

# SurReal Quests: Enriched purposeful language learning in Second Life

## Abstract

Three dimensional (3D) virtual worlds like Second Life offer opportunities for language learners to practise and develop real life communication skills with native speakers around the world. Teachers can integrate language practice in Second Life with other online and offline teaching tools to introduce immersive and immediate communication into a structured learning process. SurReal Quests are the combination of the WebQuest approach established by Dodge (1995) with the virtual world communication available in Second Life. Such quests see learners working toward producing a tangible product such as a text, audio podcast or video podcast and drawing on virtual world experience as part of the research process. Quests serve both as a vehicle to practise the language in real-time situations and to highlight areas for strengthening specific language skills. An example of a learner created travel podcast is presented.

## Introduction

Online teaching, it could be argued, has entailed a trade-off between the convenience and accessibility of distance learning and the effectiveness of the learning environment. The appearance of three dimensional (3D) online virtual worlds, like Second Life, is taking e-learning beyond this zero-sum game. Language educators (both online and in real life) now have a tool that allows for an intensity and accessibility of language skills practice that would be difficult to achieve in the real world.

Educational institutions are increasingly turning to Second Life to provide an e-learning environment that is more interactive, immersive and communicative (SimTeach 2007). As a setting, Second Life looks and feels like many computer games played on Xbox or PlayStation. However, it is not a game and there are few rules to play by. Instead, it is more of a parallel space in which we can socialise, do business and learn. Everything in Second Life (such as buildings, scenery and people) has been constructed by the residents (those of us who visit) and so it has become a place where our imagination is given freedom to create and explore.

## Second lives

In enabling a more communicative and immersive learning experience Second Life offers many advantages to educators, especially since the introduction of voice. Voice in Second Life allows residents to talk with each other, much as we talk with one another in real life. Notwithstanding the limitations on learners who lack sufficient bandwidth, institutional support or technology, the implications are enormous. We can now communicate with other people (whether complete strangers, acquaintances, friends or colleagues) in a 3D environment of our choice regardless of where we are physically located. This is a significant step forward for many language learners as it offers the potential for socialisation experiences in their target language at any time of the day. This opportunity also presents an exciting challenge for language educators: how to exploit Second Life to the pedagogical benefit of language learners.

It can be argued that Second Life may also affect how we communicate in the same way that emailing and texting on cell phones have led us to write in a more concise manner when using these technologies. Second Life residents seem to be socialising in a different way from how we do it in real life. One example of this change is the openness Second Life residents display toward conversing with other residents. In my experience, there are

few cultures where total strangers would start up a conversation in a plaza, a café or other public place. In Second Life, however, this is entirely the norm. A social culture has developed where it is considered entirely normal, perhaps even expected, to start up a conversation with complete strangers. Second Lifers are open to casual, chance conversations – and this can only increase the opportunities for language practice.

Second Life allows, then, for a more open and immediate communication with others from around the world. It permits almost instantaneous travel to 'regions', cities and islands. Communities and groups can be formed and developed around shared interests and residents can not only build, but build much more cheaply than is possible in real life. It is this last point that has led to the creation of replicas of real places. Second Life now boasts various locations closely based on real cities, such as London, New York, Barcelona and Moscow.



**Figure One: Knightsbridge in Second Life**

## **The quest for purposeful communication**

Adapting the web-based, inquiry-oriented approach of the WebQuest (Dodge 1995) to the 3D virtual learning environment, allows teachers to take advantage of the social element the virtual world offers. This approach focuses on enabling learners to talk with real people in the foreign language to gain specific information and complete real communication within the virtual world.

The aim is to mimic face to face communication, both in terms of the social functions and the information conveying functions, through creating a genuine need to communicate. The quest creates the need to communicate because the learner researches both on the Internet (sources are suggested by the teacher) and within Second Life, allowing personal and immediate knowledge to be gained. The learner edits and crafts the information into the final product: a podcast, video-podcast (vodcast) or text. Select to [view examples of learner created podcasts](#).

Intended specifically for language education, SurReal Quests (Vickers 2007) combine the social and communicative aspects of Second Life with the wealth of information available on the Web.

Second Life locations have become meeting places for Second Life residents who are perhaps from the place itself (in real life), who have an interest in the real life location, or

who are just interested in meeting other people in a familiar environment. These social forums in Second Life make excellent sites for SurReal Quests.

Any location in Second Life that bases itself around a certain subject matter can become the focus for a SurReal Quest. Many companies, clubs, associations and non-government organisation (NGOs) have a Second Life presence and therefore present excellent opportunities for live interviews and discussions, which allow learners to use their language in a structured and considered context.

The integration of social, yet virtual, encounters into the language learning process allows learners to both practise their English in a directed, purposeful and structured manner. The presence and guidance of the teacher before, possibly during and after the Second Life encounters, allow the communication to have a greater pedagogical structure and focus than that of just language practice.

One example of a SurReal Quest is a travel guide podcast created by a learner, for a destination which exists both in Second Life and real life.

## SurReal quest stages

There are several stages to a quest. In each stage language skills are practised alongside study and work skills. Although the teacher facilitates and guides the process, it is the learner who plays the main role. During the initial planning of a podcast, the learner considers what materials will be produced, who the target audience is and what the audience's interests are. The planning is followed by the research phase to gain the content, which is then arranged to give the podcast a structure. Finally the learner drafts and records the podcast.

