Learning together and learning alone in Second Life
This abstract is for a workshop

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Abstract:
A common complaint about virtual worlds is that when one visits them there is no one there and nothing to do. Virtual worlds offer interesting potential for collaborative learning events, but it is less obvious how they can enhance individual learning activities. Our project (the Research Observatory in Second Life) is concentrating upon enabling both collaborative and lone learning opportunities. The Research Observatory (RO) is a web-based teaching and learning resource for research methods students and the Second Life development is the next step in creating a more socially and physically active resource for students studying research methods and methods of enquiry at all levels in the university. The RO website is at http://ro.uwe.ac.uk.

We have been working in SL since July 2007 and have constructed a RO structure to accommodate our research methods learners. The design of the RO structure has been built upon the winning entries of a design competition we held for our first year architecture students (see the blog at http://researchobs2.edublogs.org). The lone learning opportunities use dynamic logic activities, where the user physically interacts with the learning process, e.g. being transported around interactive learning activities such as online exercises and discussions with chat bots. The user is moved to the next appropriate learning interaction depending upon their response to the previous one. These activities can also be used by

groups of learners, individually or at the same time, as the seed for discussions in the chat and collaboration areas of the building.

The workshop will concentrate upon reporting our research findings so far regarding the design and operation of the learning activities and, in particular, will focus upon the integration of lone and collaborative learning, accommodating different learning preferences and abilities. These include tendencies towards systemization and autistic tendencies such as low empathy and inhibited socialising skills. Part of our research into engagement with the RO has been to assess the students' positions on the neurotypical part of the autistic spectrum, together with their position on the systemizing continuum, drawing upon the work of Simon Baron-Cohen (Cambridge University) investigating autistic traits in the general population.

[349 words]

Please comment on how your abstract meets the themes of the conference (100 words):
This workshop would be part of the "opportunities and challenges of virtual worlds for learning and teaching" theme. The workshop will have a particular focus on how virtual worlds might offer benefits for students who have traits associated with autism, but are not diagnosed as being autistic. These students can face a significant disadvantage in undertaking group collaborative learning in real environments, due to the social inhibitions they experience. This can place an additional load on such students. Virtual worlds may help students to practice group collaboration in a "safe space", and subsequently apply those experiences to the real world.

[100 words]

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