

# Authentic Theurgy: Ceremonial Magic in Second Life

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**Abstract:** In this paper we describe an interactive, experiential learning activity developed for teaching the sociology of religion to undergraduates. The activity begins with basic instruction in using the virtual world Second Life and culminates with the students' performance of a role play of a Pagan religious ritual. We focus our discussion on fun.

**Keywords:** Second Life, magic, experiential learning, fun, paganism, sociology, role play, religion, gaming

## Introduction

This paper considers the case of an immersive educational experience in Second Life and discusses the importance of fun as a vital component of learning while considering whether real educational value is achieved.

As educators expand into virtual worlds the importance of understanding the processes of digital domains increases. This leads to questions such as whether experiences in a virtual environment are authentic in themselves and whether there is real educational value in online interactive media, including games and shared virtual environments such as Second Life. An important aspect of education that is sadly often overlooked, especially at tertiary level, is fun. Csíkszentmihályi posited that people are most happy and attentive when in a state of flow[1]. From this we deduce that in order to achieve ideal educational value activities should induce flow.

## 1. The Fun of Flow

Recent work[2] has shown how Second Life can be used to increase the measurable learning achieved with similar time and resources. This work also indicated that learning can be achieved through complementing physical environment activities with virtual environment activities in a structure fostering a flow experience that would be prohibitively resource intensive in a physical instructional environment alone. In addition to the resource efficiency of such activities, these experiences are more likely to be enjoyable.

There is not yet an established model for judging enjoyment in virtual worlds, although Sweetster and Wyeth have suggested a flow based approach[3]. While the study of enjoyment is in its infancy in Virtual Worlds it has a long history in media studies[4]. However there is an important fundamental difference between enjoyment of media in general and of enjoyment in education in virtual worlds: enjoyment is taken for granted in media studies[4]. Once the audience loses enjoyment they simply stop engaging with the media. Students do not have this luxury. Rather, they must endure whatever media and content their educators put before them. Sadly educators generally prioritize content over fun.

Castronova[5] has postulated the growth of the fun society. He sees this as being driven by the huge numbers of people now playing online games. Games are designed to make people happy. In game worlds the number one priority of the game designers is that the gamers have fun. If they have fun they will pay their subscription fees. If no fun is generated players will switch to another game. In the pursuit of this happiness, large numbers of people spend a huge number of hours learning how to do things in the game world. Usually these are things which have no relevance outside of the game world, how to beat the troll guarding a particularly desirable weapon, how not to get eaten by the dragon in order to get the gold. We already know that people will play if it is fun. What we need to do then is to change the content from simply the kind of mindless repetition of intrinsically meaningless make work so often seen in games to engaging educational content.

If we employ this mechanism in education many will balk at the idea of prioritizing fun at the same level as content. But in fact this apparently counterintuitive idea will enhance learning by inducing flow and hence increasing engagement. In the single minded immersion of flow the emotions are employed to produce completely focused motivation. By inserting content that relates to the learning outcomes we seek we produce accidental learning. Accidental because students will be primarily motivated by a desire for fun, but the high level of focus seen in flow will have the secondary effect of increasing attention and the assimilation of content. The fun of flow has the power to engage the emotions to enhance learning outcomes. In order to test this we produced an activity that sought to prioritize fun.

## **2. The Activity**

The activity was to role play a Pagan circle ritual in a purpose built ritual environment as part of a first year undergraduate sociology unit. We constructed the environment in the University of Tasmania's (UTAS) region in Second Life. The environment in the UTAS region was the site for five two hour classes and for the performance of the role play, which was shown during a lecture for the unit.

This activity was one of a number of assessment options available to the students in a thirteen week, first year undergraduate Sociology unit. All other options consisted of the writing of a 2000 word essay. This was the first occasion on which any option other than writing an essay was offered for this unit.

Students undertaking this option were required to attend ten hours of instruction in excess of that which was required for the essay options, additionally, students were required to practice using Second Life in their own time, to keep a weekly journal and to write a 1500 word essay. The essay question cited Katz's quote "To type is not to be human, to be in cyberspace is not to be real; all is pretence and alienation, a poor substitute for the real thing"[6] and required students to argue whether they felt this was an accurate assessment. Despite this substantial extra load, and the prospect of the performance of the role play of the ritual before an audience of hundreds of other students, of the three hundred students enrolled in this unit four did select this option. All students undertaking this option were female. One student was from a Pagan family. One student was a regular World of Warcraft player. None had any experience with Second Life.

The first two hours of teaching were inworld instruction in the basic skills necessary for using the virtual world Second Life. Subsequent classes involved instruction in basic concepts of Paganism, sociological theory, and practice and performance of the role play.

