"Can You Die?": On the Relevance of *Second Life* in Business Writing Pedagogy

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Introduction

Increasingly, business writing pedagogy includes considerations of digital literacies associated with new media. New Media writing pedagogy helps students understand how to engage in synchronous or asynchronous collaboration (e.g.: Wikis), digital public relations (Blogs), establish and maintain a Web presence (Web site development) or publish digitally (books/tutorial videos). The collection edited by Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe and Sirc (2004) contributed to helping writing teachers develop approaches to integrating New Media into writing pedagogy. Further, Selfe, Fleischer and Wright (2007) encourage instructors to include in assignments that integrate new media reflections by students on challenges they faced while working with a given tool. Lankshear and Knobel (2005) encourage instruction in this new literacy to include consideration of the socio-cultural impact of the practice of particular digital literacies within learning environments; that is, how might a given technology and its relationship to a given culture affect learning? Gee (2003) describes the potential benefits of virtual gaming environments for literacy learning, citing how students may be engaged with the environment on multiple levels of learning including addressing a specific situation and involvement with multiple modes of representation, among others.

One such environment is *Second Life* (SL), and scholarship and the presence of multiple listservs related to its use in education and practice point to its popularity in higher education and business (e.g.: Ritke-Jones, 2010). SL is a three-dimensional virtual environment that looks much like a video game. As users create their own accounts for SL, they also create a visual representation of themselves (avatar) that can assimilate their own appearance or be a dramatically different image than who they are in real life, including an animal. Users can develop a space in the environment for their own organization or company, which is called an "island." The collection of "islands' forms the SL "World." Users can move from island to island interacting with others in the SL virtual world. However, there is some resistance to its use in business and in writing pedagogy along with the perception that instruction in theories of technology is irrelevant (Malaby, 2007 and Scott, 2006). In particular, Scott acknowledges that, while it is important to understand connections between writing, technology and economics, "broad social and political critique is problematic in professional and technical writing programs where students expect to learn the kinds of skills that can most directly help them get and keep jobs" (p. 229). Students in these programs tend to value "practice/skills-based pedagogy." The quotation included in the title of this article suggests to some degree this perception of irrelevance for an environment that appears much like a video game; however, the context of that quotation is described later in this article.

SL necessitates an understanding of certain digital literacies, including CMC, digital rhetoric and digital forms of research. This includes an understanding of certain aspects of theories of technology. Leonardi and Barely (2008) acknowledge challenges associated with technology-related studies, especially related

to workplace communication issues, and they indicate that when studying technologies one needs to consider material attributes of the technology and how they affect its use.

This proceedings presents some results of an empirical study pertaining to students' perceptions of the relevance of including SL in business writing pedagogy that involved simulations and consideration of SL's affordances and constraints in various settings. In the scope of the study, which asked several questions (see Remley 2010a), I found that some students commented positively about the relevance of their SL experience while some commented negatively about it. I decided to pursue this issue by examining a portion of the data, which I describe below, more closely. These results illustrate support for and resistance to integration of SL in business writing pedagogy that also includes analysis of affordances and constraints of the technology. It is important for instructors to make explicit connections between technologies they integrate in their pedagogy and ways that students may be asked to use them in the workplace. Such connections can contribute to showing students the value of integrating experiences with new media and theories of technology into their learning. This proceedings concludes by suggesting ways to help students see the relevance of SL and the theory of analysis of affordances and constraints to their professional development and links to writing coursework.

The Relevance Issue

Even though considerable scholarship discusses studies associated with ways to integrate new media applications into writing courses, the debate about their inclusion and instruction in theories of technology in writing pedagogy continues (Scott, 2006; Remley, 2010a). Scott , in particular, calls attention to the perception of technical writing students who believe that they will not need background associated with theories of technology in an economy that limits their access to policy-making decisions.

