

Chapter 23

New Life for Corporate Training

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ABSTRACT

While the educational use of Second Life by the academic community is well established, the number of corporate training and development programs utilizing Second Life has yet to be fully determined. However, while the corporate training use of Second Life may not be as prolific as the academic use, it is occurring. To support this argument the author combines the use of ethnographic evaluation with a review of the existing literature surrounding the corporate use of Second Life. Presented within are what the author found to be the main advantages and hesitations that surround the corporate use of Second Life. The affordances of Second Life, the communication channels, the immersive self-directed building opportunities, and rich, content driven environments, are a unique mix that makes Second Life an ideal medium for developing corporate learning programs.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008 Larry Myatt proposed that “Schools must walk away from text-driven instruction and embrace developing technologies if they hope to stem the loss of students” (p. 186). Multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) allow educators from all fields to ebb the flow of lost students by providing a rich, immersive environment that allows students to interact with content like never

before. Stoerger (2008) notes that, “Virtual worlds enable students to learn through seeing, knowing, and doing within visually rich and mentally engaging spaces” (p. 56). One such MUVE that is particularly well suited for educational pursuits is Second Life. Second Life, one of the oldest virtual worlds in existence, stills remains one of the most used virtual communities with over a million different users logging in during the course of a month (*Economic Statistics*, 2009). Over the last few years educators within academia have seemed to herald Second Life as the MUVE of

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choice. A review conducted by the New Media Consortium determined there were over 1,200 educational focused islands created in Second Life during 2007 alone (Johnson, 2008). Collectively, academia has designed and developed a range of materials within Second Life, covering topics such as computer programming, writing, Art history, philosophy, game design, psychology, medicine, construction, genetics and much more. And given its past history, the academic use of Second Life shows no signs of slowing down.

What has not been demonstrated as of yet is the educational use of Second Life by corporate training and development programs. While there has been some scattered use within this community of practitioners, on the whole the corporate community has been slow to adopt Second Life. This may come as a surprise to some. Why does one user community rush to adopt a new tool and the other seemingly sit and watch? It goes to reason that the same principles of learning in both the educational and corporate training and development communities are applicable so one would expect to see the same rates of adoption of Second Life in both communities. However, this is certainly not the case.

Between September of 2008 and April of 2009 I conducted an eight month evaluation of Second Life, its residents, tools that lend themselves to educational practice and various locations already developed for use by educators, both in corporate and academic settings. As a participant-observer, I explored Second Life and all that it offers; I met various other residents, attended lectures, visited workshops and even participated in my first virtual conference. I found a technology filled with promise and well-structured to only benefit corporate training programs. Because of the visual nature of Second Life, as shown in Figure 1, the platform lends itself very well to education when working with issues that requires 3D visualization, movement and/or interaction and environments too costly, if not impossible, to replicate in real-life (Werner, 2008; Taylor & Chyung, 2008). Second

Life is also a social platform and allows residents, the term users of Second Life call themselves when in-world, to interact with each other. So besides the obvious student/teacher interaction that can occur, Second Life can also be used for activities such as, role-play exercises, artistic expression and team meetings.

Within this chapter I hope to show that while the corporate training use of Second Life may not be as prolific as the academic use, it is occurring. I will first briefly introduce the world of Second Life, discuss some of the main advantages and hesitation that surround its use by the corporate community, and also present examples of activities and exercises within Second Life currently being conducted by the corporate training and development community. It is my desire that by the end of the chapter readers will have a fundamental understanding of Second Life and what it has to offer as a development tool. In discussing some of advantages and resistances surrounding Second Life, readers should find not only a tool full of promise but also realize that just like every other tool it has pros and cons. Finally, the use of real world examples should provide inspiration for personal projects and demonstrate what is currently possible by establishing a Second Life presence.

Second Life

Second Life, run by Linden Lab, was opened to the public in 2003 and over the last three years has become the educational flagship of virtual worlds. It is freely available and accessible almost anywhere there is an Internet connection. Once logged in, residents customize their avatar, go through orientation and begin to interact with the environment and each other. Communication in Second Life is conducted through either text-based Instant Messaging or Voice over IP. These tools allow for residents to interact just as they would in the real-world.

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