Chapter 3.1
Second Life Brought to Life:
A Case of Usability In-World

Kevin Yee
University of Central Florida, USA

Jace Hargis
University of the Pacific, USA

ABSTRACT

This case presents the challenges and successes encountered when a university attempts to offer a course in a new online virtual learning environment (VLE). Overcoming the resistance towards change requires many aspects—innovation, expertise, funds, culture, persistence, attitude, collaboration, willingness to take risk and possibly open to experiencing a failed event. Most importantly, there is a need for addressing the individual needs of student learning. Being able to develop networks and reach outside of those networks for expertise, input, and commitments are essential to moving forward and becoming successful at offering a unique and innovative VLE. Ultimately, the social, technological, economic, and political parameters involved in this process are all significant and requires workarounds in order to provide an innovative, individualized teaching and learning model.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The organization, from which this case is drawn, is among the top 100 liberal arts university for higher education in the United States of America. This private university provides a wide variety of programs throughout its eleven schools boasting an innovative approach to teaching and learning for over 150 years. The management structure follows a traditional academic hierarchy, which includes a board of regents, president, provost, associate/assistant provost, academic deans, department chairpersons and faculty members. The financial status is solid, even in recent times of market downturn, private institutions are typically well endowed and the enrollment has increased due to the limiting of new enrollment at state-operated higher education institutions. Enrollment at this

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0011-9.ch3.1

institution is approximately 8,000 undergraduate, graduate and pre-professional students. The strategic planning in this University focuses on active pedagogy, innovation, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), leadership development, experiential learning, and diversity. The organizational culture encourages creativity, fosters non-linear solutions and awards progressive thinking.

SETTING THE STAGE

Typically educational institutions have struggled to advance as quickly as corporate businesses with identifying and implementing useful, application instructional technology, which is a commonplace amongst educational institutions. Institutional management of technology in this University is two-fold: the infrastructure is maintained centrally by an Instructional Technology (IT) department; and secondly, the support for classrooms and faculty with respect to technology are decentralized through each school. Therefore, everyone is a potential player in this process from the faculty to the department chair, dean, IT professional, etc. Like many, the institution adopted a course management system (CMS), which enables faculty to post their syllabus, hold discussion boards, collect and return assignments electronically, as well as provide online assessments and active learning modules. However, as common in the academic world, these electronic environments have not been uniformly utilized by all faculty members, so we were not surprised when initially exploring the possibility of enhancing our current CMS with a new VLE, that there would be a smaller pool of faculty members to engage, as well as there might be resistance to moving ahead with the technology when the current infrastructure had not been fully utilized.

The VLE which we reviewed, evaluated and recommended for our faculty members is called Second Life (See Figure 1). Second Life (SL) is a persistent online virtual world hosted on Internet servers run by Linden Lab; participants download and install free client software to view and enter the virtual world. Resembling a video game in appearance and range of motion, SL is unlike a game in that there is no proscribed series of actions, and no task that must be performed. The servers and virtual world persist even after individual clients log off, generating a unique amalgam of synchronous and asynchronous experiences for users. Most SL inhabitants "in-world" set up a virtual shop and attempt to make money (the currency, called lindens, can be exchanged for dollars and vice versa) by selling virtual goods useful to other characters. Players can customize their avatars, or use the software tools to create structures, furniture, or any other conceivable object. While membership is free, land on which to build a permanent presence in-world depends on renting land from Linden Lab.

The promise of SL in education revolves around community, and the connecting of individuals through a new, avatar-driven interface. Unlike the text- and picture-based network available courtesy of the World Wide Web (WWW), SL offers an immediacy of experience and companionship. It's hard to ignore the reality of another person behind the keyboard when their avatar runs toward "the camera" or flies overhead. The entire notion

Figure 1. Second Life