

6 The Third Place in Second Life: Real Life Community in a Virtual World

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Abstract: In June 2006 The Open University (OU) purchased its first land in Second Life. Over a two and a half year period, the OU presence evolved and grew to a point where an average of between 150 and 250 unique users in any 7-day period are active in an OU area. This chapter charts the history of the development of the OU Second Life social community and considers the nature of that activity at a point of critical change, in January 2009, shortly before a new island is developed to provide a permanent home for the community. In order for the community to continue evolving it is necessary to understand the nature of the core activities of these users, and to consider this in a context of sustainable development. Through reference to aspects of socialisation and physical community, the author proposes that a virtual world environment can be described using the physical world concept of a Third Place in the information age, and considers the value of virtual space to a learning community. From a perspective of ethnography, this chapter captures a community development within SL and proposes that physical world concepts of community and Third Place are exhibited in a virtual world, and that there are equivalent benefits in the sense of support and belonging to a virtual world community.

6.1 Introduction

Felix (2005) states that 3rd Millennial education institutions uphold six distinct learning expectations:

- Flexibility
- Inclusiveness
- Collaboration
- Authenticity
- Relevance, and
- Extended institutional boundaries

Virtual world activity is extremely flexible. It is generally inclusive and where it is not, for example to those with restricted sight or with hardware or broadband limitations, efforts are ongoing to remove barriers (for the former see White et al, 2008 and, for the latter, Peachey and Yanacopulos, 2008). Embedding learning in a practical and authentic context that links activity and discussion exploits the value of community of practice to build shared repositories and collaborative learning. Not only is it relevant to adopt these environments for education, it is also logical: Students are likely to be confident in an environment that is linked to those in which they spend significant periods of leisure time, and working in this milieu places them in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, a prerequisite motivator for constructivist learning. The Open University (OU), very much a 3rd Millennial institution, has extended its institutional boundaries into Second Life (SL) and may yet go further into world or worlds unknown.

This chapter outlines the development of the OU Second Life community over a two-year period and demonstrates how it maps to the physical world location-driven community concept of Third Place, as defined by the urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1991). In the field of community building, Third Place is used to describe a social environment that is distinct from the first and second place norms of home and workplace, for example a regularly frequented coffee shop. Oldenburg argues that a Third Place, "...hosts the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" and is necessary for civil society, democracy, civic engagement and establishing an authentic sense of place within a community. Through observing and interpreting the student-driven behaviour of the social community we gain an understanding of how users engage in and with the environment, providing valuable insight for input into long term strategy in creating a community of learners for the OU in virtual worlds. The chapter considers the background and context to the development of the OU *social* community in SL and explores community building in general terms before proposing the Third Place as an appropriate model. The chapter concludes by looking forward to the possible future for this community.

6.1.1 Locations and activities

Table 6.1, below, clarifies the locations, characterisations and relationships between the various spaces mentioned in this chapter.

Table 6.1: Reference for Islands and Activities

Date	SL location	Overall characterisation	Participants	Activities	Parallel related developments
2006	Cetlment island	OU Pilot and exploratory project (Centre for Open Learning in Maths, Science, Computing and Technology)	Self selecting OU tutor groups	Tutorials / Open experimentation with space	SchomeBase – Schome project: OU plus people from other places specifically working on Schome Initiative
2007	Cetlment island	as above	as above	Evaluation – finds good contribution to retention including through social elements of interaction (immediate desire for residential presence)	SchomeBase devotes attention to planning and then setting up Teen Second Life project: Schome Park programme
Feb 2008	Open Life opens for initial building	OU course teams begin to explore	Some existing and new OU students and staff – still small numbers, occasional	Various buildings, spaces and events, both tutorial focussed and more purely social	SPP – main focus of limited SchomeBase activity
May 2008 -	Open Life 'take off'	Promotion of Open Life; significant new entrants, Sholokhov Halls take off	Hundreds of OU students and staff make at least 1 visit	Sholokhov Halls community development. Tutorials and course events in-world.	SPP – main focus of limited SchomeBase activity
July 2008 – Dec. 2008	Open Life community spreads over Open Life island and Schomebase	Open Life on Open Life island = tutorials. Social community on Schomebase = (expanded) Sholokhov Halls	Hundreds of OU staff and students on each island	Diverse range of activities including tutorial groups; curriculum-related (but broader than single tutorial groups) SL skills development; social gatherings	Most Schome members focused on SPP; some involved with Open Life activities (author of this paper & colleagues key in liaison between communities as in-

				eg discos, shared interest discussion groups, collaborative builds, invited speakers	volved in both). After SPP closure lessening of activities among those Schome people not in Open Life community. In an effort to reinvigorate SchomeBase identity decision is made to relocate Sholkhov Halls
Jan 2009	Open Life across Open Life & new island	Open Life community spread across 2 islands – 1 for tutorials and 1 for the social community	Hundreds of OU staff and students regularly on each island	Continuing	SchomeBase closes.