The research phase is one of the more intensive aspects for the learner. The Internet, with its wealth of informative resources, provides great opportunities to source content for the podcast. Learners are guided by questions for each subtopic, such as eating out, accommodation, entertainment and activities in the case of a travel podcast. The teacher suggests web sites for them to visit to gain this information. These websites may include general travel sites, tourism boards and the specific sites of museums, restaurants and hotels, but they could also include forums and blogs for more informal sources. Of course, the variety of media on the Web allows for a far richer language experience when researching than Second Life is currently able to offer. Learners will investigate through reading texts, listening to audio files and watching videos – all of which may vary in type and style of the language used.

However, it is the opportunity to discuss their findings with others in a virtual world that really brings the podcast research to life. The language learners can visit the virtual location and ask locals more detailed questions, for example to gain recommendations of places to visit or bars and cafés to go to. Not only can the information gained in the interviews be included in the podcast's content, but the interviews themselves can be recorded and included within the podcast. In this way, the travel podcast takes on a more professional tone, mirroring the travel shows produced by broadcasters. Learners are able to use their foreign language in a realistic manner to produce materials that will give them a sense of achievement and also allow them to practise very practical language skills that are needed outside the classroom.

SurReal Quests are a vehicle for language skill practice, but they can also serve to highlight where the learner's strengths and weaknesses lie. Through the continual production of written and verbal work, the learners demonstrates to both the teacher and

themselves where grammatical, lexical or pronunciation work requires concentration. Lessons can provide a parallel process of addressing and supporting these areas with more conventional methods. This tailored approach allows the teaching of language skills to be focused in areas of most need.

Quests involving Second Life, whether to produce podcasts, blogs or other materials, can also involve interaction with other language learners. Learners can work together in pairs or teams to develop the quest. The completed materials can be used as the basis for future activities with other learners, for example where a learner carries out an activity based upon information given in a previous learner's podcast, such as finding places, following directions or taking part in mini treasure hunts.

## Teaching approach

The role of the language teacher is to ensure that practice leads to the actual development of the language skills, through guidance and selecting when to take time out, for example, from the podcasting process, to focus on some specific language skills that need strengthening. Teachers can also foster the use of online communities for practising the target language. Further, SurReal Quests can be a vehicle for introducing learners to the social possibilities of Second Life.

The idea with this approach is not to teach entirely within virtual spaces, such as Second Life, but to use those spaces in conjunction with other web (or non-web) tools, such as teaching with blogs, podcasts and other Web 2.0 tools. That way Second Life is used for its strengths (verbal, social and immediate communication) and other tools are incorporated into lessons for their benefits (diverse, media-rich information in the case of the Internet). Second Life becomes a tool, to be incorporated into both online distance learning or into more conventional classroom teaching.

Virtual worlds such as Second Life are particularly relevant for those language learners who have grown up surrounded by technology such as the Internet and cell phones. Mark Prensky's (2001) term 'digital natives' is often used to describe this generation, who he contrasts with 'digital immigrants', who have had to learn how to adopt and adapt to these technologies. These digital natives are usually keen to make learning a more social experience. They want interactive, task based learning activities and they also seek the immediacy that online communities offer (Guiloff & Farcas 2007).

## Combining real life with Second Life

Clearly an approach which employs such varied tasks as those involved in a SurReal Quest creates opportunities for a wide range of language skills to be practised: reading and listening (both for gist and for specific information), interviewing, writing (appropriate use of vocabulary and style for the target audience), speaking (including pronunciation and intonation for maintaining interest). The quest creates a learning environment that reflects real life tasks, which lead to the achievement of a tangible product, such as a podcast. This quest-approach is able to motivate the learner to a greater extent, because it has greater relevance to their needs and wishes, incorporating genuine communication with native speakers, regardless of the learner's location.

Through its interactive and social qualities Second Life is proving to be popular with both educators and online learners. Learners can now meet and talk with other speakers of their target languages (native speakers or fellow learners), regardless of the hour or the place. Second Life can either be used as a simple forum for conversation practice, or as a basis for a more focused approach, such as through a SurReal Quest.

As with any new technology or tool, Second Life tends to add most value to language teaching when it is used in combination with other tools, be they on- or offline. While the Web offers language learners a wealth of information, Second Life adds a real-time, social and communicative dimension. In doing so, it complements, perhaps even revolutionises, distance learning for languages.

## Useful links

Examples of learner created travel podcasts

<http://www.avatarlanguages.com/podcasts.php>

## References

Dodge, B. 1995, 'Some Thoughts About WebQuests', WebQuest.Org. Retrieved 3 October 2007 from [http://webquest.sdsu.edu/about\\_webquests.html](http://webquest.sdsu.edu/about_webquests.html)

Education UK Island, no date, 'Virtual Quests'. Retrieved 3 October 2007 from <http://www.sleducationuk.net/?q=node/2>

Guiloff, A. & Farcas, D. 2007 *Generation.Net: Choque cultural en la sala de clases*, CEU, Santiago de Chile.

Prensky, M. 2001, *Digital Game-based Learning*, McGraw Hill, New York.

SimTeach, 2007, 'Institutions and Organizations in SL'. Retrieved 3 October 2007 from [http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Institutions\\_and\\_Organizations\\_in\\_SL#UNIVERSITIES.2C\\_COLLEGES\\_.26\\_SCHOOLS](http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Institutions_and_Organizations_in_SL#UNIVERSITIES.2C_COLLEGES_.26_SCHOOLS)

Vickers, H. 2007, 'SurReal Language Quests', AvatarLanguages.com/Blog. Retrieved 3 October 2007 from <http://avatarlanguages.com/blog/?p=14>

## Author

Howard Vickers has an online virtual language school within Second Life. He previously taught with the British Council in Spain and with a private English as a Second Language (ESL) school in Russia. Contact email: howard at avatarlanguages.com

[www.avatarenglish.com](http://www.avatarenglish.com)

[www.avatarlanguages.com](http://www.avatarlanguages.com)