Scott asserted that, "[t]hough centered around expanding connections through electronic networks, emerging communications technologies and the terms of work in late capitalism can alienate people from each other and their work even as operations are integrated" (p. 230). Such limitations serve to discourage employees from learning theories that may be relevant to them later in their career. Further distracting from such pedagogy, students taking business writing or technical writing courses tend to want to learn particular writing skills such as formal elements, good news/bad news messages, how to write a persuasive proposal and integration of visuals into their documents. Finally, Scott encourages a pedagogy that he characterizes as a compromise between omitting the discussions of ideology and making students aware of the various perspectives within the scholarship (p. 230).

While Scott observes attitudes toward theories of technology generally, he does not identify particular theories of technology that such writing pedagogy can integrate. However, one particular theory of technology that can be useful within such writing courses is the analysis of affordances and constraints. This theory can help students understand how technologies can affect decision-making within a particular ideology, especially when applying this analysis to *Second Life*, which has been used in academic and commercial settings. This theory can be relevant for students when those graduates have the agency, based on their experiences with New Media composing technologies and this particular theory of technology, to suggest using new tools in a given workplace environment.

Indeed, Leonardi and Barely (2008) assert the relevance of studying affordances and constraints of technologies used in workplace settings, observing material attributes that affect usability. They argue

the value of understanding how people use a given tool in practice toward understanding why workers "do the things they do with technology and why organizations and practices acquire the forms they acquire"(pp. 171-172). Designers observe users interacting with a new technology in order to understand how to design it to be more user-friendly, and therefore, more useful; so, too, should we engage students in practices they may encounter so as to understand how they perceive a given tool and help them understand its affordances and constraints.

The more closely connected application of a theory is to affecting business decisions, the more relevant it is for students. In the next sections, I explain traditional conceptions of the scope of business writing pedagogy and the link between SL and pedagogy that integrates forms of New Media and analysis of affordances and constraints.

Business Writing Pedagogy and New Media Studies

As mentioned above, the term "business writing" tends to generate discussions about formal documents that integrate tables and charts, the rhetoric of correspondence and persuasive proposal writing or composing effective instructions. Increasingly, writing is defined beyond the traditional perception of print-linguistic, text-based forms of composition; (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Selfe, 2004; New London Group, 1996; Witte, 1992). So, writing coursework in higher education recently has been addressing development of skills associated with these multimodal forms of representation. As Remley (2010a) observed, "[t]his instruction involves learning not only basic mechanical skills but also use of various forms of representation to optimize communication, including digitally mediated communication. Virtual environments engage all of these forms of representation as people interact on islands in *Second Life*, mixing visual, audio and print-linguistic text communication" (p. 171).

James Gee (2007, 2009) identified a number of benefits, or affordances, associated with using video games for literacy development and learning, including development of problem-solving skills and critical thinking. Gee describes 36 principles of learning/literacy that good video games offer relative to 3 areas of current research: situated context (learning in context); New Literacy Studies (learning/literacy as social and cultural practices with economic, historical and political implications); connectionism/embodied knowledge/ learning through experience.

All of these principles can be applied to the analysis of affordances and constraints of SL when applied to problem-based learning assignments in writing pedagogy, especially within technical writing or business writing courses wherein contextualized learning is espoused generally. Relative to *Second Life*, such pedagogy challenges students to critique the virtual environment as a location for business operations and offers them an opportunity to engage in the practices of users of the environment as well.

One way instructors can integrate SL into business writing pedagogy is through the use of problem-based learning activities and assignments. Vygotsky (1978) encouraged the use of realistic situations to help students learn similar kinds of activities that they may experience in their workplace. Kinneavy (1986) also encouraged instruction to give students exposure to realistic situations so that learners can learn how to perform in real situations. Further, Pennell and Miles (2009) observe numerous benefits of such pedagogy, especially pertaining to learning concepts of rhetoric and changing students' perceptions of the world (pp. 380-381). Providing situated learning applications encourages trainees and

students to think about the process they used to arrive at a given outcome and to evaluate toward improving performance in the future.

Problem-based or simulation-based learning experiences that occur in group settings provide opportunities for participants to engage in team-based development that is part of the learning organization (Senge, 2006). Scholarship in business writing pedagogy encourages collaborative projects, not only because of the collaborative environments often found in business settings, but because of the learning that occurs in such settings. Studies have long-documented the enhanced learning that one experiences in group environments (Vygotsky, 1978). There is a synergistic effect in a group environment; the participants can share unique perspectives to the benefit of the entire group in identifying solutions to a problem that one cannot consider on his or her own.