6.2 Cetlment Island: background and context

6.2.1 Experimental spaces

In June 2006 Cetlment Island (see Figure 1: Cetlment Island) was a pilot project in SL housed within the Centre for Open Learning in Math's, Science, Computing and Technology (COLMSCT), a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the OU. The original project was owned by Jacquie Bennett and I joined her as co-researcher in October that year, leading the project after Jacquie's death in September 2007. A second OU island at the end of 2006, SchomeBase, provided a main grid presence for the Schome project, which exists to explore and challenge traditional instructional models and pedagogic practices (see Twining and Footring; Gillen [this volume]). In the early stages of their existence both islands were experimental spaces, working on a small scale, where any user could generate objects and contribute to the island development. Students were welcome to visit, and formal tutorials were run and evaluated on Cetlment (see Bennett and Peachey, 2007), but in order to contain the project there was no formal promotion of these sessions, resulting in little regular activity or casual social interaction on either island aside from during organised events. An OU UK group was inaugurated inworld as a social focus for staff, but without a critical mass of users activity dwindled to nothing over the course of a few months.



Fig.1: Cetlment Island

By 2007, evidence of participation and retention rates from the pilot studies on Cetlment was encouraging, and the university was keen to build on this work by expanding access to more students. For the previous few months the Schome project had been focusing much of its attention in the Schome wiki, forums, and on their island in the teen grid. The decision was made to buy a new island, funded by the COLMSCT CETL as a research space, and site it next to SchomeBase with a development plan to landscape the two islands together as complementary spaces. Open Life was delivered in February 2008, replacing Cetlment as the OU SL presence.

6.2.1 Island design

With little indication of the scale of future take up for the islands, it was decided to create spaces that were simply as appealing and flexible as possible within the context of the environment. The COLMSCT and Schome projects would continue, and more staff and students would be invited to visit the islands and by their presence, input and feedback to guide further development of both form and function for the University's presence inworld.

An informal survey of friends and colleagues among the inworld learning community provided a number of key points for consideration in designing attractive SL spaces, for example:

- Ambient sounds, as long as they are not too intrusive, add richness and depth.
- Places that reflect physical world nature, with lots of green, are seen as welcoming and physical world connections generally help visitors feel grounded and safe.
- The island should not reveal itself all at once, for example by being completely flat.
- Paths that link key spaces will encourage visitors to explore.
- Finding small things to surprise and delight will encourage visitors to return.

The overwhelming majority of users surveyed were enthusiastic about spaces that reflected the physical world rather than fantasy, and all agreed that this was especially important in supporting those making the transition from 'newbie' to SL resident. The notion of having green spaces also worked with the unknown future of the island as, just like in the physical world, these spaces could potentially be flattened and built on should the need arise.

6.2.3 Virtual residence

An incidental observation from the Cetlment research period was the number of first time visitors who immediately wanted to create a virtual residence. Unless you wish to exhibit for example art, information or items for sale, there is no need to own property in SL, as all your belongings can be held in inventory until needed. Hunter Walk, a founding team member at Linden Lab, is quoted by Au (2008:57):

"Where one might expect airborne societies of people frolicking in the clouds, the overwhelming majority of Residents insist on remaining earthbound for most of their time. When SL launched, Walk watched, perplexed, as the early users steadfastly kept themselves on the ground. 'They immediately started building – homes! And not even fantastic, otherworldly homes, but realistic houses for the most part, fully appointed McMansions with utilities of no conceivable necessity. ('Why would you build bathrooms and dining

rooms?") But that kind of artificial realism was the preference of the majority (and still is)'. "

Boellstorff (2008), an anthropologist who spent some time immersed in SL agrees that "placemaking is absolutely foundational to virtual worlds". In recognition of this, and in order to explore it further, it was decided to provide a small number of residences on the new island. These buildings would be available for free rent to any member of staff or students for a period of 6 weeks, after which time they would be required to vacate if there was a waiting list. The assumption was made that after this time a resident would either wish to settle down in a higher quality, paid-for apartment elsewhere in-world, would be happy to exist without walls or would have left Second Life altogether. The resulting twenty-four Sholokhov Halls apartments, named for Jacquie Bennett's avatar, were located on Open Life and built to face into a central quad, with communal seating and a virtual coffee machine. The area was landscaped and a poster was placed in the quad to explain the purpose of the Halls and to provide a note card with information for prospective residents.

