attending services in temples, mosques, and churches. Clearly these explorations were of interest to students and instructors did not have to prompt them. In our view the opportunity to explore a range of experiences was a clear strength of using SL as an educational setting—particularly in a college setting.

As researchers and students, we also see multiple research opportunities in SL. Clearly a systematic evaluation of student outcomes in traditional and SL-based classes is warranted. The observations presented above clearly identify elements of experimental approaches that have been shown to promote learning and development. Demonstrating this effect empirically would help to promote growth in college instruction in virtual worlds. Also evident in the student comments was the observation and concern that Avatars seemed to express the individuals own values and interests unevenly. For some SL users it appeared that their avatars were closely aligned to their real world selves. By contrast, other users behaved in ways that suggested a disparity between avatar and self. Students often wondered why some users built in differences and some remained true to themselves. Why and for whom do individuals more or less present their real world selves is an interesting question that has implications for researchers interested in self development. Further, counselors may find how the individual presents his/her avatar of importance in understanding their clients and evaluating treatment outcomes.

Finally it was clear to the class that SL is an evolving social system that is adapting to various demands that place the individual in interaction and sometimes in conflict with others. As such, there is an evolving moral climate in SL that would be interesting to observe over time. Very rarely to researchers have the ability to observe a fast evolving social system that includes major elements of the real world such as a thriving economy, a clear religious presence, leisure activities, significant educational offerings, groups interested in sex and various expressions of sexuality, all mixed together with users from all over the world. Tracking the evolving moral system that is SL would be a significant but profitable undertaking.

In conclusion, the primary interest driving the development of the course was to use a virtual world to address moral and ethical concepts based on an experiential component. We further hoped that by promoting targeted exploration of a virtual world would encourage active learning in a variety of situations that would be very difficult to construct in real life. Our experiences and the available written student records suggest that this course was successful in achieving these goals.

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Figure 1. The classroom in Second Life.

