Chapter 3
Engagement, Immersion, and Learning Cultures:
Project Planning and Decision Making for Virtual World Training Programs

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ABSTRACT

The decision to use a virtual world for training and development is a potentially treacherous one. Legal issues, adoption barriers, a pedagogical design complexities often inhibit true engagement and adoption. Strategic planning is required for every step from the choice of a virtual world to instruction design and user adoption. In this chapter, Keesey and Smith-Robbins offer guide to avoiding common pitfalls while suggesting a plan for maximum training benefit in virtual world implementations. Included are considerations about sound pedagogical practices, advice regarding the assessment of a corporate culture's ability to engage in a virtual world, as well as recommendations for alleviating common fears and concerns. Special attention is paid to the complexities of virtual world cultures as they interact with organizational cultures. Finally, the authors offer a rubric to aid training designers evaluate whether a virtual world is the right choice for their organization through a series of question and adoption concerns.

THE CHALLENGE OF VIRTUAL WORLD VENTURES

The metaverse is littered with the corpses of failed corporate forays into developing virtual world presence. From late 2006 to the present, companies such as Coke, Reebok, Adidas and many others launched spectacular three-dimensional failures. These environments appeared to have little beyond a simple presence or conglomeration of slick modern structures, lacking adequate planning for how such a world could provide real Return on Investment (ROI) beyond an initial flurry of wild eyed journalists racing to be the first the report the official announcement of web 2.5, 3.0, 3.5 or whatever new marketing moniker had just been devised. Many of these industry players were guilty of the same

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offenses that were committed only 10 years ago during the height of the Internet bubble. Remember the rush of the wind generated by the stampede of anyone even capable of plopping a sub-par and sub-planned website onto the internet in 1997? Remember the subsequent bubble burst short years later following that wind of folly?

Indeed, recent Gartner research statistics show that nine out of ten business ventures into virtual worlds will fail. Many virtual world naysayers are quick to utilize research data like this in support of a presupposed incompatibility between industry and virtual world technologies. Ultimately these failures were the result of one or a combination of missteps all leading down the same path of lack of proper research, knowledge, information and planning for proper implementation of a virtual world for adding value in the enterprise.

Yet, regardless of the failure rates thus far by business in virtual worlds, Gartner Research also estimates that an over-riding majority of companies will utilize a virtual world within their enterprise by the year 2012. Therefore, the challenge for businesses today is to first identify if a virtual world can offer the kind of value add to justify the investment. Second, if it is determined that there are business functions/processes where a virtual world can increase efficiencies, shave costs, or provide value added, then the company must identify proper planning points to ensure that the initiative will not only succeed but also be continually supported by and provide support back into the enterprise.

THE BEST CORPORATE TRAINING PROGRAMS FOCUS ON THE END-USER

Corporate training programs are one component of organizational management that could stand to benefit from properly planned utilization of virtual world technology. For example, one of the authors can remember back to 2001 and their first forced entry into a corporate LMS. Not only was completion of the training program required for retaining one's job, but it was thought that the program would teach participants how to perform required job functions more effectively and efficiently. At the time, the whole experience was abdominally boring, merely consisting of page-turners and test-taking. That experience in 2001 was not designed for the learner. It was designed for the training managers and for human resources. While it did a great job of collecting data that could subsequently be utilized by trainers and managers, it did a horrible job of training this author or any other associate of the company because it wasn't designed for the end-user or learner.

Since that time, traditional corporate learning experiences across many companies have greatly improved, as training managers and corporate instructional designers conceived and implemented far more engaging, learner-center approaches to employee training. However, many of the early corporate builds in virtual worlds still lack the same consideration of the end-user. They seemed to have been implemented with little end-user focus at their mission core and in-such served no purpose, added no value, and ultimately ended up as visually pleasing ghost-towns. Imagine designing a feature-rich enterprise software application without first engaging in a host of ethnographic studies of your end-user or of how the potential software could add efficiency to their individual process and subsequent company process.

Training initiatives deserve and are most often implemented following similar study of the user, in this case the learner. We study outputs and outcomes to identify training or knowledge gaps or processes where training could close said gaps and add efficiency and value. In the case of a virtual world training experience the scope of research should be even more complete. Ideally, study of the users would happen over multiple levels including training needs assessments and user/training interface study. Additionally, with existing virtual worlds that have existing cultures