Chapter 18
Practical Considerations when Using Virtual Spaces for Learning and Collaboration, with Minimal Setup and Support

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ABSTRACT

Working within virtual, three-dimensional environments offers the promise of moving beyond geographic constraints, enhancing distance interactions, providing more cost-effective presentations and forums, and allowing the formerly un-doable through simulations and virtual experiences. However, working effectively in these environments can require a significant investment in time, planning, preparation, and resources. This chapter assembles practical advice from the author's three year experience with Second Life and from the education and technology literature to allow an instructor or developer: to work with limited resources; to consider the types of virtual experiences that are possible; to stage such experiences to grow participants' abilities; to consider the breadth of objectives that can be addressed in virtual spaces; to prepare a range of individuals for participation; and to assess and improve virtual experiences. These practical, design-and-implementation suggestions will allow developers and instructors to find effective yet feasible ways to grow their skills and abilities in virtual development and design.

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual spaces, such as Second Life and Active Worlds, create new types of opportunities for teaching, learning, meeting, and collaborating within educational, training, and business organizations. These spaces can foster richness, interactions, commitment, and conversation across distance and geography – you can literally create your own world as posited by Johnson & Levin (2008). And, they can bring together individuals from organizations and locations that may not have had the time and funding to meet otherwise. And, they can also allow experiences that would never have been possible or feasible – a tour of a molecule; a visit to Notre Dame; a ride on a hurricane chaser. Schools and businesses are finding that these platforms expand opportunities and experiences (Borremans (2007); Deubel (2007); Greenberg, Napkie, & Pence (2009)); academic debates ensue about the value of virtual learning and collaboration (Craig, 2007). However, the development and integration of virtual platforms can take considerable time and effort: a new environment needs to be learned; curriculum, experiences, and meetings needs to be cast into a very different framework; virtual settings must be borrowed or acquired; and approaches to training the learners must be developed. The objectives of this chapter are to provide introductory, technical and procedural information and resources and to suggest instructional-design considerations so that you can determine if, how, where, and when you might *begin* to add virtual experiences to your training, research, collaboration, or educational ventures. If your organization is making the commitment to bringing significant aspects of its educational, meeting, and simulation experiences into this space, it will be necessary to consider the larger organizational goals and objectives (as studied by Fominykh, Prasolova-Forland, Morozov, & Gerasimov (2009) in their case study of a virtual campus) and to develop a pathway that can accommodate and allow for growth in areas such as land management and permissions, delegation of space, creation of simulated environments, and the like. These important considerations are beyond the scope of this chapter. However, the reader will be provided an overview of important practical considerations and ideas so you might begin to develop, test, and improve instruction and experiences within virtual environments, even if initial support is minimal.

Please note, although there are several virtual providers and more becoming available, the basic instructional, design, and management concerns addressed herein will be relevant for most development applications.

BACKGROUND

As mentioned in the opening, virtual experiences are becoming more widespread and it behooves educational and business organizations to determine if and how they might integrate virtual experiences into their courses and programs. This chapter is designed as a practical overview to guide new virtual developers through introductory experiences in virtual environments suggesting how to "test the waters" and to determine the best initial applications for such environments. It overviews virtual learning and how to get started in such environments, even if you must work with little technical or institutional support; curriculum and instructional design considerations; preparing the learners for virtual work; scheduling and managing; and, methods of assessment. The advice provided comes from the working experience of the author who has used Second Life for over three years in graduate classes and from published literature related to the topics. In providing ideas and advice to any educator, trainer, or organizer who is considering creating virtual experiences, there is not necessarily a specific linear progression through the tasks and activities that you would need to follow. The most efficient way to proceed will depend upon the available