6.2.4 Living in halls

The new development of Open Life and SchomeBase opened to a 2 day technology course event in May, publicised in the relevant course forum. Around 50 staff and students visited over that period, with five taking up residence at the Halls. In the following week an announcement was posted to both staff and student web portals. Over the subsequent seven days on the islands there were over four hundred unique visitors, the Halls were filled with a mix of 17 students and 7 staff, and a waiting list was established.

Most residents were quick to decorate their apartments – those who didn't do it straight away never really progressed beyond putting out one or two small objects and were not active in the subsequent community - and the propinquity encouraged communication between those who found themselves inworld at the same time. At the end of the first week at full occupancy there was an impromptu housewarming party, with a small dancefloor and a streamed music radio station. All the residents dressed their avatars in party finery

for the occasion and used dance, food and drink animations to ground the activity in physical world metaphor. The OU SL group was resurrected, both staff and students were encouraged to join and membership increased rapidly. The group was used to organize in-world outings and social events and, occasionally, to issue notices about island matters, for example to remind everyone of the user policy for the OU space (see Figure 2).

Welcome to the Open University Island in Second Life. Please note that this is a PG sim for education purposes. You are welcome to visit the island, but in doing so you are agreeing to abide by the following simple rules:

- Respect the privacy of any groups using the island
- Do not communicate in any anti-social manner, including but not exclusive to discussion and/or material including illegal, offensive, commercial or promotional content
- No grieving (a term used to describe deliberately annoying behaviour of a type specific to virtual world contexts)
- No nudity
- No weapons

The Open Life team reserve the right to restrict or deny access to anyone who they consider to be in breach of these rules. If you wish to make a complaint about another user of the island, please send a notecard to Elsa Dickins including all possible identifying material and as much evidence of the problem as you can, for example a chatlog and/or screenshot.

All staff and students of the OU should also note the OU Computing Code of Conduct: <http://www3.open.ac.uk/our-student-policies/pdf/studcompcode.pdf>

Fig.2: User Policy

There was also a short set of rules for the tenants at the Halls (see Figure 3):

These buildings are available to staff and students to rent for free. If you wish to rent, please email a.peachey@open.ac.uk from your FirstClass OU Mailbox, and include your avatar name. You will then be added to the Open Life Sholokhov Buildings group, and allocated a house.

You will only be able to create, place and edit objects in your home when your Sholokhov group is your active group. If you find that you have lost permissions, check your groups (tabbed option in 'Communicate') and click on Open Life Sholokhov Buildings then Activate.

The buildings are rent-free, enabling people to test out how it feels to be a Second Life resident. If there is a waiting list and you have had your building for more than 6 weeks, you may be asked to vacate and find a permanent home elsewhere within Second Life. We hope you will have a very positive experience in the Sholokhov Halls community, so please note the following formal but necessary notices:

- By accepting a home here, you are agreeing to abide by the following simple rules:
- Respect other residents privacy
- Preserve the general style of the area (especially if you build on your porch)
- Don't exceed a prim count of 100 in your building, so that resources on the sim are shared evenly (there is a limit on the island)
- Do not communicate in any anti-social manner
- No grieving (a term used to describe deliberately annoying behaviour of a type specific to virtual world contexts)
- This is a PG sim for education purposes - any illegal, offensive, commercial or promotional material will be removed, and you may be banned from the buildings and/or the island.
- If you do not use your building for a period longer than 4 weeks, it may be reclaimed for other users.
- If you wish to keep your space private you are welcome to create a door and hide the windows from the inside. However, remember that in Second Life there is no true privacy, as cameras can go through doors and around corners. The Open Life team reserve the right to restrict or deny access to anyone who they consider to be in breach of the group rules.
- If you wish to make a complaint about another user of the Sholokhov Halls, please send a notecard to Elsa Dickins including all possible identifying material and as much evidence of the problem as you can, for example a chatlog and/or screenshot.

All staff and students of the OU should also note the OU Computing Code of Conduct: <http://www3.open.ac.uk/our-student-policies/pdf/studcompcode.pdf>

That's the serious bit over - now have fun!