Uses of Second Life in Academic and Workplace Settings

Institutions of higher education, including Purdue, University of California and Harvard, have been integrating SL into pedagogy in a number of ways ranging from engaging architecture students in design projects to facilitating academic conferences. Also, many companies have been using SL in their operations, including IBM and Cisco. Companies have been using it for marketing purposes, including customer service, as well as for training and real-time conferencing. According to Wagner (2007), Cisco's presence in SL includes,

> several sims that they use for user-group meetings and meetings among their own international staff. They do customer education and training in Second Life, get feedback from customers on products, and do presentations using PowerPoint, video, and streaming audio.   Parag. 3

Figure 1 shows an avatar in *Second Life* reading a display of a particular company's island map identifying specific items located on its SL island. A partial listing of companies currently using SL in their operations is in Appendix A.

Figure 1: Avatar Reading Display

Dickey (2005) and Malaby (2007), among others, consider affordances and constraints of such virtual environments for education and business. Dickey studied the affordances and constraints of *Active*

Worlds, which is similar to *Second Life*, toward facilitating learning in a given pedagogy. She observed that *Active Worlds* encouraged students to be more active in learning and facilitated agency on students' part with each other. Many companies have implemented virtual environments into their training and operations. However, Malaby (2007) observes that some who have experimented with it have abandoned it. He reviews a particular case study examining the economic and geo-political implications associated with using virtual worlds in commercial settings. He critiques SL's affordances and constraints relative to socio-political implications. He stated that technologies like SL, do not fundamentally remove from human experience the kinds of human exchange that inevitably produce both possibilities and constraints (p. 67). Consequently, employees increasingly need to have digital literacy skills to help them navigate and critique digital environments where business operations may occur and digital technologies like SL are very much relevant to workplace practices.

Analysis of Affordances and Constraints

Norman (1990) explains that, when studying technology, one should also study the psychology associated with use of a given artifact. This study includes considering what users perceive as affordances and constraints of an artifact. Norman defines affordances as "the perceived and actual properties of the thing…that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (p. 9). He defines a constraint as something that limits the way in which an artifact can be used; "Affordances suggest the range of possibilities, constraints limit the number of alternatives" (p. 82). While he emphasizes visual cues that suggest possibilities of use or limits of use, he also acknowledges that affordances and constraints may be embedded in the artifact; that is, they may be part of the artifact's design but not immediately visible to the user.

Affordances and constraints of a given tool are relative to the user's previous experiences with similar tools or technologies. Norman states that, "Affordances can signal how an object can be moved, what it will support...Affordances suggest a range of possibilities, constraints limit the number of alternatives" (p. 82). So, a constraint can be a visual cue that suggests a limitation (that is, it tells us in some way not to use it a certain way or limits how we can use it). While Norman emphasizes first-hand experience as he discussed affordances and constraints, secondary research, readings based on others' experiences, can inform an analysis of affordances and constraints. If one has limited experience with a given tool, her understanding of that tool's capabilities and limitations is shaped as she reads about how someone else used that technology.

Analysis of affordances and constraints is very much a part of business applications and development of innovative processes and products. Cost-benefit analysis, commonly applied in business settings, is one form of analysis of affordances and constraints. If the benefits associated with purchasing and/or using a given technological application outweigh the costs associated with that purchase and use, one perceives the cost as an affordance; the value enables the company to afford it. However, if the application's costs outweigh its benefits, the cost is taken as a constraint; it limits the company's ability to purchase or use it. Also, usability testing, common practice in engineering settings and Web design, also applies elements of analysis of affordances and constraints. Because analysis of affordances and constraints is so often used in business and industry, it is an ideal theory to use in business and technical writing pedagogies that integrate New Media.

