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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcmNegotiation of space in *Second Life* newbie interactionMiriam A. Locher^{a,*}, Andreas H. Jucker^b, Manuel Berger^b^a University of Basel, Switzerland^b University of Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Interaction in virtual worlds takes place in a spatial context. The interactants respond in various ways to this context but they also discursively create various spaces in their interaction. They negotiate spatial orientation through the use of linguistic deictic elements, create co-presence and joint attention through the gestures and positioning of their avatars and they need to handle screen space as well as the physical space of their surrounding. We discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the interdependence of interaction and space and its application to one specific virtual world, *Second Life*. We focus on a group of newbies, who participated in a workshop to experience computer-mediated communication in a virtual world and had to engage in classroom interaction and independent group work. We discuss how the participants try to organize themselves in the virtual reality of *Second Life*, while situated in different locations in the physical world, and we demonstrate how the interactants rely on space for their orientation and interaction within the virtual world and how the physical world is brought into the online interaction.

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1. Introduction

Interactants in physical and virtual life have at their disposal a large array of resources to orient themselves in space and to negotiate such orientations with their interlocutors. For example, they may use linguistic spatial deictic elements such as *here* or *there* to create a common point of view (Hausendorf, 2003; Hanks, 2005, 2011), orient their bodies/avatars towards each other to signal availability to talk and/or they can discursively create (virtual) spaces, for instance, by delivering a lecture and thereby transforming a communicatively more neutral or multi-purpose space (e.g. a clearing in a wood) into a lecture theater (see Weibel and Wissmath, 2011, for empirical work on spatial presence and flow in a variety of computer games). However, as Pearce (2008) points out

[e]ven from their earliest, most primordial instantiations, video games have struggled with the representation of space on the two-dimensional, albeit dynamic, plane of the screen, requiring players to develop a sense of spatial literacy, that is, a mode of conventions for 'reading' game space. (Pearce 2008; 1)

Like other virtual worlds, *Second Life* uses analogies from physical life. This means that 'reading game space' heavily draws on physical life conventions with respect to creating spaces (e.g. buildings, objects, landscapes). However, virtual worlds are also different worlds in which conventions can be taken over only to a certain extent and need to be adapted or created anew (cf. Herring, 2012). For example, *Second Life* also provides affordances such as flying and teleporting that are different from physical life. There is in fact a doubling of the person sitting at his/her computer and the resident in *Second Life* (see Boellstorff, 2008; 135, who talks of virtual and actual embodiment). Furthermore, there are spatial challenges in communicating since avatar gestures cannot be used as effectively as in physical life, and disrupted turn adjacency occurs in chats (e.g. Herring, 1999).

In this paper, we set out to uncover some of the layers in which interaction and space are related in virtual worlds, and we take one particular virtual environment, *Second Life*, as an example in order to reflect on its affordances of spatial orientation. We observe a group of *Second Life* newbies, i.e. computer users with no or very little experience in *Second Life*, in their struggle to gain spatial literacy through explicit and implicit negotiation of space. In Section 2, we introduce the concept of an online virtual world and introduce *Second Life* to provide a backdrop for our discussion. In Section 3, our data sources are introduced and our methodological approach is outlined. In order to illustrate our observations in Section 4, we draw on our own experience with the virtual world and data from our case study of *Second Life* newbies in their

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 61 267 27 83.

E-mail address: Miriam.Locher@unibas.ch (M.A. Locher).¹ Present address: Universität Basel, Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften, Englisch Seminar, Nadelberg 6, 4051 Basel, Switzerland.

interaction with each other during a class taught in the virtual world. We look at how these users tried to come to terms with the spatial affordances in the virtual environment of *Second Life* and how they engaged in negotiations of space.

2. The virtual world *Second Life*

Second Life is an online platform that was launched in 2003. It is widely referred to as a virtual world, i.e. a three-dimensional virtual space that can be accessed via virtual embodiments (avatars) through which users can interact verbally and non-verbally (Yus, 2011; Herring, 2012). Upon registration, users get to select a user name and an avatar through which they can access the virtual world. The choice ranges from humans, animals, fantasy creatures such as vampires and dragons to mechanical devices such as robots or buses. There are thousands of different places for exploration and interaction within *Second Life*, ranging from lecture halls, seminar rooms, cafés and clubs to ephemeral landscapes or even virtual brothels. *Second Life* is accessible all day long so life does not stop within that world. *Second Life* has already been elaborately described elsewhere.² In this section we focus on the two aspects most relevant to our study: the spatial affordances of *Second Life* and the affordances *Second Life* offers for interaction.