### 3. Development of the Ritual Environment

#### *a. Landscaping*

The production of the environment and associated course materials required one hundred hours development time. While this may seem like a lot of time, it is significantly less than would be required to organize a ritual role play outside of the virtual world. Much more expense would be involved in having to produce physical versions of all the magical tools, robes, statuary, and effects employed. Moreover the environment can be utilized repeatedly.

Development commenced with landscaping the environment, which took the form of a gum tree covered mountain by the sea, and which was a generalized representation of the Tasmanian natural environment, replicating typical Tasmanian geographic features and native Australian plants and animals. Sound effects were employed to enrich the experience, including those for natural features, such as the sea, as well as appropriate animal sounds.



*figure 1. The ritual mountain*

#### *b. Religious Items*

The ritual area included four elemental pentagram altars located at appropriate compass points for performing a Pagan circle ritual in the Southern Hemisphere, viz. Fire at North, Water at East, Air at South and Earth at West. A set of ritual tools (Sword, Cup, Dagger, Pentacle) representative of present day Pagan practice was constructed, each including detailed appropriate symbols and colours. Ritual robes and a script for the ritual were provided. Appropriate statuary was also developed.



*figure 2. The Fire altar*

*c. Scripting*

Because of the interactive nature of the ritual, custom scripting was required. A programmer experienced in the Linden Scripting Language used in Second Life was employed for ten hours.

#### **4. Content**

*d. Introduction to Second Life*

The students were introduced to Second Life in an empty space with a plain flat ground. The first activity was the creation of avatars. Each student visited the Second Life website and created a user account and selected an avatar. Over an hour was spent on the customization of avatars in class, though the students spent much more time than this at home changing their avatars' outfits and hairstyles.

The students initially unanimously expressed that Second Life was simply a game and would have no real world effect on them. After only three hours instruction time students were advised that they should take their avatars' clothes off. All students immediately indicated that they would be too embarrassed to remove their avatars' clothing. This provoked much discussion regarding the reality of activities undertaken in a virtual world and the relationship of avatars to their human operators.

Following on from this was a treasure hunt activity which taught the students the basics of receiving items, opening boxes, obtaining and using landmarks, using camera controls, using Second Life's voice capability to communicate, teleporting and selecting objects. Some parts of the hunt required students to act cooperatively in order to achieve the goals.

The students were required to visit the Second Life Marketplace and buy their own robes, for which funds were supplied. This enabled them to understand the purchasing mechanism whereby residents acquire items and provided a means for the introduction of

concepts of digital currencies, copyright issues, making one's living from the sale of virtual items and security issues.

*e. Formal Instruction*

A two hour session on ancient and modern Pagan theology was enthusiastically participated in by the students. Content covered included a general historical and theological overview of Paganism, with more detailed coverage given to; the concept of the four elements, the nature of deity in Paganism, Hermetic Qabalah, the Enochian, Thelemic and Golden Dawn systems of theurgy and Ancient Egyptian religion. Following this the students were keen to begin the ritual role play.



*figure 3. The Air altar*

A two hour session was devoted to sociological theory, with a focus on gaming and virtual world theories. The nature of avatars and their relationship to their human operators was a key part of the content of this section and included the work of Mark Stephen Meadows[7] and Tim Guest[8].

*f. The Role Play*

The ritual the students role played was specifically written for this activity and included elements from various traditions in order to explicate the syncretic nature of Neo Paganism. The ritual took the form of a procession around and up the mountain to arrive at the main ritual area at the summit.

Each of the four students adopted a particular element and wore robes which they had customized to show colours appropriate to their element. During the deosil ascent each person stopped in turn at each of the elemental altars. Each altar contained symbols and colours associated with its element. At each altar each student performed a short preparatory ritual, spoken aloud, in the Golden Dawn tradition, comprising the Qabalistic Cross and the tracing of a pentagram in the air. The gestures were accomplished by the use of a custom made animation which was triggered by a collision generated by the students' avatars

standing in the correct position on the altar. Once this animation was completed an object appropriate to the element in question appeared before the altar and the participant was given a copy of that object for use later in the ritual.

Students were immediately aware when they had arrived at the altar of their own element by means of the matching of the colours of their robes with the accoutrements of the altars. This repetition of stimuli facilitated the assimilation of information.

After having moved through all four elemental altars in sequence the group proceeded to the ritual area on the summit of the mountain. The movement up the mountain symbolized the move from mundane to sacred space, with each stop at an altar focusing the attention until by the time the group arrived at the summit their attention was particularly well focused on the performance and significance of the main part of the ritual.