Second Life and Business Writing Pedagogy

As described relative to the Dickey (2005) and Malaby (2007) articles, virtual worlds facilitate a rich environment for analysis of affordances and constraints relative to how the related technologies affect various cognitive and material dynamics. This section describes the pedagogy used in a business writing course that integrated consideration of the affordances and constraints of SL within problem-based learning activities and assignments. This pedagogy is detailed elsewhere (Remley, 2010a and 2010b); however, generally, the instruction included some preliminary activities to orient students to SL, and as specific activities were introduced, learning goals were also acknowledged.

Because SL was a new technology for most students, students initially viewed SL by observing the instructor log into SL and manipulate his avatar around a particular island. This gave students exposure to the interface and some dynamics therein. Students were asked if they had general questions about SL based solely on this introduction; and, in one class, the first question came from a female, who asked the question used in the title of this article. The question suggests the perception that SL is a game, which it is not; there is no game-theory application explicitly embedded within SL, though such games can arise from among users. The question also suggests the perception that SL is irrelevant as a learning tool in a business writing class; that it is strictly a game environment. However, students were also provided with several Web-based chapters and Blog links regarding how companies use SL in their operations to help students understand the relevance of *Second Life* in their business education. Students were provided a week of class time (three hours) to become oriented to SL. Because their research into its affordances and constraints would include viewing company islands and engaging others in conversation about items available on each island, students were encouraged to perform specific tasks such as chatting with others, navigating within a single island and between islands (also called "teleporting") and saving certain island locations for future teleporting to them (also called "landmarking").

Shortly after these activities, students were introduced to a group assignment in which they would address a particular manufacturing company's consideration of using SL in its operations. This assignment is detailed in the 2010 works already referenced. After introducing the scenario, the instructor pointed out that many companies use SL but many have since reduced their involvement or abandoned it entirely. The instructor acknowledged that the purpose of the assignment was to consider the affordances and constraints of SL for certain business functions, and to give students experience in a collaborative writing situation assimilating a real setting.

Finally, after the instructor lectured about job application materials—resumes and application letters-- and preparing for interviews, students paired up randomly and engage in a first interview experience on my institution's SL island. The instructor acknowledged that the goal of this activity was to give students experience in communicating electronically in an interview: some companies interview in SL and there are job fairs conducted there. Within this activity, Students were encouraged to consider their dress as well as the positioning of their avatar relative to people involved in the interview.

Method

With Institutional Review Board approval, students in sections of a junior-level business writing course at a large Midwestern university were invited to participate in a study of their reactions to the aforementioned pedagogy that integrated SL into it. All students majoring in a program related to the College of Business Administration are required to take the course; and it is considered a "core course," which students take prior to taking upper-division courses in their major. Students received course credit for participating.

Students in each of the sections involved worked with SL as part of the coursework; however, those who volunteered to participate also completed a questionnaire and submitted a reflective essay acknowledging their perception of their learning with SL. Seventy-five (75) students across five sections over a two semester period participated in the study. Table 1 lists demographic information about these seventy-five students.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Variable	Highest frequency (percentage)	Second Highest frequency (percentage)
Age (yrs)	18-22 (78.7%)	23-27 (18.7%)
Gender	Male (62.7%)	Female (37.3%)
Previous Computer Experience	All listed (68%)	Primary (text-production tools such as word-processing, email, IM, and discussion board) and gaming (21.3%)
Previous SL experience	None (94.7%)	Less than one month (2.7%)

Most students were between the ages of 18 and 22, had considerable computer experience including gaming, and almost none had any experience with Second Life prior to enrolling in the class. Interestingly, even though many had experience with gaming environments, this course represented their first exposure to SL.

As reported earlier (Remley, 2010a and 2010b) almost an equal percentage of students responded to open-ended questions acknowledging that they perceived the inclusion of SL to be relevant as perceived it to be irrelevant (19.4% to 20.6%). However, aggregate date associated with close-ended questions about its relevance to their career showed that 57.3% agreed or strongly agreed that it was relevant to their career while 14.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed about that relevance. Consequently, reflective essays were reviewed further to ascertain more clearly student perceptions of its relevance. For the reflective essay, the prompt that is in Appendix B was provided. Generally, it asks students to consider their learning experience within the framework described above: that is, within the pedagogy of including SL in class activities and an assignment in which the focus was analyzing its affordances and constraints for particular business functions. Students composed their essays after completing the questionnaire and at their leisure in the final week of the semester. Nevertheless, the essays reflect perceptions of SL's relevance and its irrelevance. However, some that describe a negative experience seem to focus on challenges they faced with the usability of the application.