Fig.3: Resident's Policy

There was only one significant breach of the Halls rules, when a resident exceeded the prim limit in their apartment by over 400 prims (Second Life building blocks). This is an important issue as any island has a restriction of 15000 prims and the limit can be reached remarkably quickly if building is unchecked. A high number of prims can also lead to lag for anyone on slow broadband connec-

tion and/or old machine. In the first instance the majority of the residents' objects were returned to him and he received a friendly reminder of the necessity in keeping prim limit down. He protested that he hadn't understood the need for limits, but became a repeat offender despite further warnings and, mainly due to complaints from other residents (his object often included noisy things such as da-leks) eventually he forfeited his place at Halls.

After just three weeks it was clear that activity at the Halls was about far more than the individual process of furnishing a space and, at any given time, a visitor to the island would be more likely than not to find at least 2 or 3 Halls residents chatting in the communal area, significantly more during evenings and weekends. The social aspect of this interaction, along with the shared background of the University, was attractive and engaging to new visitors, and the waiting list for new apartments had to be suspended due to the lack of administrative resources to deal with the subscriptions.

There was one downside to the level of social activity on the island. More tutors were beginning to use the public spaces for tutorial and teaching sessions with their students, and sometimes found themselves with an uninvited and inquisitive audience, drawn from the community socialising at the Halls. The tutors involved were kind enough to extend their sessions and include the visitors, but this was clearly not a scalable solution for the long term. After discussion with Peter Twining, the Schome Project Director, a solution was found.

6.2.5 Home sweet Schome

The informal learning and group activities taking place on Open Life were significantly social constructivist, which mapped well to Schome ideals. In social constructivism, the focus is on interaction with people and co-construction of knowledge (Felix, 2005). Social constructivist conceptions of learning assume that knowledge construction is achieved by the interaction that takes place within oneself through reflective thinking, and by the interaction that occurs in communications and collaboration with other people (Vygotsky, 1978). Students and staff were demonstrating communication and

collaboration in their activities online, and developing this activity through their individual reflections. This model complemented the Schome activity to date on the teen grid, and an obvious and viable solution to the compromised use of Open Life space was to relocate the Halls to the underused land on SchomeBase.

At the end of June, residents were emailed and informed of the planned move, which then took place in early July. The new SchomeBase site was much bigger, allowing for more Halls (48 in total) and for a bigger seating area, dancefloor and meeting point for the OU group. Residents were introduced to the Schome principles, and to use of the wiki and forums for managing collaborative work.

Within two weeks of the move, members of the social community were posting events to the SchomeBase events page on the Schome wiki. Planned activities took place in the most context appropriate space on either of the two islands, and between them SchomeBase and Open Life hosted meetings for a literature group, a science group, a debating group, a collaborative build and one-off activities such as tutorials for building skills. One student came forward as a Second Life DJ and offered his services to provide live music for parties, for example the 'Eighties night' shown in Figure 4. Crucially, at this point it was made clear to everyone that the Sholokhov Halls group inworld was for admin purposes (to set land permissions for home decorating in apartments) and that the OU social community inworld was open to everyone as either a Schome or Open University group member. Five residents forfeited apartments in the move, as they had not been active inworld for over four weeks, and three of the original residents moved out to apartments elsewhere in SL, as had been predicted. All three of these continued to be regular visitors to the space and very active members of the community.



Fig.4: Eighties night at the Sholokhov Halls

6.3 *Socialisation*

With an increasing number of regular users in our SL space, the socialisation process necessary to engage with the surroundings, and with other users, emerges as relevant to any discussion of development and community.

Socialisation defines the process by which individuals develop the habits, ideas, values and attitudes through which they learn to inhabit their culture or community. A classic definition holds that (albeit for any gender) "[...] it prepares the individual for the roles he is to play, providing him with the necessary repertoire of habits, beliefs, and values, the appropriate patterns of emotional response and the modes of perception, the requisite skills and knowledge [...]" (Chinoy, 1960).

Socialisation continues in adulthood as a form of contextualised learning relevant only to specific situations. Brezinka (1994) says

that "Socialisation is often described using the concepts of 'learning', 'social learning', 'societally relevant learning', 'taking on', 'receiving', 'acquiring', 'assimilating', 'absorbing' or 'internalising'". Contemporary sociologists and cultural theorists have identified mass communication as a device for socialisation, and echoed the continuity of adult socialisation moulded by the changing culture in which we exist.

Marshall McLuhan, quoted in Wheeler, 1998, claimed that, "The medium, or process, of our time - electric technology is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action...". This permeation of technology into our lives pushes us into new spaces, of which SL is only one, where we must work through a period of socialisation and adjustment each time.