2.1. Spatial affordances

While the computer-screen on which the virtual world is accessed is of course two-dimensional, Yus (2011) points to the illusion of three-dimensional space that is created in virtual worlds. *Second Life* is thus different from the early online game worlds where space was created and imagined with purely linguistic means (e.g. Carlstrom, 1992; Deuel, 1996; Cherny, 1999; Paolillo and Zelenkauskaitė, 2013). In contrast, the new technological innovations allow *Second Life* to re-create elements of our physical world such as islands, the sea, forests, buildings or chairs in virtual space. The avatars through which users³ navigate that space can walk, run, fly and teleport in this virtual world. What users see within *Second Life* is tied to their respective avatars: By default users have a first-person perspective of their avatar with a tracking camera, i.e. the virtual camera adopts a slightly raised position immediately behind the avatar providing a view of the avatar's back and the approximate field of vision of the avatar. Users can, however, also manipulate camera angles and make use of the affordances that allow them to move their avatars independently from the first-person perspective.

While *Second Life* is made up of different islands, residents do not need a ship to cross the water to visit them. Instead, they use landmark links, which help them to directly teleport to a new location. Once the avatar has materialized in the new location, s/he can start exploring. Usually, islands have signposts that offer teleports to points of interest on the island, but there are also paths and maps that help residents to orient themselves. Landmark links can also be found with a browser type search function. Keywords such as “museum” or “club” will result in a list of landmark links that can be used for teleportation. Residents can save their

landmarks in their personal inventory (Screenshot 1) and can share these links with other residents. Importantly, once residents have befriended each other, one of them can, at any point in time, easily send the other an invitation to join him/her at his/her current location since one's friends are listed in their inventory.⁴ This is possible as soon as both residents are online. The use of the teleporting function is so pervasive that people will not actually walk or hike to distant locations, but will share landmarks and will then teleport there (see Frohwein et al., 2008; 35–36).

Walking, running, jumping and flying are quite often employed to explore new spaces. Especially flying allows residents to gain a quick spatial understanding of an island since flying high above the island provides a bird's eye view of the buildings and landscape below. Walking and running allow users to discover intricately designed islands, e.g. walking up stairs or taking elevators and discovering new rooms in buildings or strolling through meadows and along lakes.

In addition to flying and teleporting, the platform offers enhanced maps which are unique to *Second Life* and do not exist in physical life. These island maps provide residents with the location of other residents via green dots as well as giving them the ability to zoom in and out. This allows them to find locations where other residents congregate and teleport directly to where avatar interaction is currently taking place. A small-scale ‘mini-map’ can be kept open as a window on the screen (see Screenshot 1 on the right). Especially when teleporting to a new island, this mini-map allows users to quickly assess whether they are alone or whether there are other avatars in the vicinity. As Goel et al. (2013; 266) point out, “one of the most salient [of our conclusions] is the necessity of taking into account the importance of the presence of others in a virtual environment to an individual.” Indeed, gaining knowledge about the co-presence of other people in our immediate environment that we achieve quickly with glances in physical life is here achieved with a technical affordance.

2.2. Affordances for interaction

Second Life offers a number of affordances that allow residents to interact with each other (for introductions see, for instance, Antonijevic, 2008; Boellstorff, 2008; Hodge et al., 2011; Pojanapunya and Jaroenkitboworn, 2011; Boellstorff et al., 2012). Table 1 provides an overview of these affordances.

The main language-based channels for interaction in *Second Life* are open chat, voice over IP and instant messaging (see also Biebighäuser and Marques-Schäfer, 2009). Through open chat, users can post a text that can be seen by other users in a chat window (see left side of Screenshot 2). What is posted in the chat window is only available to those residents who are within proximity of each other, such as in the seminar room in Screenshot 2. This set-up imitates the ability to overhear a conversation in the physical world. The set-up is similar for voice over IP: Users can stream their voice into a particular location within *Second Life* and this voice can be heard by users that are close enough. Instant messaging is a way of text-based private talk (see window on the top right corner of Screenshot 2), which can only be seen by one or a number of selected residents. To communicate via instant messaging, residents do not need to be in the same place within *Second Life*. Different means of communication are usually simultaneously used as can be seen in Screenshot 2.

With respect to avatar positioning and the range in which chat can be received, *Second Life* imitates and highlights certain spatial aspects of interaction in physical life, such as the distance between

² For elaborate introductions to *Second Life* see for instance Boellstorff (2008) for an ethnography of *Second Life*; Bruns (2008) for its collaborative aspects; and Wagner (2008) for its beginnings and history. Specific features of *Second Life* tend to change from time to time. Our description is based on the features as we encountered them throughout our own research between 2012 and 2015.

³ We wish to make a clear distinction between the users, i.e. the physical-world computer users sitting at their computers, the residents, i.e. virtual identities inhabiting *Second Life* and the avatars, i.e. their virtual online manifestations in the shape of a person, an animal, a phantasy creature or an object (see also Abdullah, 2015).

⁴ As newbies tend to be overwhelmed with learning how to navigate when first entering the virtual world, we made sure in the class we taught that the group leaders insisted that all the group members befriend each other so as to be able to find each other again.

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