Some students, like this one, observed a connection between integrating a problem-based learning assignment into the course with SL:

> Using Second Life in a business writing class was a good idea. I think it exposed us to different approaches for companies to market their products. I think we used Second Life in our business writing class because it is an alternative to more traditional approaches. While real world advertising is still the mainstream approach, Second Life's popularity could soon increase and we may see more and more companies using it. I thought it was a good idea to expose us to it. Computers and the internet have become a vital part of business and everyday life today, so Second Life has a great appeal especially to the younger generation.

Another student also observed a connection between SL and learning to communicate using new technologies, applying some degree of analysis of affordances and constraints in his/her essay:

> Any material that allows us to learn how to more effectively communicate in a business-related context is appropriate material for a business writing class. During the semester we incorporated Second Life into many of our writing activities. My group completed a proposal detailing how to most effectively use Second Life for our fictional company. Not only did we become more familiar with Second Life, we learned to efficiently create a persuasive business proposal. Any business writing class should also introduce its participants to new, innovative forms of business related communication. The extensive use of Second Life throughout our class allowed me to explore and become more familiar with this unique conception.

> I enjoyed seeing how other businesses incorporated Second Life into their operations. During the collaborative writing assignment I surveyed at least six or seven Second Life islands created by firms operating in the technology sector. They each took a unique approach to servicing their customers through the use of Second Life. I also enjoyed researching the history of Second Life. Several chapters that I read indicated that businesses were having difficulty attracting Second Life traffic to their islands until they realized that Second Life users were interested in seeing more than just a 3D web page for the company… My favorite part about working with Second Life was being able to observe the multitude of ways businesses currently utilize it in their operations.

> …One troubling phenomena I observed was the decided lack of other Second Life users at the islands I visited. This leads me to wonder if it is fiscally efficient for many of these companies to use Second Life.

The student calls attention to a particular problem on many islands that students visited; lack of traffic. Several groups identified this as a constraint, since few potential customers visit the island. Figure 2 illustrates this problem; the avatar is reviewing a billboard on a company's island; yet, no other avatars are visible within the entire screen shot.

Figure 2: Absence of Avatars
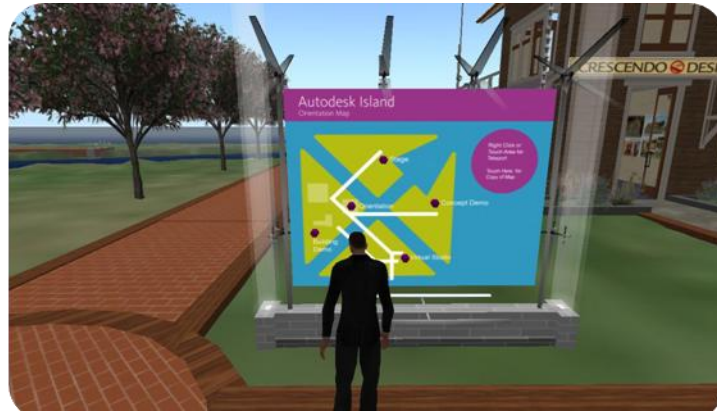
It was also clear, however, that some students perceived that SL was irrelevant to a business writing course and/or to their career. Most of these attached this irrelevance to its use in business operations more than to its use in the business writing course. However, those who indicated its irrelevance to a business writing course also indicated what they felt would be appropriate content for a business writing course. SL's perceived irrelevance in both the course and career is represented by this student:

> I felt that we used second life in business writing because some companies are now using second life in the work place to conduct interviews and meetings. I also felt we used it because it was beneficial to the instructor. I don't think business writing is a necessary class however since we must take it I think it should focus a little more on resumes and cover letters. I had to write a cover letter the other day and I had no idea how. That is a skill college graduates NEED to have. Other things imperative to the word place would be memos and proper email and (work) instant message etiquette. … my overall experience with second life was awful. I will never use second life again and if my company asks my opinion about it I will do everything I can to persuade them not to use second life.