Users of the OU space in SL often demonstrate and/or report their awareness of this socialisation process as evidenced by the most significant project from the group, who took the initiative to establish the 'nOUbie Centre', a building to house information about both Shome and the OU inworld community, and to provide support for newcomers to SL and the community. With administrative support, the group established a building, created a logo, volunteered for Buddy Boards (to provide instant inworld support to visitors) and scheduled weekly meetings to continue developing the space. Longer-term members of the group will provide a tour and history of the Halls development to anyone showing an interest. Those visitors who behave outside the norms of the local environment, for example by not wearing enough clothes or, with more subtlety, by not allowing someone else the space to express their opinion, are politely but quickly made aware of their indiscretion.

A value that can be a surprise to newcomers in the OU space is the egalitarian nature of the social community, where tutors and students have equal voice in matters relating to the maintenance and development of the community, subject to the underlying necessary structures as already discussed. However it is frequently students who take the lead in activities and interactions. To some extent this egalitarian spirit is associated with the overall SL virtual world ethos, (see Boellstorff 2008) in that projection of identity via avatars

conceals markers of status and authority of "actual life" presences. At least as significant however, is the ethos developed in OU projects, including in the Schome initiative where it is consciously recognised that students (i) may often be the ones to hold and develop expertise in specific matters quicker or more deeply than staff members; (ii) learning is an active process, so participatory modes that involve shifting leadership roles may be the most effective (see Peachey et al 2008 for discussion of "fluid leadership" in the Schome Park project).

6.4 Community building

6.4.1 Communities

In this chapter the collaborative social activity centred around the creation of Sholokhov Halls has already been referenced as a community – it is hard to find another word that better describes the group activity. There are numerous contemporary definitions of community that reference group characteristics rather than a location, for example the OU can be described as a learning community despite the significant geographical distribution of the individuals within it. The term community of practice (COP) (Wenger 1998) is used widely and there is some dispute as to the range of activity it encompasses, for example Jones and Preece (2006) reserve their use of the term for "those communities that typically exist in relation to companies or professional organizations," and would alternatively reference the learning community on Open Life and Schomebase as a "community of interest". Wenger asserts that a COP occurs naturally and can not be created (although Jones and Preece report some successful instances of this, for example Schlager et al 2002), so any investigation of inworld community from this perspective should

recognize that bringing people together in a virtual space does not in itself constitute the creation of a COP, and that the activity that takes place there arguably does not relate to the participant's practice in the physical world. However, reflections on the teen grid phase of Scheme identified the features of a learning community and specifically a modified community of practice:

- "We feel that the concept of 'communities of practice' fits activity within the Scheme Park project better than alternative frameworks. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe the links between learning, modifications of identity and practice in their characterisation that we have found relevant to understanding the shifting activities, developing expertise and modifications of identity." (Peachey et al 2008).

In another paper therefore there may be convincing arguments for the main grid Scheme and OU social community as a community of practice, where practice in this case is learning to learn.

In this chapter the focus on community instead centres on the unique feature of virtual co-location with a sense of three-dimensional physical presence, and considers the authenticity of the community as if co-located in physical space. This is particularly significant at a point when the community is about to be rehoused to a permanent location, purpose-built to meet its needs, and an understanding of how the virtual space impacts on the community is critical to the development.

Community Building is a process described by Peck (1988), who describes what he considers to be the most salient characteristics of a true community:

- inclusivity, commitment and consensus
- realism
- contemplation
- a safe place
- a laboratory for personal disarmament
- a group that can fight gracefully
- a group of all leaders
- a spirit

6.4.2 Roles, identity and communication

Over the period since the Halls were first opened there is evidence, including chatlogs, wiki and forum records and informal interviews, that the SL community has met each of these criteria, exhibiting not only commitment and consensus but also conflict, and the ability to resolve and move on from such. Understanding of our virtual community has developed from a longitudinal perspective of participant observation, supplemented by interview and case studies. This embedded position, also referencing grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in a continuing theoretical discussion, has required the author to be at once administrative manager, researcher and Halls resident/active member of the community. Regular members of the community have accepted and absorbed this multiple perspective and quickly settled on an informal title that recognises the unique position held by my avatar, Elsa Dickins. Their unprompted decision to call Elsa "Mummy" references trust, community/family membership and submission/authority, providing a rich seam for future discourse analysis.

