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SAGE Open 2012 2:

DOI: 10.1177/2158244012465762

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SAGE Open
October-December 2012: 1-3
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244012465762
<http://sgo.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

Second Life is a multiuser environment that can be found on the Internet. There are hundreds of counselors using Second Life as a service delivery mode. Currently, Second Life remains an unregulated avenue for practice. Counselors considering opening a practice need to investigate the benefits and disadvantages for using this medium. The author will discuss the opportunities, issues, and steps for establishing a counseling practice in Second Life.

Keywords

counseling psychology, careers, distance learning, psychology, entrepreneurship/small business

Second Life is a 3D, interactive virtual world that can be found on the Internet (<http://secondlife.com>). It is a multiuser virtual environment (MUVE) that provides users with the opportunity to communicate through texting or audio. Users create cartoon-like characters called avatars to represent themselves. They also create a first name and select from a list of last names. Thus, Second Life provides the opportunity for social networking while maintaining a sense of anonymity.

Second Life was created by Linden Lab in 2003 for the primary purpose of allowing users to create spaces, called islands, and characters, called avatars, that can interact (<http://secondlife.com/whatis>). There is a free membership option for individual users. Linden Lab makes most of its money from the sale of virtual space on the site and through currency exchange. The currency is called Linden Dollars (L\$). Linden Dollars can be exchanged for real currencies such as the U.S. Dollar. Users must purchase the currency to buy items such as clothing options, objects (e.g., torches, books, butterflies), and services such as counseling.

Opportunities for Providing Counseling Services in Second Life

Second Life has risen from its roots as a social network to a viable option for entrepreneurship. Major companies such as Circuit City, American Apparel, and Starwood Motels have set up virtual shops in Second Life. Starting a virtual business is relatively inexpensive compared with real-world endeavors (Hobson, 2007; Sebor, 2007). Residents are active consumers of products but may not be willing to pay top dollar for virtual goods. For example, American Apparel sells virtual t-shirts for US\$1.10, much less than the tangible ones (Fitzgerald, 2007). Providers should also be aware that in addition to lower wages, there is a 3% fee for converting Linden Dollars to U.S. Dollars.

One group of workers taking advantage of Second Life as a marketplace is counselors. Currently, there are over 100 identified groups offering mental health services in Second Life (<http://secondlife.com/community>). Hackerman and Greer (2000) noted that the Internet offers a new form of communication that offers new avenues for providing counseling services. The anonymity of Second Life may appeal to clients who would not otherwise seek counseling. Counseling services can be performed outside normal business hours and can reach clients in remote areas (Maples & Han, 2008). Second Life is best suited for counselors seeking to work with adult populations. The average user is around 30 years old, well educated, innovative, and creative (Scott, 2007). Linden Lab has opened Teen Second Life but adult interaction with minor users is restricted to providing educational programming (Dembo, 2008).

Professional Issues With Providing Counseling Services in Second Life

Although it appears that there are a significant number of providers offering their services through Second Life, there is a lack of written standards for using this medium. Second Life is known as the "wild west" (Talbot, 2008, p. 58) in a digital playground. Linden Lab rarely mediates disputes among residents and thus members must fend for themselves. One group of residents has created the Virtual World Business Bureau that operates as an online version of the Better Business Bureau (Bloomfield, 2008).

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Professional counselors must self-regulate in the Second Life environment. Given that Second Life operates through the Internet, perhaps the best source for standards is the guidelines scripted by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) for webcounseling. In *The Practice of Internet Counseling* (NBCC, 2005), the special issues relating to “chat” style counseling are grouped into three categories:

The Internet Relationship that addresses issues such as anonymity and technology;

Confidentiality in Internet Counseling that addresses issues such as techniques for maintaining client privacy; and

Legal Considerations, Licensure, and Certification that addresses issues such as duty-to-warn and competencies for performing counseling through the Internet.