As with others who acknowledged a similar perception, the student argues that a business writing course should develop writing skills, which are traditionally represented in standard kinds of business-related documents, and that integrating SL into the course detracted from that goal. Another student responded:

> Second Life is not related or applicable to a business writing class. Including it as part of the curriculum resulted in many weeks being devoted to focusing on a program that is ill-adapted to run on the computers in the classroom—hours of class time were wasted. Probably, a majority of the students who took the course will be required to compose numerous business letters, memos, and reports in the course of their careers. Many will probably never use Second Life again.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many perceive that writing instruction ought to involve improving students' mechanical skills, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, and showing students how to format a professional document as well as rhetorical elements of correspondence, job hunting and proposal writing; what writing scholars consider to be "traditional" or "formalistic" definitions of writing pedagogy. However, writing scholars have moved to definitions of writing that include new media forms of composing, including creating Web pages, audio and visual products that integrate interactive or dynamic, moving features. Employees interact with these media on a regular basis. Writing pedagogy in the new media age, thus, needs to include critical discussions of technologies with which employees work.

The reflective essays show that students who see a connection between SL, analysis of affordances and constraints, and business writing pedagogy attribute SL's relevance to its use in business and the need to be aware of such technologies and their capabilities and limitations prior to entering the workforce. Those who perceive it to be irrelevant articulate different attributes, from lack of usefulness in actual business operations to its incompatibility in what they perceive to be appropriate content for a writing course. Instructors, therefore, should include explicit discussions not only of composing technologies and related new media theories but also of the changing conceptions of "writing" to help students understand the relevance of New Media and related theories in writing instruction.

This proceedings illustrates one way instructors can integrate technologies like SL into writing coursework in ways that make critical discussions of technology relevant to students while developing digital literacy skills graduates will need in the workplace. While pedagogy that included SL is described, instructors can integrate analysis of affordances and constraints into assignments pertaining to assessment of the potential profitability of using digital devices such as Kindle for textbook use or Blogging as a corporate marketing tool.

Teachers should integrate new media such as SL and technologies like it into their pedagogy to help students develop various digital literacies. However, teachers need to make explicit connections between the technologies considered, the analysis of their affordances and constraints, and applications to workplace practices in order for students to understand the value of including these assignments or activities in a business/professional writing class.

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Appendix A:
Partial List of Companies and Organizations Using Second Life in Their Operations

(From Virtual Worlds for Business (2009). Retrieved from http://www.nbhorizons.com/list.htm)

Amazon	Dell
Adidas	Major League Baseball
AMD	Microsoft
Best Buy	NASA
Cisco	NBC
Coco-Cola	Sony
Coldwell banker	Sun Microsystems
Comcast	Wells Fargo

Appendix B:
Reflective Essay Prompt

If you are participating in the SL research study, please write a 2-3 page essay reflecting on your learning experience with the Second Life applications: These applications included orientation, the collaborative report and the interviewing activity. This essay is NOT graded; I will use it to understand students' learning experiences with Second Life in business writing classes.

Among some things to think about as you reflect on your learning with SL: 1) What did you understand the purpose of our use of SL in a business writing class to be (that is, why do you think we used it in a business writing class)? 2) What do you think is appropriate content for a business writing class (what kinds of things should students learn in a business writing class)? 3) What positive experiences did you have with the activities in terms of learning how companies use it in business communications? 4) What are some negative learning experiences you had with the activities? 5) What technological issues affected your experience (e.g., crashes; slow connection)? 6) Do you perceive including SL in business writing classes to be of value? Why, why not? 7) Would you have wanted to use it in more/fewer activities/assignments in class? 8) In what activities would you think it would be useful for learning business writing, if any?

You do not need to respond to all of these items, but use this list to guide what kinds of information you might include.