In an environment where identity, mediated through an image that can be changed at the click of a mouse, is often seen as a fluid concept, there is currency in demonstrating a consistent identity and in the sharing of confidences to purchase trust within a community (see Peachey, 2009). For example students might use the private messaging system to share some aspect of their self that has no direct relevance to their interactions online, such as a disability or their sexuality, because they feel that they are not being 'themselves' with their correspondent if he or she is not aware of this aspect of their identity. Experience and evidence suggests that the majority of users have a strong perception of the potential for misunderstanding in discussion that is mediated through text, and go out of their way to support, acknowledge and defer to one another in conversation. When differences have arisen, members of the community have expressed real distress, and have worked together to resolve and move forward. Differences in personality and backgrounds have generally been celebrated, and again the community has worked together to involve the individual members with more challenging characteristics. Leadership has been fluid, changing according to the skills and experi-

ence needed within a context, and multiple perspectives are provided by the multimodal communication networks (including the Schome wiki and fora, a First Class forum, email, MSN, Google docs and Facebook) in which the group operates. Members challenge each other to explore new interests and provide support in doing so, for example a regular (student) member of the community, comments that, "As a community, we organise outings to exhibits in Second Life. Not all of them are relevant to my studies but I have a circle of friends in Second Life that broaden my horizons and so my interests are wider as a result."

6.5 The Third Place

6.5.1 The character of the Third Place

Oldenburg (1991) describes a taxonomy of place wherein a first place is an individual's home and family, a second place is the workplace (where someone may spend more time than their home), and a third place is an informal public/neutral gathering place such as a beer garden, post office, coffee shop, library etc, lending "a public balance to the increased privatisation of home life." He argues that these Third Places, or "great good places" are "anchors" of community life, essential to community social vitality and to fostering broader and more creative interaction, and are notable generally for the following characteristics:

- cheap or free food and drink
- being highly accessible/proximate for many
- being welcoming and comfortable
- involving regulars/habitual participants
- providing both old and new friends

In contrast to the first and second places, Third Places encourage and enable the putting aside of mundane concerns so that individuals can live in the moment, enjoying the company, activity and conversation around them. Third places level the status of users, creating habits of public association and providing comfort and familiarity to individuals and communities.

"The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres. Though a radically different kind of setting for a home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends... They are the heart of a community's social vitality[...]." (Oldenburg, 1991)

Project for Public Spaces (2007), in New York, developed the Third Place diagram below in consultation with Oldenburg (see Figure 5).

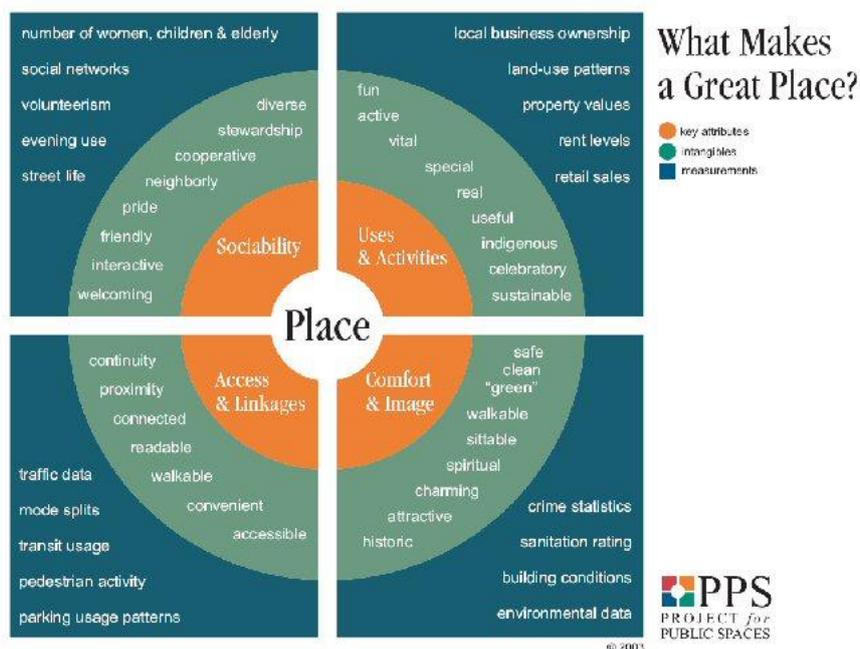


Fig. 5: What makes a great place?

The key attributes, in the central segments, provide guidance for the detail of the measurables and intangibles in the outer segments.