The ethical and legal concerns facing providers in Second Life are similar to those practicing webcounseling. Counseling through the Internet can pose special considerations in the area of maintaining confidentiality, accurately diagnosing concerns, ascertaining client identity, correctly posting credentials, and refraining from dual relationships (Botterbusch & Talab, 2009; Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008; Hughes, 2000; Maples & Han, 2008; Marson & Brackin, 2000; Shaw & Shaw, 2006). The nature of Second Life does pose some unique concerns. The most notable difference is the ability to visualize the client through the avatar. A benefit of the avatar is that counselor can note nonverbal cues. Clients can use voice and gestures such as yawning to convey their feelings. A special consideration for counselors is that avatars do not necessarily appear as realistic representations of the client. For example, Gronstedt (2007) found that 20% of female avatars are actually operated by men.

Professional counselors often seek credentials in areas of specialization, for example, NBCC credentials counselors in specialty areas such as career counseling, mental health counseling, and school counseling. Common requirements for attaining specialization status includes completing advanced education, passing an approved examination, and having a minimum number of supervised client contact clock hours. The Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) recently created an opportunity for professional counselors to attain a specialty credential in distance counseling (CCE, 2011). The requirements for attaining the credential, Distance Certified Counselor (DCC), follow the same avenue as that used by NBCC. Successful applicants must hold a master’s degree in counseling or related field, have a valid license to practice counseling in the state they reside/work. In lieu of a state license, applicants may have current certification as a National Certified Counselor. In addition to the above requirements, counselors seeking this credential must complete a 15-hr distance counselor training program approved by CCE. The training program provides counselors with information on a variety of subjects, including methods for incorporating distance counseling methods with more traditional interventions. Ethical and legal issues are also covered

including the procedures and processes for clients to make complaints. Applicants must successfully complete an examination to reach a passing grade for the course.

Counselors considering using Second Life as a medium for offering counseling services need to understand that the DCC credential does not automatically allow a professional to practice in a particular state. CCE alerts counselors that although the DCC is a national certification, it does not legally supersede state mandates that govern the practice of counseling. Thus, counselors seeking to engage in delivering counseling services in Second Life should check with individual state licensing boards to ascertain that they will be allowed to work with clients from that state (CCE, 2011).

Establishing an Office in Second Life

Delivery of counseling services in Second Life takes place in a virtual office. Thilmany (2008) suggested that a pleasing environment can foster interactive communication. This goal can be accomplished by creating innovative spaces conducive to counseling such as a relaxing beach or peaceful forest. To create virtual office space, land must first be purchased through Linden Lab and by using Linden Dollars. Currently, the exchange is US\$1.00 = L\$275.00. A typical office space of 512 m² is about L\$22.00. There are other costs involved in setting up an office. To purchase land, a resident must upgrade from the free membership to one that costs about L\$10.00 a month. There is a monthly fee based on the size of area. Currently, the fee ranges from L\$5.00 to L\$195.00 (Turner, 2007). The counselor’s next move is to build an office or hire a builder to create one. It may be more viable for the beginning counselor to “rent” an office in an established practice (Thilmany, 2008). A list of possible practices can be found by searching the *Groups* in the *Community* page on the Second Life website (<http://secondlife.com/community>).

Perhaps the best example of an established practice is *The Counseling Center on Wellness Island* (www.slwellness.com). The director goes by her avatar’s name, Avalon Birke. Birke has a master’s degree in counseling psychology, is a National Certified Counselor, and specializes in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. In addition to providing direct counseling services, the staff also provides life coaching and training in medical ethics and peer specialists.

Conclusion

The rise of Second Life as a vehicle for providing counseling services suggests that this method of counseling has the potential to reach a significant number of individuals seeking assistance with mental health and career issues. Counseling in Second Life most resembles that of other webcounseling mechanisms. Thus, ethical and legal issues with this form of counseling are similar to those for Internet

counseling. Counselors considering establishing an office in Second Life should follow the guidelines for webcounseling produced by the NBCC. It is possible to create a virtual office or associate with an established center.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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Bio

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