The summit ritual space was a flat bottomed, circular caldera with high sides creating the feeling of a semi enclosed space. Each quadrant of the area was arrayed with the set of symbols and colours of a particular element. There was a central pentagram altar with a fire at its midpoint.



*figure 4. The angel of Earth, Uriel*

On arriving at the summit the students each stood at the cardinal direction associated with their element and arranged in front of them the ritual tools they had received from the four altars. After an ancient Greek banishing formula was declaimed, each student in turn used an Enochian formula to invoke the angel associated with their element. As each student said their ritual formula a twelve metre angel appeared behind them. Once all four angels had been invoked the group used a Thelemic formulation to invoke the Egyptian god Thoth. As they did this a fifteen metre tall statue of Thoth appeared and then spoke to the group. There followed a short closing formulation and then the group processed back down the mountain, back into mundane space.

## 5. Outcomes

### *a. Student Reactions*

All students repeatedly remarked that it was an unusual experience to be having fun in a subject at university. This was reflected in their high level of engagement with this class. At the completion of each two hour session they invariably did not wish the class to end. Fortunately the lab was often available and so classes continued on for up to an extra hour on each occasion.

Although the performance of the ritual was filmed on the day of the performance, some sections were missed. The students were asked to return for a two hour session so that these missed sections could be recorded. Despite having been advised that this was completely optional all the students attended that session, the main topic of discussion among them being how they could get to engage in the activity again. All students volunteered to perform the ritual for an upcoming conference. And all were very keen to see the machinima of the event.

One of the four students has become a regular user of Second Life having joined a role play community. Confidential student appraisals of the activity were conducted, however the results are not yet available.

### *b. Learning Outcomes*

It is too early to ascertain completely the efficacy of learning effected by this activity as the students are yet to submit all their written work. The work completed so far, their journals and their essays, indicate they have an understanding of how socialization occurs in virtual worlds, avatar/human relations, theories of society and of personality, the nature of the real, and that the concept of learning as fun was quite novel to them.

Learning has been demonstrated by the students' inworld activities. They all can now clearly articulate the concept of the four elements and know the relevance of the order of the elements taught to them. Each one is able to relate the properties of their particular element. An understanding of the Qabalistic concepts of the macrocosm and the microcosm, and their relationship to each other, is also clearly demonstrated by the students. All students quickly and easily assimilated the concept of The Great Chain of Being and of all things, including humans, being part of a system in which no one part had a privileged position.

All students initially held the view that Second Life was "just a game" and that participating in it would not have a real effect on them. They have all now moved to the view that actions in a virtual world can have real world consequences and are aware that they became socialized to the culture of Second Life. Moreover they have come to see Second Life as more than a game, as a place with its own culture, and to be able to discuss the benefits and shortcomings of that culture.

Notions of embodied presence, and the nature of self provoked much discussion in class. The notion of participating in a culture of one's choosing, one that fits better with one's values and means of expression and that one has a meaningful part in shaping, rather than the only option being to experience the culture one was born into, was exceptionally appealing to all participants.

### *c. Future Modifications*

This activity has been scheduled to be run again next semester. Some modifications will be made as a result of what was learned this semester.

The ritual will be amended in order to achieve a good balance between being interesting for the participants and also more engaging for spectators. Having each person conduct the preliminary ritual at each altar, while engaging for participants, was too slow paced for audience engagement. Amending the ritual so that only the student adopting the role of that particular element performs the ritual at that altar should speed up the performance and increase audience engagement. Having shortened this part of the ritual, time will be made available which can be used to lengthen the closing section as it seemed too perfunctory.

Because the environment has already been developed and will be reused, time will be available to develop more accoutrements and to improve the interactive nature of the ritual. The ultimate goal is for the ritual to be able to be performed without the lengthy instructional period. Ideally we seek to make the ritual experience available to all residents of Second Life to partake of, for it to be able to be performed without the instructor's presence being required. This will require more inworld interactivity and the provision of information inworld rather than in class. Planning is underway to facilitate this.

## Conclusion

We have presented an instructional activity that integrates experiential learning not otherwise achievable with traditional lecture and discussion based instruction. This was achieved by providing foundational knowledge concerning the target content, theoretical discussion of the use of virtual worlds such as Second Life, and an experiential interactive exercise using Second Life itself.

Our results highlight the importance of fun as a factor in learning and in improving student engagement. This activity produced a high level of engagement on behalf of the students undertaking it. Although all written assessment is not yet completed for this unit we can discern from the written work that has been completed, and from the students' participation in the activity in Second Life that they have assimilated the majority of the content in which they were instructed.

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