6.5.2 The Third Place online

Oldenburg was first referenced in the context of online communities in 1994, by Rheingold:

“It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL. [the forum community to which Rheingold belonged] Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall. Or perhaps cyberspace is precisely the wrong place to look for the rebirth of community, offering not a tool for conviviality but a life-denying simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another. In either case, we need to find out soon.” (Rheingold 1994 p.26)

Over a decade on, most researchers agree that the internet is neither the utopia nor dystopia that early theorists predicted but a middle ground with light and dark shades. We have continued to explore communities with increasing variance in the means through which they come together and, in 2006, S and W applied the notion of Third Place to their experience of community in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) – virtual worlds with game narratives. They found that:

“By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new "third place" for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old.” (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006 p.1)

Glogowski (2007) proposed that an online blogging community he builds with his students each year resembles a Third Place. He took the Project for Public Spaces diagram and re-versioned the measurables to indicate what the key attributes provide within this new context, as shown in Figure 6 below:

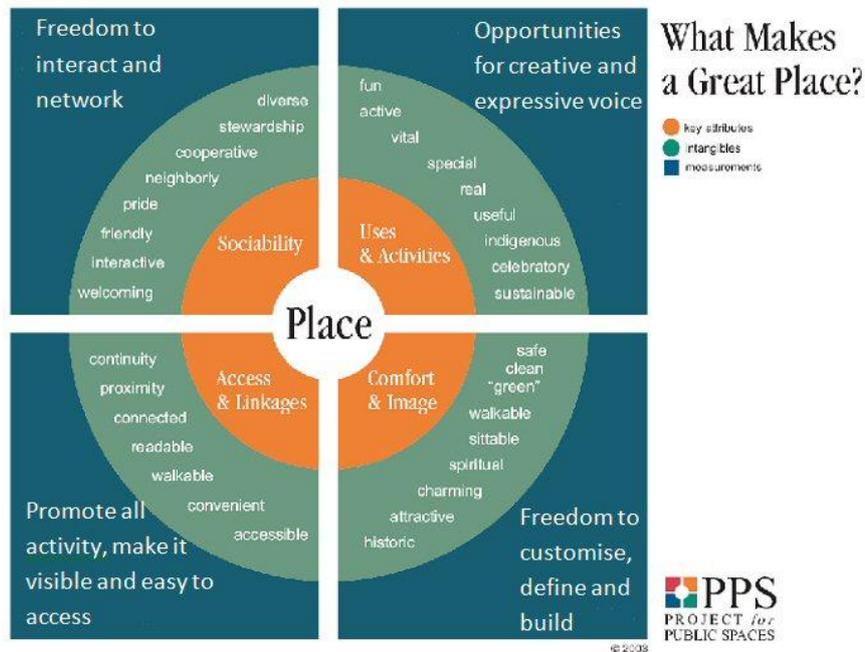


Fig.6: Blogging community as Third Place

6.5.3 The Third Place for the OU in Second Life

Glogowski's model is just as applicable to the environment that hosts the OU community in SL. Members have total freedom to interact and network inworld, and although many of these associations have spilled out into other social networking tools and media, SchomeBase and Open Life remained a primary focus for interaction. Social activity is indeed diverse, cooperative, neighbourly, friendly, interactive and welcoming, and is executed with stewardship and pride. Within the environment members have the opportunity to use their creative and expressive voice and do so in activities that are fun, active, vital, special, real, useful, indigenous, celebratory and, to date, sustainable. With no more restrictions than in the physical world, members of the community have the freedom to customise, design and build. Those members who rent an apartment in Halls can decorate as they wish, and there is often rigorous discussion about what other changes might or might not need to be

made to the rest of the island. The nOUbie centre is often used as a village hall, for meetings and events, and a collaborative building group have taken ownership of one half of the top floor. As a community, should the group wish to add or take away some element of the island environment they are empowered to do so, or to have the action taken on their behalf. However it is interesting to note that the environment can be argued to meet many of the intangibles already listed in the associated quadrant – safe, green, clean, walkable, sitable, spiritual (probably most tenuous, although a meditation animation on a cushion beneath a tree proved very popular), charming, and attractive (see Figure 7) - and members are generally satisfied with the ‘comfort and image’ of their surroundings. In the next iteration of the island, it is anticipated that historic will also be incorporated. Finally, the access and linkages quadrant requires that the Third Place has continuity and proximity and is connected, readable, walkable, convenient and accessible, all of which are reflected within the context of the inworld environment. Over the period that the community remained on Schomebase, members promoted activities using the Schome wiki (also streaming it inworld) and group notices, as well as notices placed around the island. However this is probably the weakest aspect of the location as a Third Place, and plans for the next phase of the project address the need for continuity of promotional media.



Fig.7: Images from SchomeBase and Open Life

It is evident that all the characteristics of a Third Place are met in the SchomeBase/Open Life environment. SL may not offer a cup of coffee (although the seating area at the Halls would animate an avatar with a virtual one), but users are generally sitting at a computer in their own home, with the refreshments of their choice at hand. With the appropriate hardware and sufficient broadband connection,

Second Life has the key aspect of being accessible and proximate to anyone, regardless of physical location. Verbal feedback and evidence of continued use by repeat visitors indicates that ShomeBase and Open Life islands are welcoming and comfortable environments, and there is a consistent mix of regulars and newcomers to both islands, so a regular visitor is likely to meet old friends and make new connections during their visits.

Martin, 2006, noted, "People are moving away from traditional educational institutions for their day-to-day needs of updating, networking and learning," and at least one student from the OU SL community would agree: "After studying for 3 years with only tutorials as my main contact with students, interacting with others in Second Life makes me feel less isolated. It's amazing how included you feel. You think it will be just looking at a screen but Second Life makes you more conscious than ever that behind those avatars, there are real people. With the caring responsibilities I have, I would never have been able to take part in the activities offered by the OU if they hadn't been in Second Life - everyone joins in and really helps me learn."

6.6 Conclusions and Next Steps

It is not possible to know whether the current community would have come together without the catalyst of the Sholokhov Halls, but it is evidenced that the Halls and surrounding island locations have enabled a Third Place environment.

Until January 2009, the Third Place community on ShomeBase/Open Life was defined by its location at the Sholokhov Halls, although the community activity on the island was unrestricted by membership of these virtual buildings. This group, with a core of about 50 regular users and more on the periphery, consisted entirely of OU staff and students. This wasn't deliberate, and the OU community made a big effort to use Shome groups and facilities such as the wiki to publicise activities including a sim-wide arts exhibition,

but the greater Schome community (who had worked in Teen Second Life but never had a particular focus in SL) chose not to participate. Over time this division began to pose issues for both communities – members of Schome expressed concern that SchomeBase was becoming too strongly associated with the OU, and the OU community were restricted by a project that was imposed upon them. A suggestion that the Halls be demolished to make way for an extended sandbox (open building area) enabling more freedom on the island, which projected a clearer fit with the more investigative Schome ideals, was met with significant resistance from the community. Instead, in order to continue providing the "psychological comfort and support" (Oldenburg, 1991) that a Third Place extends, it was proposed that the community be asked instead to relocate to a dedicated new island.

Tuan (1980) addressed the difference between an identified location and the undefined space that surrounds it, citing a strong "Sense of Place" for those spaces that hold significant meaning, names or definitions. Without the Halls, would the members and users of the island have a strong enough Sense of Place for the Third Place to remain? The new island would have a greater capacity for residences, with dedicated administrative support, and would be a perfect opportunity to extend the metaphor of a physical world village community, with for example village hall, library, village store etc. The OU community, now able to function freely and explore its own limits with no branding tensions, will also have a dedicated support website and wiki on standard OU webspace to replace the events pages used on the Schome wiki.

In order to maintain the sense of ownership among the community through the transition period, at a time when it might be seen as very vulnerable, it was considered crucial that members were given the opportunity to have input to the core details and components of the new island. A survey was used to gather input on key points, for example a village traditionally has a pub, and residents chose to adopt this metaphor wholly rather than approve a general seating area, coffee bar or even fake pub front. The new island will see this village inn realised as The Open Arms, as well as small houses for rent instead of Halls, allotments, a village green and duckpond, and will be separated physically and figuratively from Open Life – increasingly

formalized by the structured activities that take place there – by an ocean on which residents and visitors may sail boats, a popular pastime using the physics engine of SL. The island will also host an exhibition centre, Open Minds, that residents may book and use as they please, with a permanent exhibition room dedicated to the history and development of the OU social presence in SL. Finally, driven by the ‘spiritual’ requirement in the Oldenburg model and noting that a village traditionally has a church, respondents to the survey were asked if they would like to see a spiritual area on the new island and, if so, what form it should take. Over half answered yes rather than no or don’t know, and the majority choice was a tor or standing stone. This will be known as Sholokhov Tor, threading a sense of history and connectivity from the original Halls to the new island.

OU students working at a distance have always been vulnerable to a sense of social isolation and exclusion from the collective student identity. Knowles (1984) describes the social component of learning as key to the success of adult learners. The established OU community in SL, active enough to support its own learning by organising a variety of special interest and discussion groups as well as social events, demonstrates a significant achievement in using the affordances of a virtual world to overcome some of the core challenges to our student’s learning experiences. In addition it has allowed students to enter into learning without social baggage and other disadvantages they may carry in the physical world.

The move to a dedicated island, with resources for adequate administrative support, offers the opportunity to sustain and grow the community and to verify the exemplar of the Third Place model to this context. It also moves the project from an exploratory phase of research into a position of extending and defining appropriate research models for this new frontier.

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